RESEARCH

'Ragged Time' in Intra-panel Comics Rhythms

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A phenomenological method of comics analysis can be useful when we need to uncover the structural features of the comics experience itself. One fruitful application would be in the study of irregular intra-panel rhythms, where the temporalized divisions are not visibly indicated but rather are only experienced. By means of Gilles Deleuze's notion of rhythmic repetition and his elaboration of it through Olivier Messiaen's theory of 'kinetic' rhythm, we will formulate a conception of visual rhythm as being based on metrical irregularity. We further explicate this concept of irregular rhythm by drawing upon the notion of 'ragged time' in the early jazz musical form, ragtime. We finally test its usefulness by examining how the 'jazzy' rhythms of Cubist-styled panels by Art Spiegelman and Mary Fleener generate an experience of ragged time.

Introduction

Our purpose is to offer a phenomenological examination of the experience of irregular rhythm arising from within a comics panel, using the concept of 'ragged time' from the early jazz musical form, ragtime. The potential usefulness of this mode of analysis will be tested by analyzing the 'jazzy' rhythms found in certain panels with a Cubist-like style, drawn by Art Spiegelman and Mary Fleener.

Phenomenology of the Comics Experience

We will first explain why a phenomenological method of analysis is appropriate for this task. Our efforts here build from Thierry Groensteen's examination of regular and irregular rhythmic patterns in comics' layouts. He observes that comics

with a 'waffle-iron' regularized grid pattern have a steady, metrical rhythm, which is immediately apparent upon first glance at the page (Groensteen 2013: 136, 138, 149). This is because time and space, in how they are represented and experienced, are intimately linked in comics, so when the visual space of the page is made metrically homogeneous with regularized panel sizes, so too is there the tendency for the rhythms to have a steady beat or cadence (Groensteen 2013: 133, 138).

Yet, Groensteen also observes that this homogenized visual pattern in the panels does not always evoke a simple and steady cadence, because other factors can produce uneven patterns of accentuation, intensive variations in speed, and polyrhythms (Groensteen 2013: 153–155). For example, despite the metrical standardization of the panels in many of Chris Ware's comics pages, time's flow does not always maintain a steady pace but rather often slows down to a crawl (Groensteen 2013: 155). And Alan Moore's and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* has pages with nine-paneled grids whose steady rhythms are complicated polyrhythmically with additional levels of beats operating simultaneously across the very same panels (Groensteen 2013: 154). Thus, just an evaluation of the metrical regularities of the panel structure on the page is not enough to assess it as having a simple and regular cadence. In these and in other cases with regular gridding, but also with irregular or complicated timing, we still need to evaluate the reader's subjective contribution to see how she experiences the rhythmic patterns.

Now, what about pages with irregularly sized panels? They seem to be lacking the repetitive structures needed to produce rhythm. Nonetheless, Groensteen observes how there can still be rhythmic factors like variations in speed and also beat-like accentuations. Yet often, in order to uncover these rhythmic operations, we also need to examine the subjective experience itself, since the repetitions are not always visually evident in the irregular panel layouts (Groensteen 2013: 149, 151). As Groensteen explains,

the author proposes but the reader disposes. It is the latter who animates, identifies with, punctuates, and brings to life the story in his/her own way. The reader therefore contributes to the rhythm of the narration,

which, ultimately, coincides with the pulsating flow of the reading process.
(Groensteen 2013: 153)

In Groensteen's analysis, the structural element that creates the conditions for rhythmicity in comics is the separative function of the panel frame, which inserts breaks into the narrative flow. On account of the series of enframed still images, in combination with the temporal cuts separating each one from its immediate neighbor, the reading experience of comics is often 'intermittent, elliptical, jerky', and 'disjointed' (Groensteen 2007: 45; Groensteen 2013: 136–137).

The rhythms that Groensteen focuses on are what we might call int*er*-panel rhythms, since they are based on the separative function operating between panels. Our concern here lies primarily with rhythmic experiences that arise when one dwells upon a particular panel, finding rhythmicity merely within its own enclosure. Yet, we normally do not have visible divisions in such panels, like frames that could indicate separative functions. So for the sake of a rhythmic analysis of individual panels, we instead are left with just the divisions in our temporalized experience. Thus, a phenomenological method could prove to be a very useful tool in the examination of these irregular, int*ra*-panel rhythms.

What does such a phenomenological methodology involve, then? Here it means simply that we bring to our evaluative attention our very conscious experience itself of the comics imagery, looking for the important structural features of that experience. Since our interest here is rhythm, we are thus concerned with the temporal structures of the experience, especially the divisions or breaks that make an experience have a series of distinguishable segments rather than feel like one unbroken unity.

Rhythm as Metrical Irregularity in Patterns of Experience

One might first object to the term 'irregular rhythm'. Is it not oxymoronic? For, is rhythm not a matter of the even repetition of sames or similars and thus a more-or-less regularized pattern? So, first we will deal philosophically with the concept of rhythm to establish that from a certain conceptual point of view, 'irregular rhythm'

is potentially a redundancy in terms, while 'regularized rhythm' would be the oxymoronic phrase. And we will do so via Gilles Deleuze's concept of rhythmic repetition as he applies it to music and visual art.

For Deleuze, repetition is not to be understood as the reiteration of same or similar things. Now, although it proves challenging to articulate precisely what he instead means by repetition, it can for our purposes here be understood simply as a series of originations, meaning that each instantiation has a certain independence from its predecessors and successors. What is repetitive about it is not that the content of each part can be reduced to the others on account of their similarities or their metrical homogeneities but rather that this activity of renewal is 'eternally' ongoing. We might better understand his concept by seeing how he applies it to the notion of rhythm. He distinguishes cadence-repetitions, which are static, from rhythm-repetitions, which are dynamic. So in fact for him, a metrically homogenous cadence is anti-rhythmic (Deleuze 1994: 20–21).

One way this might be understood is phenomenologically. When a repetition is redundant because it repeats the same thing without metrical variation, like the ticking of a clock, we in fact find it hard to keep hearing it, even with our best efforts at concentration. It eventually dephenomenalizes and fades from our awareness. We would say that the ticking is redundant rather than rhythmic, because it produces no feeling of change and movement but is rather quite stagnant. However, were the clock to suddenly malfunction and change its speed or the pattern of the ticks, we would once again notice the sounds. So in certain situations like these, non-cadenced repetitions are rhythmic, because they create a movement of repeated variations, with each new instantiation having a certain command over our awareness. Rhythm in this sense is kinetic, or 'kinematic', to use composer Oliver Messiaen's description (Messiaen & Samuel 1976: 35). Cadenced regular patterns are reducible to a static structure that never changes, while irregular patterns continually create rhythmic 'motion' in the music by constantly renewing the forms.

In fact, when Deleuze analyzes the visual rhythms in Francis Bacon's paintings, he appeals to the rhythmic ideas of Messiaen, who, as we have observed, distinguishes rhythmic and non-rhythmic music in a way that is opposite to what one might

normally expect (Deleuze 2003: xiv–xv, 50–51, 132). A striking example of non-rhythmic music for Messiaen is the military march, which, 'with its cadential gait and uninterrupted succession of absolutely equal note-values, is anti-natural' (Messiaen & Samuel 1967: 34). Rhythmic music, however, 'scorns repetition, straightforward-ness and equal divisions. In short, it's music inspired by the movements of nature, movements of free and unequal durations' (Messiaen & Samuel 1976: 33). Thus, truly rhythmic marching music would be 'accompanied by an extremely irregular swaying; it's a series of falls, more or less avoided, placed at different intervals' (Messiaen & Samuel 1976: 34). So when we speak of 'irregular rhythm' here, what we mean, then, is the sort of rhythm that is experienced as constantly dynamic and moving (*kinetic*) on account of the unpredictabilities and free variabilities in its repetitions.

Irregular 'Jazzy' Visual Rhythm

With these notions of irregular rhythm in mind, Deleuze, in his analyses of Francis Bacon's paintings, focuses on the factors that make the painting's imagery resist being organized into a coherent whole in the viewer's perceptual and conceptual experience of it (Deleuze 2003: 2–3, 46–47, 82–83, 108–110). One specific way Bacon accomplished this was through his 'graphing' technique. He would begin with a certain basic configuration on the canvas that could be reduced to a simple narrative description. In one case it was 'a bird landing on a field', which he began depicting on the canvas. Then, he would make accidental, involuntary markings in a certain location of the image, which would smear and mangle a part of the established formations. These disfigurations would suggest new ways to develop the imagery, thereby producing in the final painting a somewhat distorted and partially incomprehensible image that cannot be coherently configured in the viewer's mind one way or another (Bacon & Sylvester 1975: 11–12, 56). The bird landing on the field, for example, became a skulled figure shaded under an umbrella and hovering in front of a large animal carcass that is hung up as if crucified.[1] This produces an irregular rhythm to the visual experience, as our minds shift through various attempts at putting the imagery together into a coherent whole, never arriving upon a final conclusive organized perception and understanding of it.

Such visual experiences are rhythmic, then, because they involve a series of discrete experiences, and they are irregularly rhythmic, because these parts arise spontaneously and without metrical constraints. Before drawing upon the idea of ragtime music's 'ragged time', let us first look at certain instances where the visual rhythm in paintings was said to be 'jazzy', as we will later employ this term as well. In her analysis of visual rhythm in painting, Brooke Colby, for example, distinguishes jazzy visual rhythm from other types, including regular and flowing. In jazzy rhythm, the visual elements 'are varied in complicated patterns and combined with unexpected elements' (Colby 2009: 6). She also writes that jazzy visual rhythm is 'syncopated, bright, quick and alive', often exhibiting polyrhythms (Colby 2009: 33).[2]

David Lauer and Stephen Pentak evoke a similar sense to the idea of jazzy visual rhythm when they describe the diamond pattern of the figure's costume in Pablo Picasso's *Harlequin* (1915) in this way: 'The red diamonds fairly pop and create a jazzy rhythm' (Lauer & Pentak 2012: 181).[3] Now, although the authors in both cases are perhaps not using a phenomenological methodology and speaking about the structural features of the visual experience itself, we will still obtain from their descriptions of jazzy visual rhythm certain qualitative phenomenal descriptions that will be useful for us. This is because the rhythmic experience that will interest us here is one that is 'jazzy' in the sense of being 'bright', 'quick', 'alive', and 'popping'. But we should note that there are other ways an irregular rhythm can present itself in jazz music which may not fit this description, for example, if it were slow and mournful. Thus the sort of comics experience we have in mind is one that can be usefully described by appealing to the qualitative rhythmic feel of just certain types of jazz music.

The Rhythm of Ragged Time

And as we noted, the specific sort of jazz that will interest us here is one of its earliest styles, ragtime. We will not appeal to every feature of ragtime rhythm in our analysis, but rather we focus primarily on the experience of a 'ragged time' that it can give us. Catherine Schmidt-Jones describes ragtime rhythm in this way:

The name ragtime refers to the 'ragged', or off-the-beat, syncopated rhythms of ragtime. To rag a piece of music is to play with its rhythms, to make them jazzier. [. . .] In classic ragtime, in order to give the ragged rhythms something to play off of, the beat is strongly established. Usually this is done with a strong march-like 'boom-chick-boom-chick' or 'oom-pah-oom-pah' rhythm in the accompaniment. [. . .] Against this strong, steady rhythm, the melody gives its ragged, syncopated rhythms. (Schmidt-Jones 2010: 1)

The element of ragtime rhythm that of course is less useful for us here is the regularized steady part. But as Schmidt-Jones notes, this is not the part that creates the raggedness of the rhythm, which instead comes from the rhythmic irregularities of the melody's syncopations. So what gives this temporal feel a 'ragged' quality, then, is that it has definite accentuations, which can serve a rhythmic 'separative' function of sorts, but they arise through a free rhythmic variation rather than from metrical constraints that predetermine their patterning.[4]

Irregular Intra-panel Rhythm in the Comics Experience

Let us first examine a simple instance so as to provide a very basic demonstration of the ragged time involved in the experience of irregular intra-panel rhythms. It is a panel in Art Spiegelman's 'Ace Hole: Midget Detective' (**Figure 1**. Spiegelman 1974).

Coming before this panel in the sequence are regularized square panel frames, which contribute a steady inter-panel beat that accompanies the calm and even pacing of the film-noir narration. When our gaze arrives upon this particular panel, we might pause and study it further, because visually something is not quite self-consistent. Perhaps first we are struck by the asymmetry in the face, as our eyes jump around the oddly arranged facial features. The image might then seemingly reconfigure entirely in our perception when we realize that it can also be seen as the profile of a face. This experience may be similar to when we view the famous optical illusion drawing of a rabbit head that we alternately perceive in another moment as a duck head (**Figure 2**. *Fliegende Blätter* 1892).

Figure 1: Spiegelman, A. 1974. Ace Hole: Midget Detective. *Short Order Comix,* **2.** ©
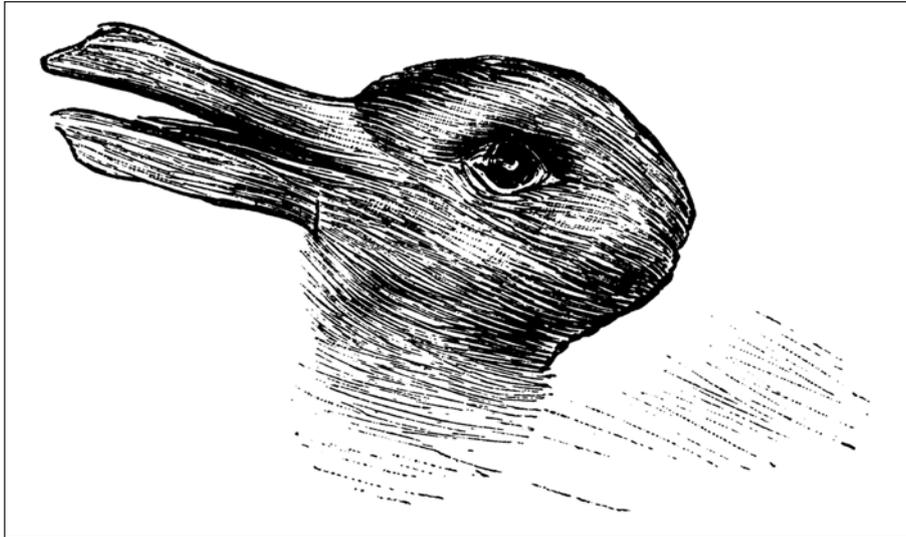1974 Art Spiegelman, panel 8, p. 34.

Figure 2: *Fliegende Blätter.* 1892. Kaninchen und Ente [illustration, artist unattributed]. 23 October, p. 147.

In other words, our experience of this panel by Spiegelman is not unitary. The most apparent punctuations in our temporal experience are when the face changes its basic orientation. The other rhythmic accentuations arise from our eyes' jumping movements, as they dart from one part of the oddly arranged face to another. Thus, we have one unitary panel but a temporally segmented and rhythmic experience of it.

We will next consider more elaborate examples in a similar Cubist vein by Mary Fleener. She explains that this style of hers, which she calls 'Cubismo', has the following influences: the abstract cartooning styles of Robert Armstrong, Victor Moscoso's psychedelic posters, 1960s op art, ancient Egyptian art, and Futurist painting (Fleener & Roth 2014). In many of these influences, her interest is largely in the 'kinetic' visual elements, and in some instances she is even specifically concerned with how they cause the viewer's eyes to move around the image rhythmically. For example, in Moscoso's posters, she explains that his patterns of primary color combinations would make everything 'go "zzzzzzzt!" And your eye would go "brdrdrdrdrdrt!" You did not know what to look at' (Fleener & Roth 2014).[5] What she obtains from her

Futurist influences is the way they depict motion by decomposing it into distinct parts.[6] She explains:

> I was a big fan of the Futurists. That was a group of painters in Italy. The most famous painting is the one [. . .] of the person walking the dog, and they draw about three dozen little legs, so the dog looks like it's going "brdrdrdrdrdrt", like that. *The City Rises* [. . .] is kinetic, because everything is moving. And [. . .] *Nude Descending the Staircase* [. . .] [has] multiple imagery that shows movement. [. . .] I found really interesting that nobody had done it in comics yet. [. . .] All we had before that were motion lines. (Fleener & Roth 2014)[7]

In cartooning she traces her initial inspiration for her Cubismo style to a panel from Robert Armstrong's single-page Mickey Rat story, 'Imported Erotika'. Here the rhythms of a European adult film scene's activities are suggested through background imagery that is composed of dynamic abstract shapes (**Figure 3**, left. Armstrong 1993).

Armstrong achieves a similar effect in one of his pieces about his jazz musician character Dizzy Ratstein, who is a variation of Mickey Rat. In the story, Dizzy takes a job as a studio musician who was asked to play only what was written for him and to also include a very brief and unembellished improvisational section. However, since

Figure 3: Jazzy abstraction in Robert Armstrong's Mickey Rat stories. Left: Armstrong, R. 1993. Imported Erotika. *Weirdo*, **8.** © 1982 Robert Armstrong, panel 7, p. 42. Right: Armstrong, R. 1980. Dizzy Ratstein. *Mickey Rat*, **3.** © 1979 Robert Armstrong, panels 3–6, p. 12.

he feels the irrepressible urge to express himself creatively, he plays his improv too enthusiastically for the commercial needs of the studio producers, who merely want to make a conventional piece of popular music (**Figure 3**, right. Armstrong 1980). The irregular and jagged panel divisions of this scene intrude into the context of the pages' more grid-like panel pattern, thereby suddenly interjecting a jazzy inter-panel rhythm into the steady beat of the other panels. This is just like how Dizzy's jazzy musical improv was an interruption into the more regular rhythmic patterns of the pop song. Yet, note also that the abstract imagery in the right-most panel has its very own jazzy intra-panel rhythm as well.

Before we proceed to some panels by Fleener, we might note briefly that she too has portrayed jazz musicians playing their music in a series of paintings entitled *Jazz Cats*, which feature her Cubismo style. Like in Futurist painting, she depicts various moments of the musicians' performances, all combined into single images, which gives them a jazzy visual rhythm of their own.[8]

Let us turn then to a couple of panels from Fleener's 'Rock Bottom: Part 1', reprinted in her graphic novel compilation *Life of the Party*. In these instances, she uses her Cubismo style to depict musical scenes with dynamic action or development. The title panel, for example, displays a series of interconnected faces that, despite their intersecting linkages, are visually distinct and pop out one after another, as the face seemingly descends into a madness depicted more and more abstractly with each transition. In the other parts of the image, we have multiple moments of her playing the bass guitar, each displayed simultaneously and yet discretely. Around the figure as well is black or white abstract imagery causing our eyes to dart about to a jazzed up visual rhythm (**Figure 4**, left. Fleener 1996).

In another panel of this story, Fleener depicts a scene she imagines while she and her band plays the song 'Tequila' at a night club (**Figure 4**, right. Fleener 1996). Here again our eyes are invited to jump about the shapes as we decompose the dance scene's various moments and places of action. Given the abruptness of each visual leap that our eyes make in a potentially endless series, our temporal experience is not a flowing unity but is rather a series of segments popping out one after the other through the disjointed passage of a ragged time.

Figure 4: Fleener, M. 1996. Rock Bottom: Part 1, or Bad Bar Band Blues! *Life of the Party*. © 1993 Mary Fleener / 1996 Fantagraphics Books, panel 1, p.16 and panel 1, p. 31.

Conclusion

As these examples demonstrate, a phenomenological method can be useful for analyzing irregular intra-panel rhythms in cases where the imagery is abstracted in such a way as to cause us to have a series of distinct experiences of just one panel. Another potential candidate for this sort of analysis could be Jeff Zenick's 'Because', which is featured in the collection *Abstract Comics* (Molotiu 2009). All eight pages of this work by Zenick have the same regularized panel format, but the contents of each panel have their own 'jazzy' irregular rhythms that seemingly act in defiance to the homogenized and standardized visual metrics of the layout. Nonetheless, it is possible that irregular intra-panel rhythms can only be found in such works with an abstract style, which would limit the scope of application for this sort of analysis. Or, perhaps these rhythmic experiences will also be found with other styles where visual or narrative ambiguities invite the reader to have a succession of unique experiences of a singular panel.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Editorial Note

This paper is part of the special collection Brilliant Corners: Approaches to Jazz and Comics, co-edited by Dr Nicolas Pillai (Birmingham City University) and Dr Ernesto Priego (City University London). Though it's the journal's policy to discourage the extensive use of footnotes, in this instance the editors have allowed a number of endnotes providing supplementary context.

Notes

[1] Francis Bacon, *Painting* (1946). An image of it is currently viewable at the Estate of Francis Bacon website: http://francis-bacon.com/artworks/paintings/1940s/id/849. An x-ray study was conducted and found some evidence of the earlier visual formations, although the bird figure was not clearly evident. See (Davis: 2015).

[2] Colby herself in fact distinguishes four types of rhythm: flowing, regular, jazzy, and random (Colby 2009: 33). She also addresses five types identified by Laura H. Chapman: regular, alternating, progressive, flowing, and jazzy (Colby 2009: 6). For our purposes, I have combined the descriptions of jazzy rhythm from both sections.

[3] Picasso's painting may be viewed at the MOMA website: http://www.moma.org/collection/works/78696.

[4] It should be noted that Messiaen gives an ambivalent assessment to jazz music's rhythmicity, because although the syncopations are rhythmic, they are placed against the non-rhythmic backdrop of patterns of equal note-values (Messiaen and Samuel 1967: 34). Again, our concern here lies not in this anti-rhythmic steady background but rather in the rhythmic syncopations.

[5] A number of examples that illustrate Fleener's observation may currently be found on display at Moscoso's personal webpage: http://www.victormoscoso.com/.

[6] Groensteen discusses the rhythm of inter-panel 'cinematic decomposition of the action presented'. In Fleener's Futurist style, various moments of the action are also decomposed and thus maintain this sort of rhythmic progression, yet since they are combined in one panel, that decomposition of the action unravels without passing to other panels. See Groensteen 2013: 146.

[7] Fleener here references the following paintings: Giacomo Balla's *Dynamism of A Dog on a Leash* (*Dinamismo di un Cane al Guinzaglio*, 1912), Umberto Boccioni's *The City Rises* (*La città che sale*, 1910), and Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No.2* (*Nu descendant un escalier n° 2*, 1912).

[8] The ten paintings in her *Jazz Cats* series are currently viewable at her personal webpage: http://maryfleener.com/shop/shop_painting.html.

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