




UNDERSTANDING COMICS

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CHAPTER ONE

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT.



WHEN I WAS A LITTLE KID I KNEW **EXACTLY** WHAT COMICS WERE.



COMICS WERE THOSE BRIGHT, COLORFUL MAGAZINES FILLED WITH **BAD ART, STUPID STORIES AND GUYS IN TIGHTS.**



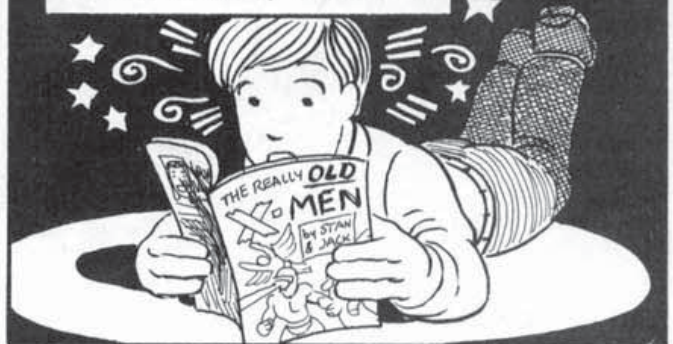
I READ **REAL** BOOKS, NATURALLY. I WAS MUCH TOO **OLD** FOR COMICS!



BUT WHEN I WAS IN **8th GRADE**, A FRIEND OF MINE (WHO WAS A LOT **SMARTER** THAN I WAS) CONVINCED ME TO GIVE COMICS ANOTHER LOOK AND LENT ME HIS COLLECTION.



SOON, I WAS HOOKED!



IN LESS THAN A YEAR, I BECAME **TOTALLY OBSESSED** WITH COMICS! I DECIDED TO BECOME A COMICS ARTIST IN 10TH GRADE AND BEGAN TO **PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!**



I FELT THAT THERE WAS SOMETHING **LURKING** IN COMICS... SOMETHING THAT HAD **NEVER BEEN DONE.**

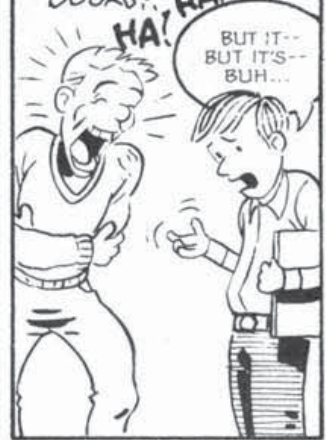
SOME KIND OF **HIDDEN POWER!**



BUT WHENEVER I TRIED TO **EXPLAIN** MY FEELING, I FAILED **MISERABLY.**

COMIC BOOKS?! HA! HA!

BUT IT-- BUT IT'S-- BUH...



SURE, I REALIZED THAT COMIC BOOKS WERE USUALLY **CRUDE, POORLY-DRAWN, SEMILITERATE, CHEAP, DISPOSABLE KIDDIE FARE--**

--BUT--

THEY DON'T **HAVE** TO BE!



THE **PROBLEM** WAS THAT FOR **MOST PEOPLE,** THAT WAS WHAT "COMIC BOOK" **MEANT!**

DON'T GIMME THAT **COMIC BOOK** TALK, BARNEY!

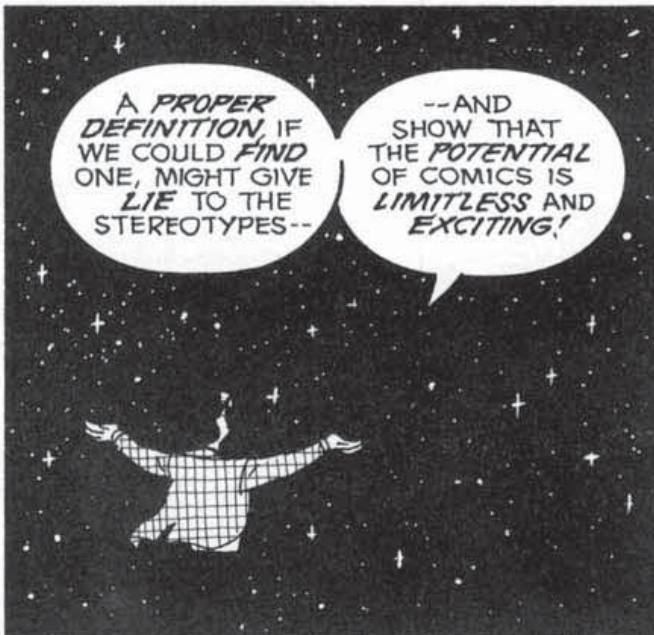


IF PEOPLE FAILED TO **UNDERSTAND** COMICS, IT WAS BECAUSE THEY DEFINED WHAT COMICS COULD BE **TOO NARROWLY!**



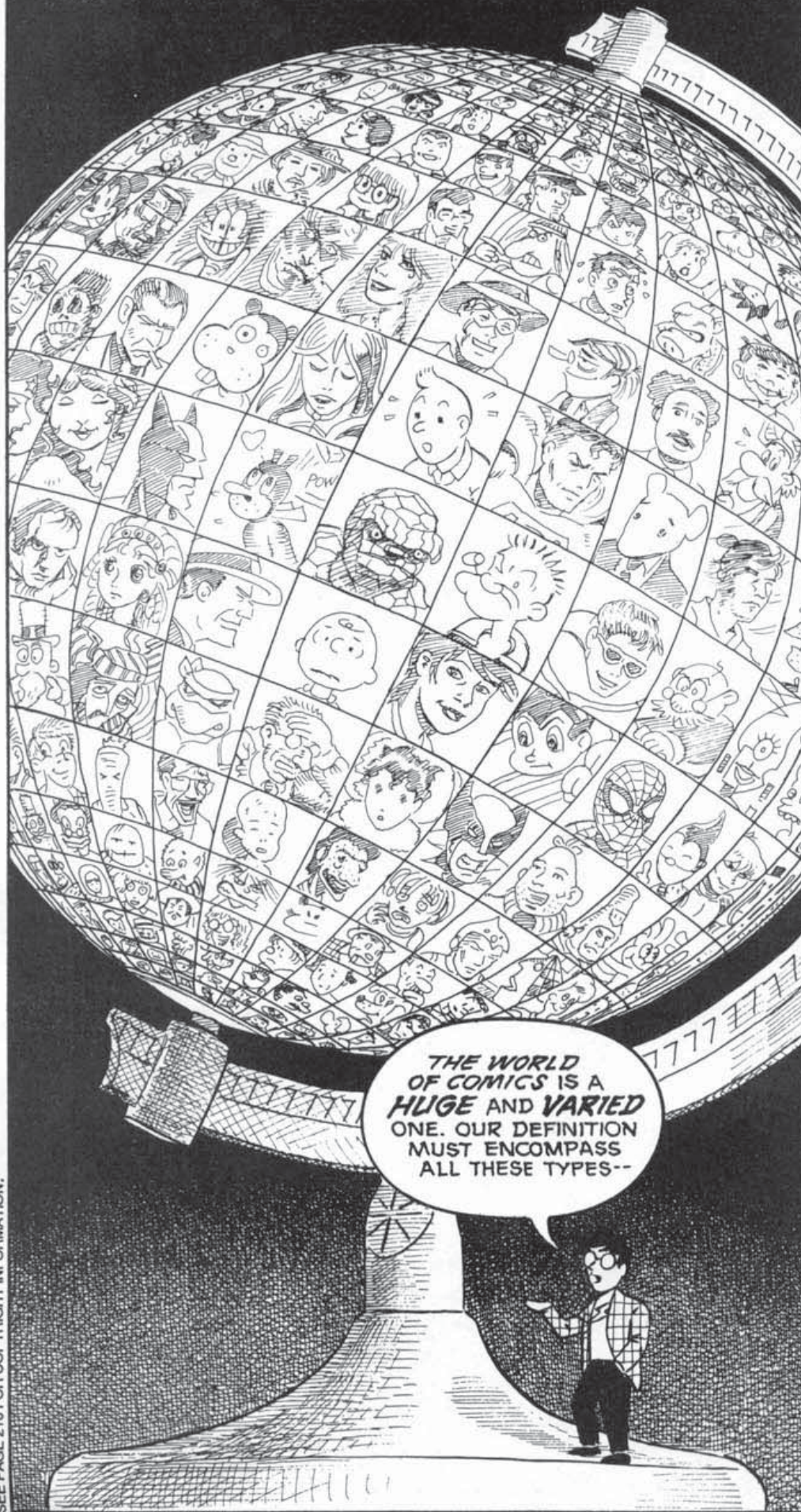
A **PROPER DEFINITION,** IF WE COULD **FIND** ONE, MIGHT GIVE **LIE** TO THE STEREOTYPES--

--AND SHOW THAT THE **POTENTIAL** OF COMICS IS **LIMITLESS** AND **EXCITING!**



THIS IS WHERE OUR JOURNEY **BEGINS.**





THE WORLD OF COMICS IS A HUGE AND VARIED ONE. OUR DEFINITION MUST ENCOMPASS ALL THESE TYPES--

-- WHILE NOT BEING **SO** BROAD AS TO INCLUDE ANYTHING WHICH IS CLEARLY **NOT** COMICS.



"COMICS" IS THE WORD WORTH DEFINING, AS IT REFERS TO THE MEDIUM *ITSELF*, NOT A SPECIFIC OBJECT AS "COMIC BOOK" OR "COMIC STRIP" DO.

WE CAN ALL VISUALIZE **A** COMIC.



BUT WHAT--
--IS--
--COMICS?--

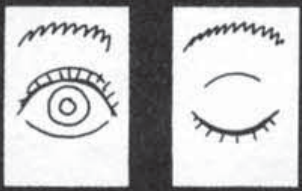
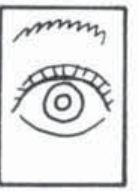
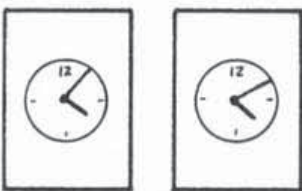
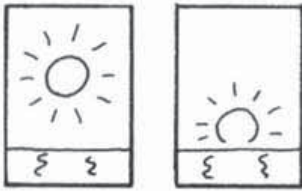
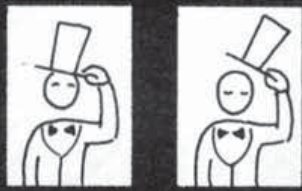
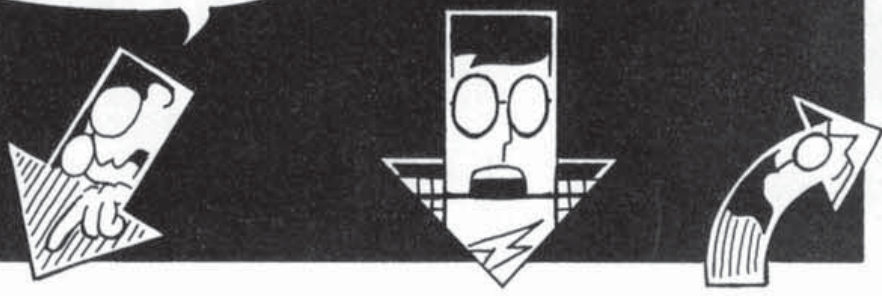


MASTER COMICS ARTIST *WILL EISNER* USES THE TERM **SEQUENTIAL ART** WHEN DESCRIBING COMICS.

TAKEN *INDIVIDUALLY*, THE PICTURES BELOW ARE MERELY *THAT--PICTURES*.

HOWEVER, WHEN PART OF A **SEQUENCE**, EVEN A SEQUENCE OF ONLY *TWO*, THE ART OF THE **IMAGE** IS TRANSFORMED INTO SOMETHING *MORE*: **THE ART OF COMICS!**

NOTICE THAT THIS DEFINITION IS STRICTLY **NEUTRAL** ON MATTERS OF **STYLE, QUALITY OR SUBJECT MATTER**.



MUCH HAS ALREADY BEEN WRITTEN ON THE VARIOUS **SCHOOLS** OF COMIC ART; ON **PARTICULAR ARTISTS, PARTICULAR TITLES, PARTICULAR TRENDS...**



BUT TO **DEFINE** COMICS, WE MUST FIRST DO A LITTLE **AESTHETIC SURGERY** AND SEPARATE **FORM** FROM **CONTENT!**



THE ARTFORM--THE *MEDIUM*--KNOWN AS COMICS IS A *VESSEL* WHICH CAN HOLD ANY *NUMBER* OF *IDEAS* AND *IMAGES*.



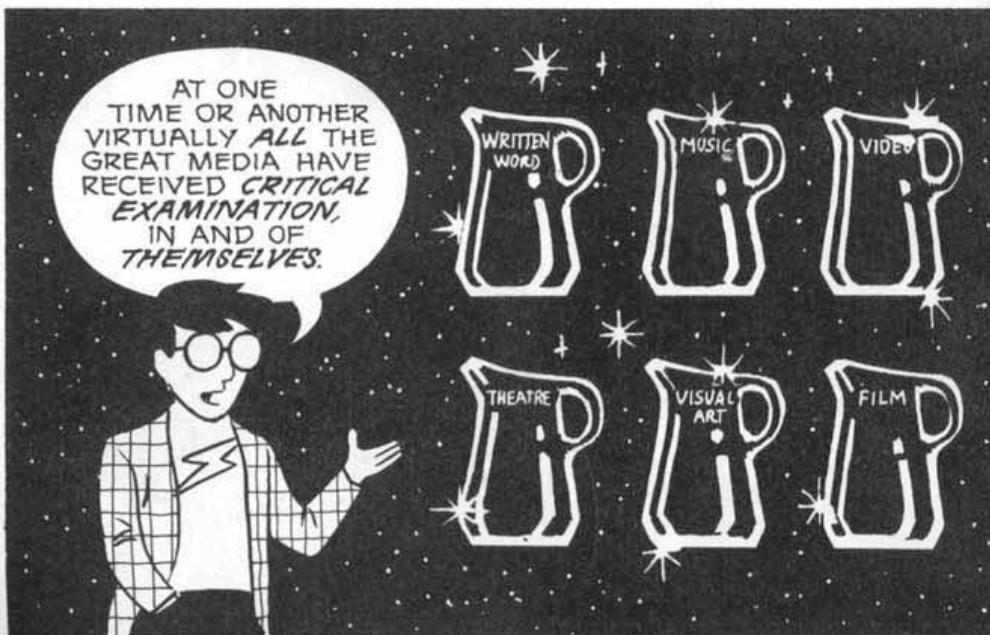
THE "*CONTENT*" OF THOSE IMAGES AND IDEAS IS, OF COURSE, UP TO *CREATORS*, AND WE ALL HAVE DIFFERENT *TASTES*.



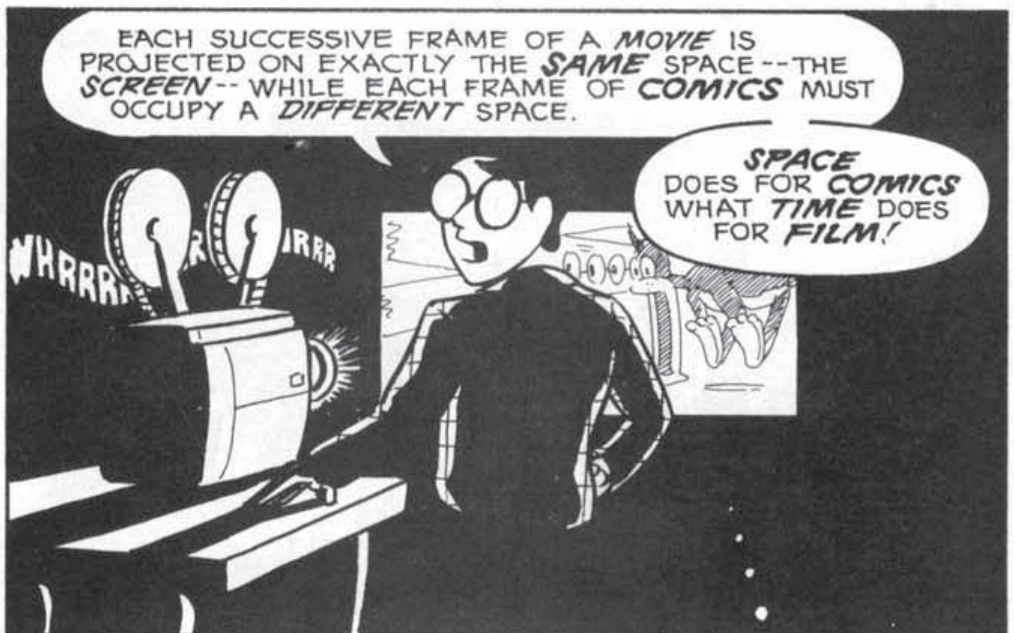
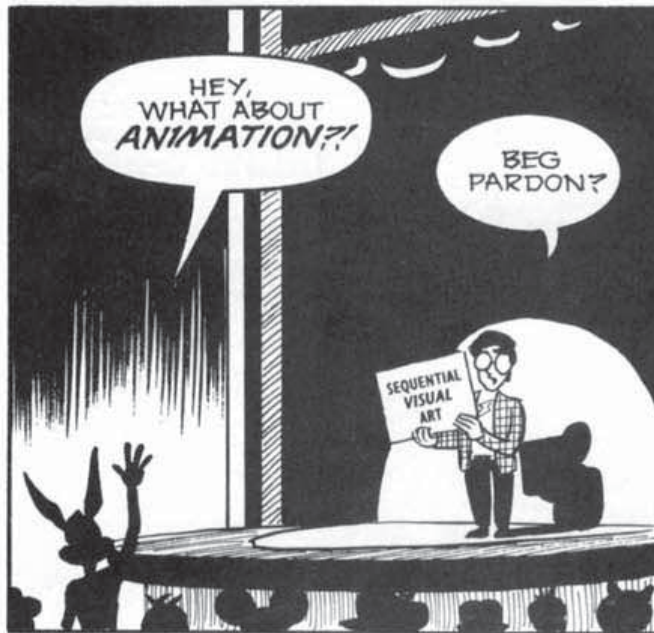
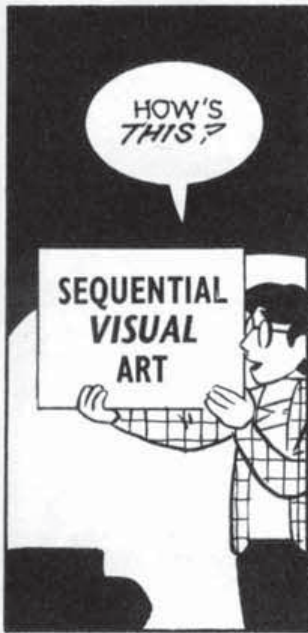
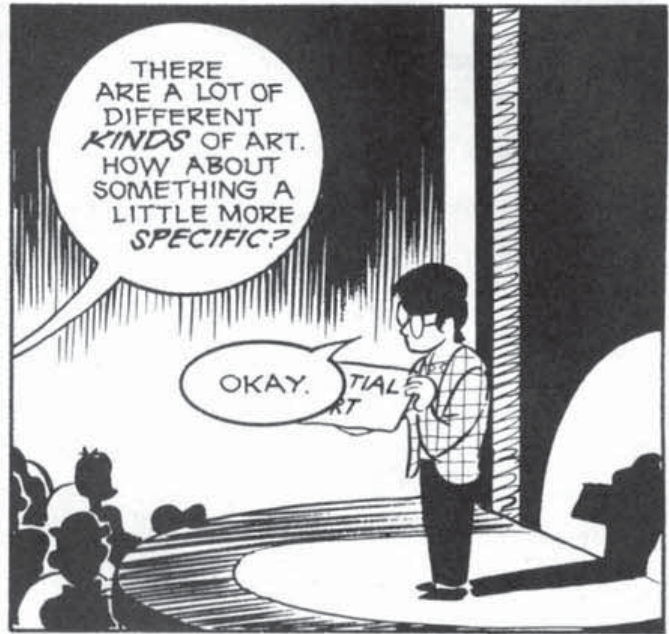
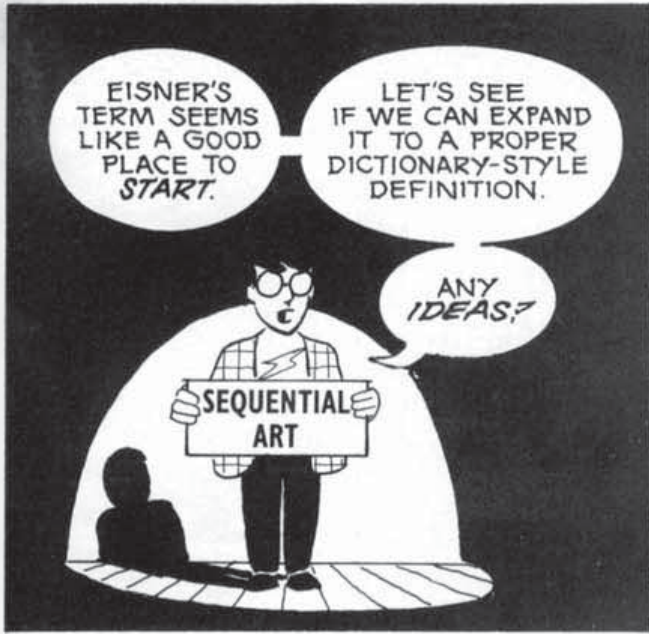
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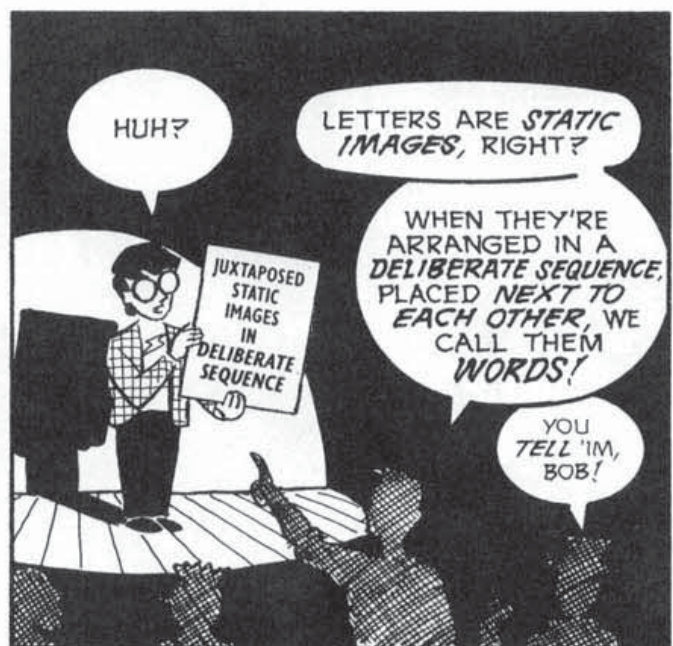
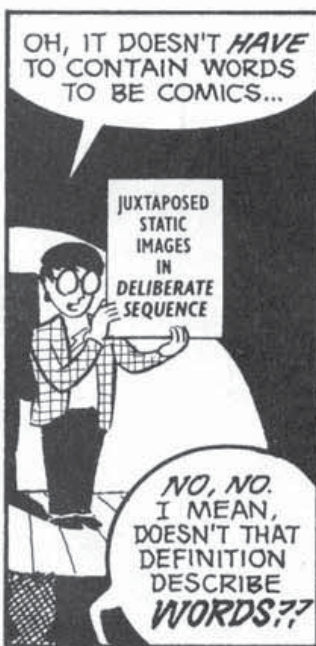
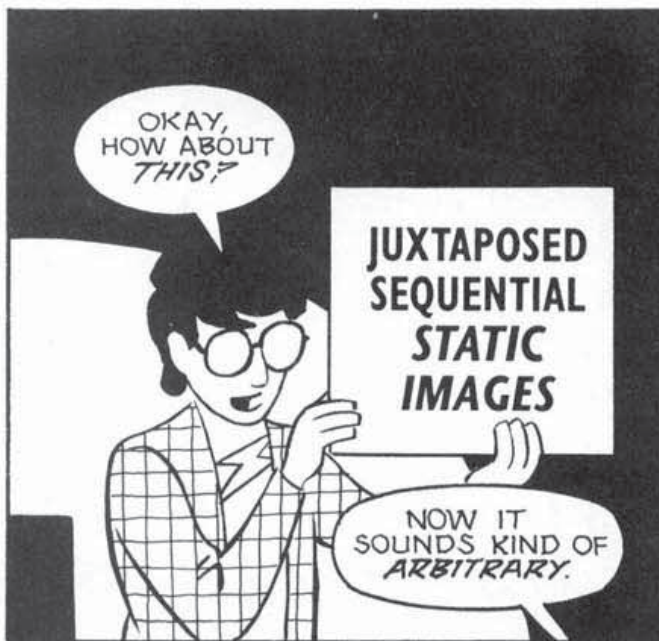
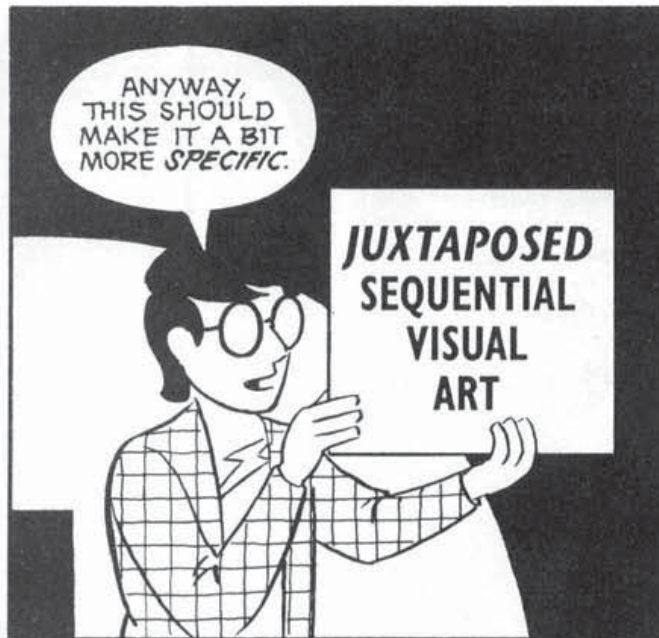
--FOR THE *MESSENGER*.

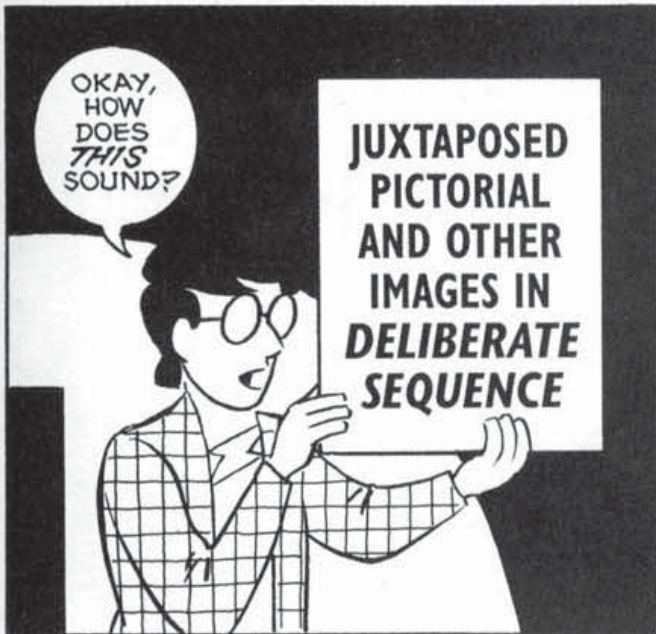


*EISNER'S OWN COMICS AND SEQUENTIAL ART BEING A HAPPY EXCEPTION.

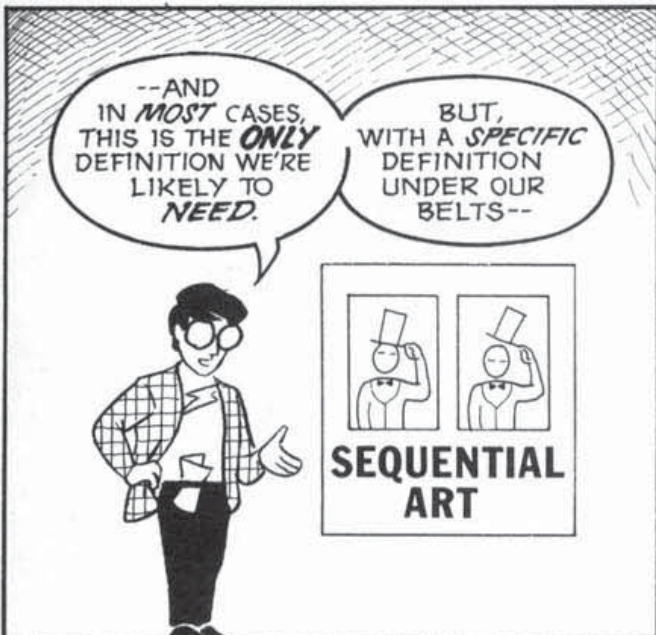


*JUXTAPOSED= ADJACENT, SIDE-BY-SIDE. GREAT ART SCHOOL WORD.



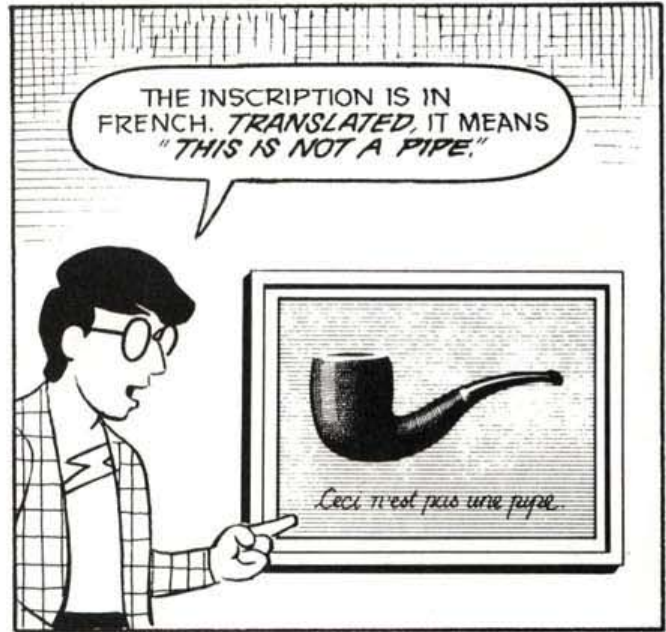


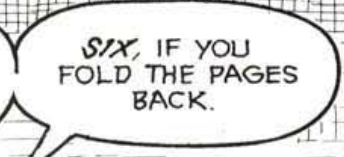
com-ics (kom'iks)**n.** plural in form, used with a singular verb. **1.** Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer. **2.** Superheroes in bright colorful costumes, fighting dastardly villains who want to conquer the world, in violent sensational pulse-pounding action sequences! **3.** Cute, cuddly bunnies, mice and teddy bears, dancing to and fro. **4.** Corruptor of our Nation's Youth.



CHAPTER TWO

THE VOCABULARY OF COMICS.







THIS IS NOT A MAN.



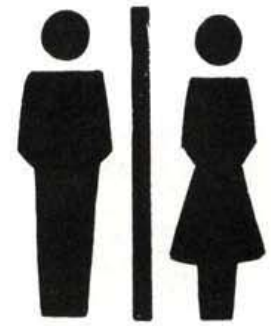
THESE ARE NOT IDEAS.



THIS IS NOT A COUNTRY.



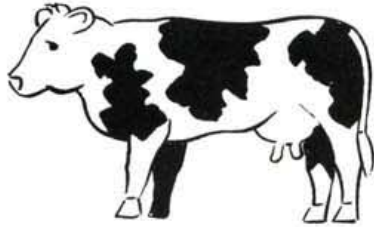
THIS IS NOT A LEAF



THESE ARE NOT PEOPLE.



THIS IS NOT MUSIC.



THIS IS NOT A COW.



THIS IS NOT MY VOICE.



THIS IS NOT SOUND.



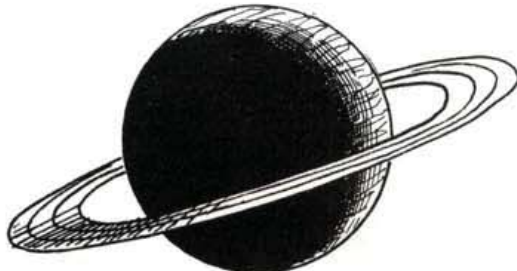
THESE ARE NOT FLOWERS.



THIS IS NOT ME.



THIS IS NOT LAW.



THIS IS NOT A PLANET.



THIS IS NOT FOOD.



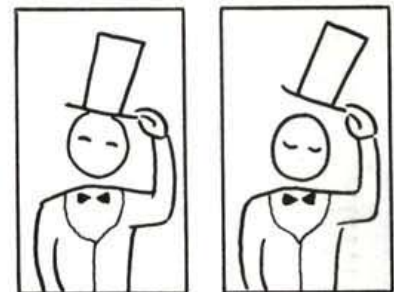
THIS IS NOT A CAR.



THIS IS NOT A COMPANY.



THIS IS NOT A FACE.



THESE ARE NOT SEPARATE MOMENTS.

NOW, THE WORD **ICON** MEANS MANY THINGS.

THIS IS PAPER
THIS IS PAPER



FOR THE PURPOSES OF THIS CHAPTER, I'M USING THE WORD "**ICON**" TO MEAN ANY IMAGE USED TO REPRESENT A PERSON, PLACE, THING OR **IDEA**.

ICON



THAT'S A BIT BROADER THAN THE DEFINITION IN MY DICTIONARY, BUT IT'S THE CLOSEST THING TO WHAT I NEED HERE.

"**SYMBOL**" IS A BIT TOO **LOADED** FOR ME.



THE SORTS OF IMAGES WE USUALLY **CALL** SYMBOLS ARE ONE **CATEGORY** OF **ICON**, HOWEVER.



THESE ARE THE IMAGES WE USE TO REPRESENT **CONCEPTS**, **IDEAS** AND **PHILOSOPHIES**.



THEN THERE ARE THE **ICONS** OF **LANGUAGE**, **SCIENCE** AND **COMMUNICATION**.



ICONS OF THE **PRACTICAL** REALM.



AND FINALLY, THE **ICONS** WE CALL **PICTURES**: IMAGES DESIGNED TO ACTUALLY **RESEMBLE** THEIR SUBJECTS.



BUT AS **RESEMBLANCE** VARIES, SO DOES THE **LEVEL** OF **ICONIC** CONTENT.

OR TO PUT IT SOMEWHAT **CLUMSILY**, SOME **PICTURES** ARE JUST MORE **ICONIC** THAN OTHERS.



IN THE *NON-PICTORIAL* ICONS, MEANING IS *FIXED* AND *ABSOLUTE*. THEIR APPEARANCE DOESN'T AFFECT THEIR MEANING BECAUSE THEY REPRESENT *INVISIBLE IDEAS*.



IN *PICTURES*, HOWEVER, MEANING IS *FLUID* AND *VARIABLE* ACCORDING TO APPEARANCE. THEY DIFFER FROM "*REAL-LIFE*" APPEARANCE TO VARYING *DEGREES*.



WORDS ARE TOTALLY *ABSTRACT* ICONS. THAT IS, THEY BEAR NO RESEMBLANCE AT ALL TO THE *REAL MCCOY*.

EYE



BUT IN PICTURES THE *LEVEL* OF ABSTRACTION *VARIES*. SOME, LIKE THE FACE IN THE *PREVIOUS* PANEL, SO CLOSELY RESEMBLE THEIR *REAL-LIFE* COUNTERPARTS AS TO ALMOST *TRICK THE EYE!*



OTHERS, LIKE YOURS TRULY, ARE QUITE A BIT *MORE* ABSTRACT AND, IN FACT, ARE VERY MUCH *UNLIKE* ANY HUMAN FACE YOU'VE EVER SEEN!



LET'S SEE IF WE CAN PUT THESE *PICTORIAL* ICONS IN SOME SORT OF ORDER.



THERE ARE MANY THINGS THAT SET THESE APART FROM ACTUAL *FACES*--THEY'RE SMALLER, FLATTER, LESS *DETAILED*, THEY DON'T MOVE. THEY LACK COLOR-- BUT AS PICTORIAL ICONS GO, THEY ARE PRETTY "*REALISTIC*."

COMMON WISDOM HOLDS THAT THE *PHOTOGRAPH* AND THE *REALISTIC* PICTURE ARE THE ICONS THAT MOST RESEMBLE THEIR REAL-LIFE COUNTERPARTS.



ONLY
OUTLINES
AND A HINT
OF SHADING
ARE STILL
PRESENT, BUT
WE EASILY
RECOGNIZE
THIS AS A
**HUMAN
FACE.**

SOMEWHAT
MORE ABSTRACT
IS **THIS** STYLE
OF DRAWING
FOUND IN MANY
ADVENTURE
COMICS.

REAL WAY.

AS WE CONTINUE
TO ABSTRACT AND
SIMPLIFY OUR IMAGE,
WE ARE MOVING FURTHER
AND FURTHER FROM THE
"REAL" FACE OF THE
PHOTO.

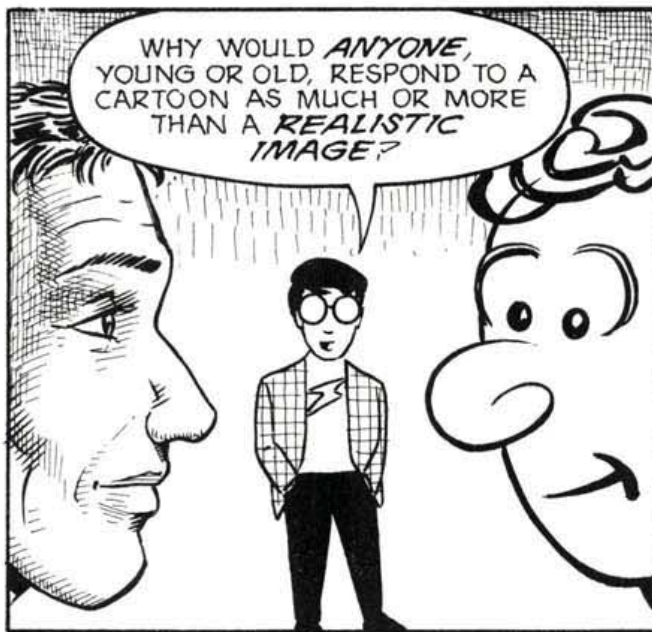
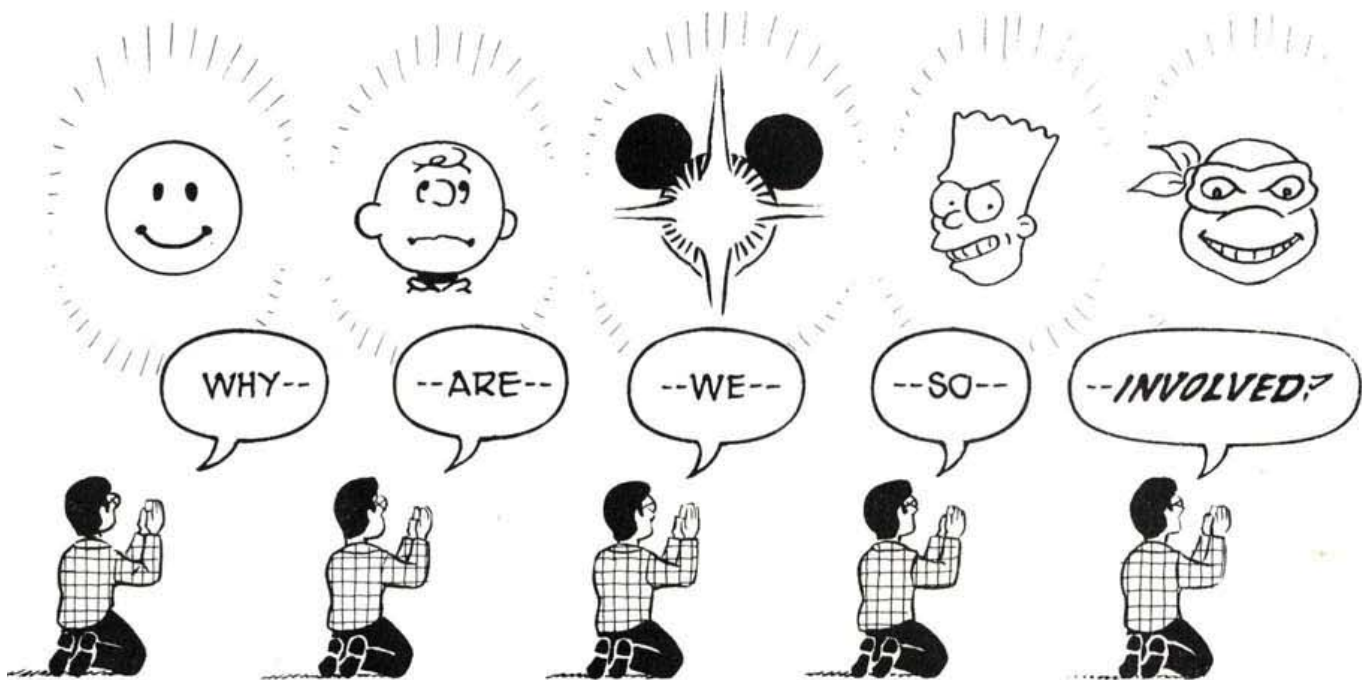
WHY,
THEN, IS THE
FACE ABOVE SO
ACCEPTABLE
TO OUR EYES?
WHY DOES IT
SEEM JUST AS
REAL AS THE
OTHERS?

RE THIS WAY.

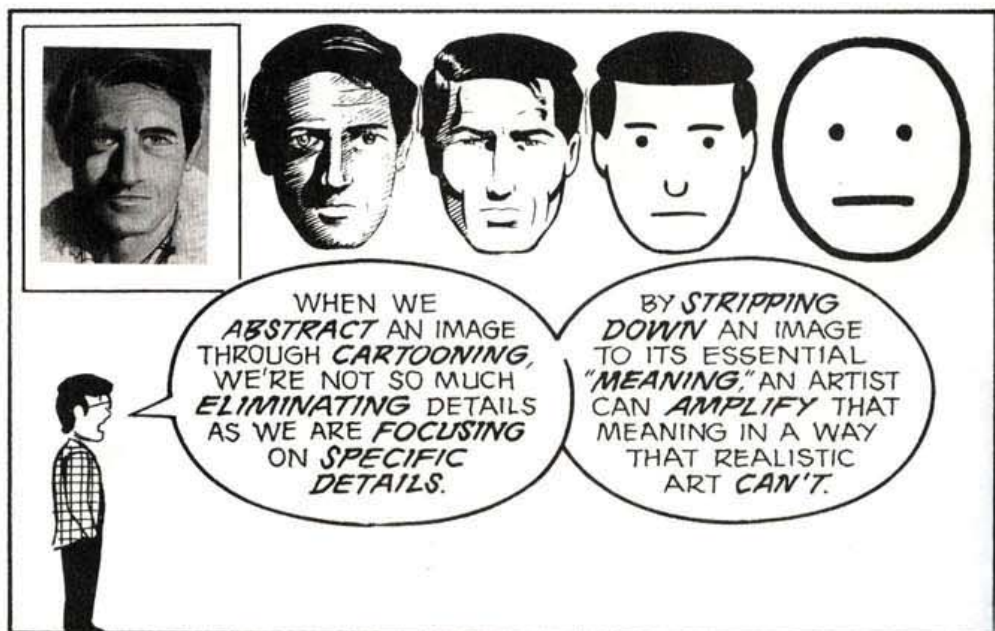
WHAT
IS THE SECRET
OF THE ICON
WE CALL--

--THE
CARTOON?

REAL WAY.



SEE PAGE 216 FOR COPYRIGHT INFORMATION.



FILM CRITICS WILL SOMETIMES DESCRIBE A *LIVE-ACTION* FILM AS A "CARTOON" TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE STRIPPED-DOWN *INTENSITY* OF A SIMPLE STORY OR VISUAL STYLE.



THOUGH THE TERM IS OFTEN USED *DISPARAGINGLY*, IT CAN BE EQUALLY WELL APPLIED TO MANY *TIME-TESTED CLASSICS*. SIMPLIFYING CHARACTERS AND IMAGES TOWARD A *PURPOSE* CAN BE AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR STORYTELLING IN *ANY* MEDIUM.



THE ABILITY OF CARTOONS TO *FOCUS* OUR ATTENTION ON AN IDEA IS, I THINK, AN IMPORTANT PART OF THEIR SPECIAL POWER, BOTH IN COMICS AND IN DRAWING GENERALLY.



ONE



A FEW



THOUSANDS



MILLIONS



(NEARLY) ALL

ANOTHER IS THE *UNIVERSALITY* OF CARTOON IMAGERY. THE MORE CARTOONY A FACE IS, FOR INSTANCE, THE MORE PEOPLE IT COULD BE SAID TO *DESCRIBE*.



BUT I BELIEVE THERE'S SOMETHING *MORE* AT WORK IN OUR MINDS WHEN WE VIEW A CARTOON--ESPECIALLY OF A HUMAN FACE-- WHICH WARRANTS FURTHER INVESTIGATION.



WHAT

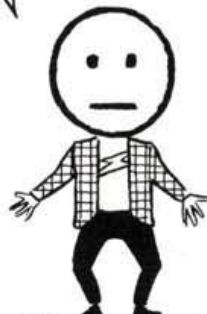
ARE YOU



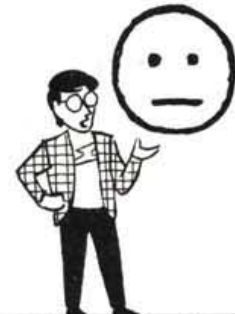
REALLY

SEEING ?

THE FACT THAT YOUR MIND IS *CAPABLE* OF TAKING A *CIRCLE*, *TWO DOTS* AND A *LINE* AND TURNING THEM INTO A *FACE* IS NOTHING SHORT OF *INCREDIBLE!*



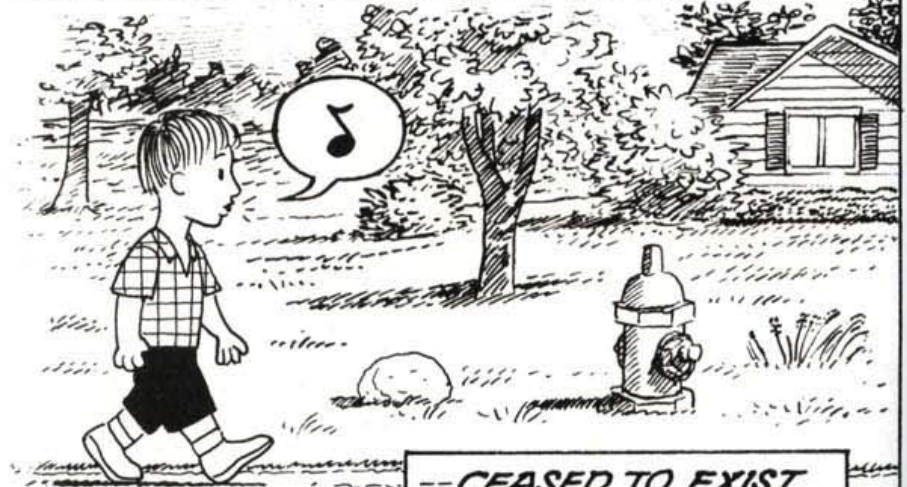
BUT STILL *MORE* INCREDIBLE IS THE FACT THAT YOU CANNOT *AVOID* SEEING A FACE HERE. YOUR MIND WON'T *LET* YOU!



CHAPTER THREE

BLOOD IN THE GUTTER.

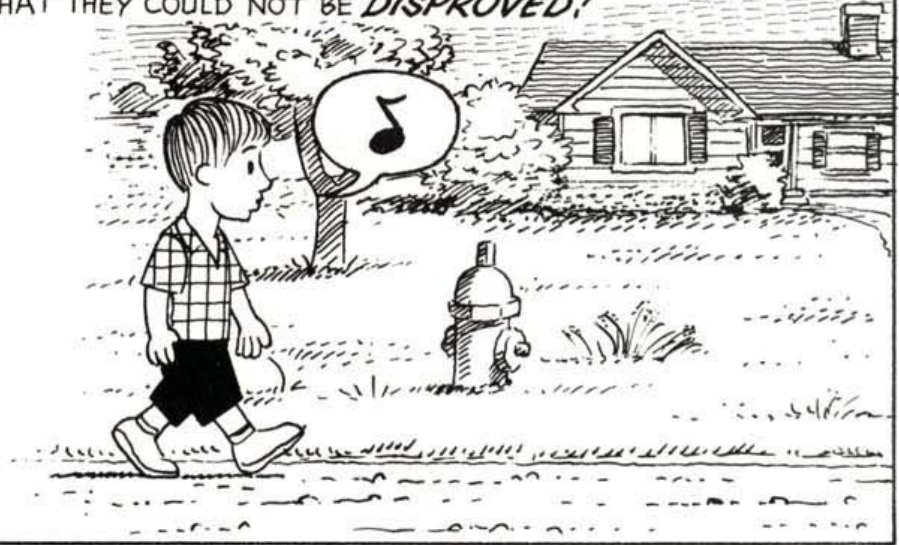
WHEN I WAS VERY YOUNG, I HAD A RECURRENT *DAYDREAM* THAT THE *WHOLE WORLD* WAS JUST A *SHOW* PLIT ON FOR MY *BENEFIT*, THAT UNLESS I WAS PRESENT TO *SEE* THINGS, THEY JUST--



--CEASED TO EXIST.



LATER IN LIFE, I FOUND **OTHERS** WHO HAD **SIMILAR** DAYDREAMS AS CHILDREN. NONE OF US EVER REALLY **BELIEVED** THESE THEORIES, BUT WE HAD ALL BEEN **FASCINATED** BY THE FACT THAT THEY COULD NOT BE **DISPROVED!**



EVEN **TODAY**, AS I WRITE AND DRAW THIS PANEL, I HAVE **NO GUARANTEE** THAT ANYTHING EXISTS OUTSIDE OF WHAT MY FIVE SENSES **REPORT** TO ME.*



I'VE NEVER BEEN TO **MOROCCO**, BUT I TAKE IT ON **FAITH** THAT THERE **IS** A **MOROCCO!**



I'VE NEVER SEEN THE EARTH FROM **SPACE** FIRSTHAND, YET I TRUST THAT THE EARTH IS **ROUND.**



I'VE NEVER BEEN IN THE **HOUSE** ACROSS THE STREET, YET I ASSUME IT HAS AN **INTERIOR**, THAT IT ISN'T JUST SOME BIG **MOVIE SET!**



IN THIS PANEL YOU CAN'T EVEN SEE MY **LEGS**, YET YOU **ASSUME** THAT THEY'RE **THERE.**



EVEN THOUGH THEY'RE **NOT!**



* NOT TO SAY OUR SENSES ARE ANY KIND OF GUARANTEE!

ALL OF US PERCEIVE THE WORLD AS A *WHOLE* THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE OF OUR *SENSES*.

YET OUR SENSES CAN ONLY REVEAL A WORLD THAT IS *FRAGMENTED* AND *INCOMPLETE*.



EVEN THE MOST *WIDELY TRAVELLED* MIND CAN ONLY SEE SO MUCH OF THE WORLD IN THE COURSE OF A LIFE.

OUR PERCEPTION OF "REALITY" IS AN ACT OF *FAITH*, BASED ON MERE *FRAGMENTS*.



AS *INFANTS*, WE'RE *UNABLE* TO COMMIT THAT ACT OF FAITH. IF WE CAN'T *SEE* IT, *HEAR* IT, *SMELL* IT, *TASTE* IT OR *TOUCH* IT, IT ISN'T *THERE!*

THE GAME "*PEEK-A-BOO*" PLAYS ON THIS IDEA. GRADUALLY, WE ALL LEARN THAT EVEN THOUGH THE *SIGHT* OF MOMMY COMES AND GOES, MOMMY *REMAINS*.



THIS PHENOMENON OF
OBSERVING THE PARTS BUT
PERCEIVING THE WHOLE
HAS A NAME.

IT'S
CALLED
CLOSURE.



IN OUR DAILY LIVES, WE OFTEN
COMMIT CLOSURE, MENTALLY
COMPLETING THAT WHICH IS
INCOMPLETE BASED ON PAST
EXPERIENCE.



SOME FORMS OF CLOSURE ARE
DELIBERATE INVENTIONS OF
STORYTELLERS TO PRODUCE
SUSPENSE OR TO CHALLENGE
AUDIENCES.



OTHERS HAPPEN *AUTOMATICALLY*,
WITHOUT MUCH *EFFORT*... PART
OF *BUSINESS AS USUAL.*



IN *RECOGNIZING* AND *RELATING*
TO OTHER PEOPLE, WE ALL
DEPEND *HEAVILY* ON OUR LEARNED
ABILITY OF CLOSURE.



IN AN
INCOMPLETE
WORLD, WE
MUST *DEPEND*
ON CLOSURE
FOR OUR VERY
SURVIVAL.



CLOSURE CAN TAKE MANY FORMS. SOME SIMPLE, SOME COMPLEX.

CLOSURE
CLOSURE
CL S RE
CLOSURE
CLOSURE

SOMETIMES, A MERE *SHAPE* OR *OUTLINE* IS ENOUGH TO TRIGGER CLOSURE.

THE MENTAL PROCESS DESCRIBED IN *CHAPTER TWO* WHEREBY THESE LINES BECOME A *FACE* COULD BE CONSIDERED CLOSURE.

EVERY TIME WE SEE A *PHOTOGRAPH* REPRODUCED IN A *NEWSPAPER* OR *MAGAZINE*, WE COMMIT CLOSURE.

OUR *EYES* TAKE IN THE *FRAGMENTED, BLACK-AND-WHITE IMAGE* OF THE "*HALF-TONE*" PATTERNS--

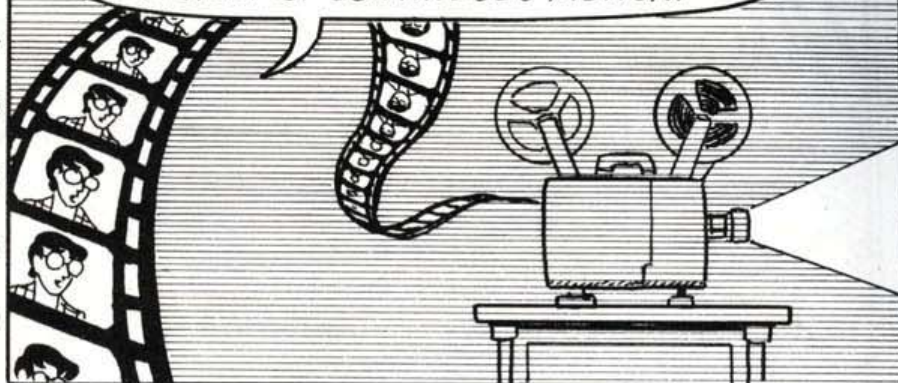
--AND OUR MINDS TRANSFORM IT INTO THE "*REALITY*"--

--OF THE *PHOTOGRAPH!*

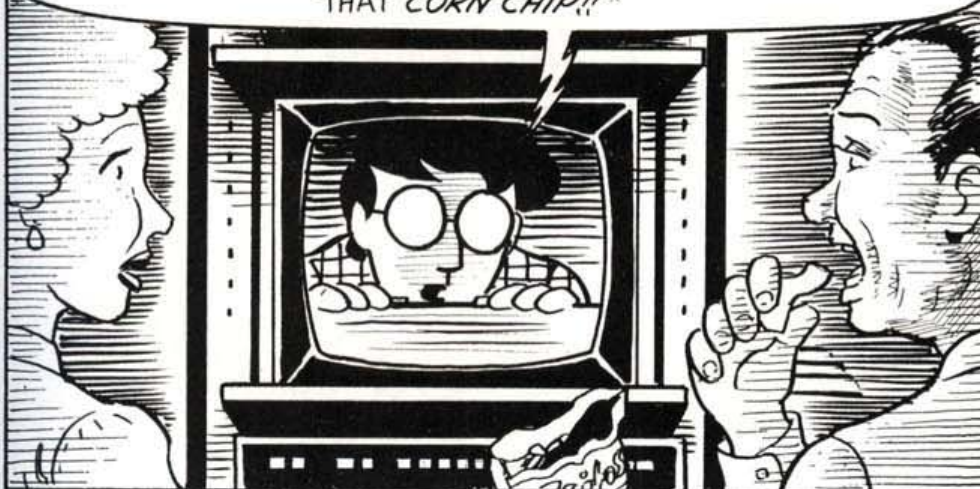
IN
*ELECTRONIC
MEDIA, CLOSURE
IS CONSTANT,
EVEN OVER-
POWERING!*



IN *FILM*, CLOSURE TAKES PLACE *CONTINUOUSLY--*
TWENTY-FOUR TIMES PER SECOND, IN FACT-- AS OUR
MINDS, AIDED BY THE *PERSISTENCE OF VISION*,
TRANSFORM A SERIES OF *STILL PICTURES* INTO
A STORY OF *CONTINUOUS MOTION*.



A MEDIUM REQUIRING EVEN *MORE* CLOSURE IS *TELEVISION*,
WHICH, IN REALITY, IS JUST A *SINGLE POINT OF LIGHT*,
RACING ACROSS THE SCREEN SO FAST THAT IT'S DESCRIBED
MY FACE *HUNDREDS OF TIMES* BEFORE *YOU* CAN EVEN SWALLOW
THAT *CORN CHIP!!**



BETWEEN SUCH
*AUTOMATIC
ELECTRONIC
CLOSURE* AND THE
SIMPLER CLOSURE
OF *EVERYDAY
LIFE--*



-- THERE LIES
A MEDIUM OF
COMMUNICATION
AND EXPRESSION
WHICH USES CLOSURE
LIKE *NO OTHER...*



...A MEDIUM WHERE THE AUDIENCE IS
A WILLING AND CONSCIOUS *COLLABORATOR*
AND CLOSURE IS THE AGENT OF *CHANGE,*
TIME AND MOTION.



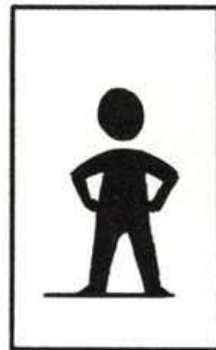
* MEDIA GURU TONY SCHWARTZ DESCRIBES THIS
AT LENGTH IN HIS BOOK *MEDIA, THE SECOND GOD*,
ANCHOR BOOKS, 1983.



NOTHING IS *SEEN* BETWEEN THE TWO PANELS, BUT *EXPERIENCE* TELLS YOU SOMETHING *MUST* BE THERE!

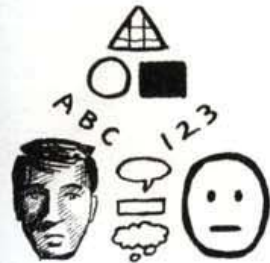


COMICS PANELS *FRACTURE* BOTH *TIME* AND *SPACE*, OFFERING A *JAGGED, STACCATO RHYTHM* OF *UNCONNECTED MOMENTS*.



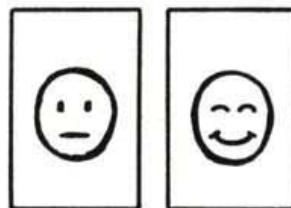
BUT CLOSURE ALLOWS US TO *CONNECT* THESE MOMENTS AND *MENTALLY CONSTRUCT* A *CONTINUOUS, UNIFIED REALITY*.

IF *VISUAL ICONOGRAPHY* IS THE *VOCABULARY* OF COMICS, *CLOSURE* IS ITS *GRAMMAR*.



ICONOGRAPHY

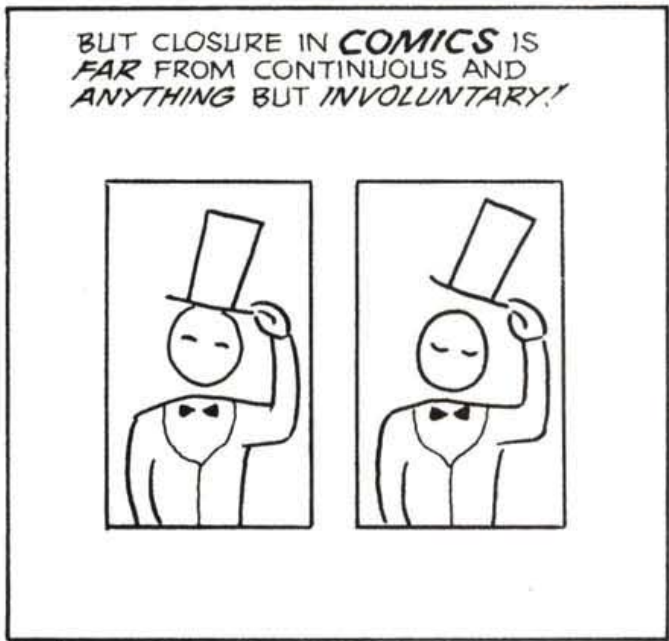
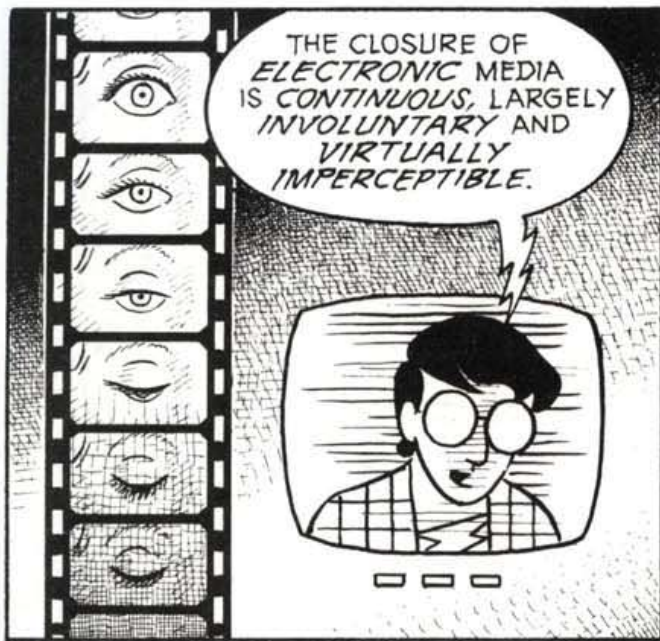
AND SINCE OUR *DEFINITION* OF COMICS HINGES ON THE *ARRANGEMENT* OF ELEMENTS--



CLOSURE

-- THEN, IN A VERY REAL SENSE, *COMICS IS CLOSURE!*





I MAY HAVE DRAWN AN **AXE** BEING RAISED IN THIS EXAMPLE, BUT I'M NOT THE ONE WHO LET IT **DROP** OR DECIDED HOW **HARD** THE BLOW, OR **WHO** SCREAMED, OR **WHY.**



THAT, DEAR READER, WAS YOUR **SPECIAL CRIME**, EACH OF YOU COMMITTING IT IN YOUR OWN **STYLE.**



TO KILL A MAN
BETWEEN PANELS
IS TO CONDEMN
HIM TO A
THOUSAND
DEATHS.



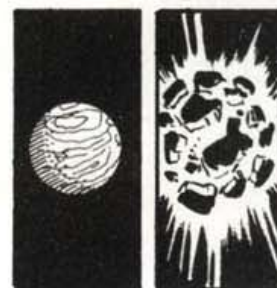
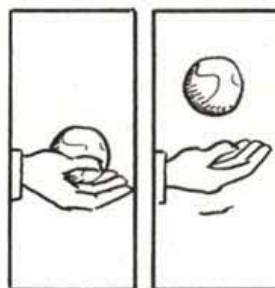
PARTICIPATION
IS A **POWERFUL FORCE**
IN **ANY MEDIUM.**
FILMMAKERS **LONG AGO**
REALIZED THE IMPORTANCE
OF ALLOWING VIEWERS
TO USE THEIR
IMAGINATIONS.



BUT WHILE **FILM** MAKES
USE OF AUDIENCES' IMAGINATIONS
FOR **OCCASIONAL EFFECTS,**
COMICS MUST USE IT
FAR MORE OFTEN!



FROM THE **TOSSING OF A BASEBALL**
TO THE **DEATH OF A PLANET,** THE
READER'S **DELIBERATE, VOLUNTARY**
CLOSURE IS COMICS' **PRIMARY** MEANS
OF SIMULATING **TIME AND MOTION.**



CLOSURE
IN COMICS FOSTERS
AN INTIMACY SURPASSED
ONLY BY THE **WRITTEN**
WORD, A **SILENT, SECRET**
CONTRACT BETWEEN
CREATOR AND
AUDIENCE.

HOW THE CREATOR
HONORS THAT CONTRACT
IS A MATTER OF BOTH
ART AND **CRAFT.**



LET'S
TAKE A LOOK
AT THE
CRAFT.

