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RESEARCH

Undemocratic Layout: Eight Methods of Accenting Images

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This essay compiles a range of 40 graphic narratives in order to identify and categorize the ways in which artists visually differentiate individual panels from other panels within page layouts. By differentiating or accenting a panel, creators give the accented panel's story content greater value relative to other story content depicted on the same page. This essay explores the eight most common methods.

Keywords: accents; frames; grids; layouts; panels

Introduction

Cartoonist Ivan Brunetti calls a comics grid 'democratic' because panels 'are all exactly the same size ... from which we can infer their equal weight and value in the 'grand scheme' of the page' (Brunetti 2011: 45). Comics creators and editors Jessica Abel and Matt Madden similarly argue that a grid's equality 'foregrounds the story and action' (Abel & Madden 2008: 71). This would be true because unchanging panels reduce attention to layout, just as the use of a single font and font size typeset in lines arbitrarily broken by page width eliminates typography and word positions as creative elements in prose-only texts.

But since layout is one of comics' most defining features, creators often emphasize rather than reduce its role. Abel and Madden, accordingly, recommend grids in order to vary from them: 'by introducing a tilted panel, to name one variation, the effect is much more powerful because the tilted panel jumps out at the reader to emphasize a mood, plot point, or dynamic motion' (Abel & Madden 2008: 71). By naming only one variation, Abel and Madden allude to but do not categorize the implied range of other methods for emphasizing images. This essay continues that task.

Methods

Because Abel and Madden employ the verb ‘accentuate’ to describe panel variations within otherwise uniform layouts, I refer to such variations as accented panels. To demonstrate and categorize their ubiquity, I draw examples from a diverse selection of 40 graphic narratives, ranging from Golden Age superhero comics to contemporary nonfiction. A majority were published in the 21st century, but works from the 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 80s, and 90s also appear. Most feature U.S. authors, but Canada, England, France, and New Zealand are also represented. Though most authors are featured only once, some appear more than once if they use more than one technique. Together they establish that comics creators employ a range of eight techniques for accenting images: size, tilt, shape, spacing, overlap, frame, style, and position. Each gives the highlighted image’s diegetic content greater weight and value. I illustrate each technique with an example and an original diagram to visually define its general principle.

Analysis

Size is the most obvious means for establishing a panel’s importance over other panels on the same page or two-page spread. The larger the panel, the greater the implied significance of its content (**Figure 1**):

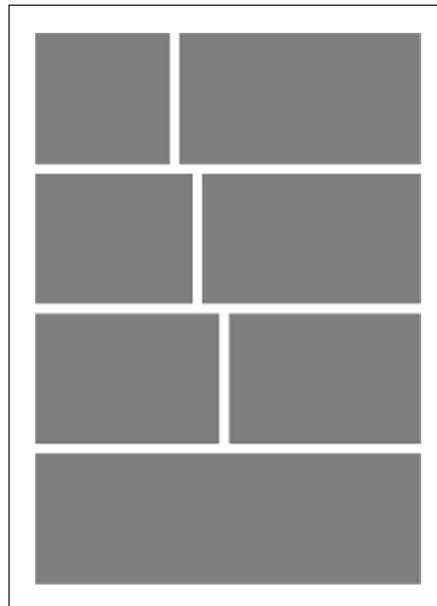


Figure 1: Size-accented panel.



Figure 2: Excerpt from Tamaki, J 2015 *SuperMutant Magic Academy*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly. © Drawn & Quarterly.

For example, in *Action Comics* #9 (February 1938), Joe Shuster draws Superman racing to catch a falling man in a seven-panel sequence divided into three two-panel rows before culminating with Superman catching the man in the fourth and final, full-width panel, the climax of the page scene and the significantly largest image (Siegel & Shuster 2006: 118). In *SuperMutant Magic Academy*, Jillian Tamaki draws a three-panel page beginning with a top panel four times larger than either of the two panels below it (Tamaki 2015: 232–3). The large panel, also the largest of the two-page spread, depicts the most visually dramatic image: a character triumphantly kicking open a set of double doors to celebrate surviving and now leaving her high school (**Figure 2**).

Evie Wyld and Joe Sumner in *Everything Is Teeth* include two facing pages with parallel layouts: a top row depicting characters fishing on a boat and below it an image of a shark swimming underwater. Each shark image occupies the equivalent of three rows, communicating the power of the shark over the human characters (Wyld & Sumner 2015: unpaginated).

If panels are rectangular and aligned with page edges, panel **tilt** is a visual accent mark, drawing attention to an otherwise identical panel (**Figure 3**).

Because the content of the image may or may not also be tilted, it is inaccurate to call a tilted panel by the film term Dutch tilt or tilted angle. In film, tilting a frame means tilting only the content of the frame while the frame itself must remain unchanged. In comics, an artist instead has four options: 1) tilt the frame and the content, 2) tilt the frame but not the content, 3) tilt the content but not the frame, and of course 4) tilt neither. In *Amazing Spider-Man*, Steve Ditko routinely drew image content at angles different from the angles of his perpendicular frames (Lee & Ditko 2009: 22, 30, 34, 43, 50, 52, 69, 70). J. H. Williams reverses the effect in *Batwoman*:

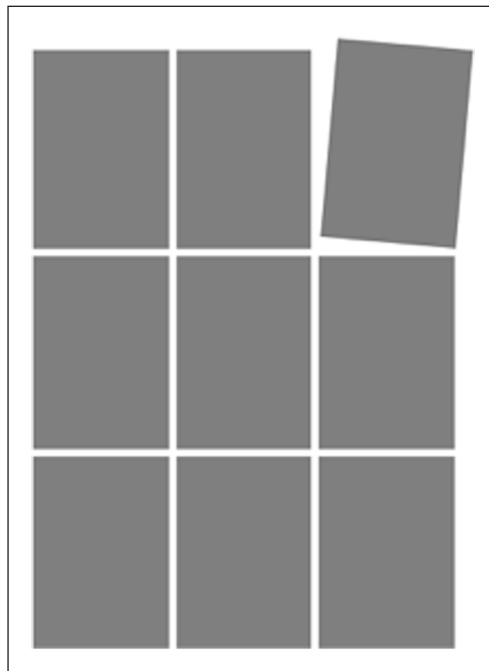


Figure 3: Tilt-accented panel.

Elegy, drawing tilted frames with perpendicular content. Joe Sacco's tilted frames in *Safe Area Gorazde* instead keep frame and content aligned and so both are tilted in relation to the page and other panels (Sacco 2001: 46, 60) (**Figure 4**).



Figure 4: Excerpt from Sacco, J 2001 *Safe Area Gorazde*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books. © Fantagraphics Books.

In *Unflattening*, Nick Sousanis begins a bottom row with a nearly square panel perpendicular to the page in order to follow it with two panels drawn at increasing tilts (Sousanis 2015: 25); the panel images depict a pair of feet lifting into flight, content parallel to the implied movement of the frames as they seem to roll forward. Tilts often increase the sense of notional manipulability, an effect Dean Haspiel expand in *The Alcoholic* by tilting a four-panel column as if it were a strip from a photo-booth machine placed over the page (Ames & Haspiel 2008: 63). In *Maus II*, Art Spiegelman similarly draws five tilted photographs as if placed across an eight-panel grid (Spiegelman 1991: 114–5).

Because perpendicular rectangles are the overwhelming norm, individual images may be accented by any variation in **shape (Figure 5)**:

Matt Baker's first eight-page episode in *Phantom Lady* #14 (October 1947) includes one circle or half-circle on each page of predominantly rectangular panels (**Figure 6**).

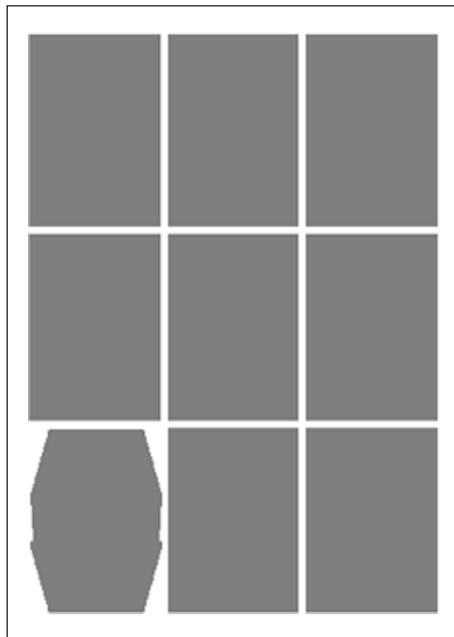


Figure 5: Shape-accented panel.



Figure 6: Excerpt from *Phantom Lady* #14, included in Amash J and Nolen-Weathington, eds. 2012 *Matt Baker: The Art of Glamour*. Raleigh: TwoMorrows Publishing.

Other 1950s artists employ occasional variant circular panels too—Wally Wood in *Shock SuspenStories* #4 (August 1952) for example—as does Frank Stack in his 1990s *American Splendor* collaborations with Harvey Pekar, arguably with a nostalgic effect (Pekar 2005: 186, 188, 190, 192). Will Eisner emphasizes the first panel in a mid-page shift from rectangular to non-rectangular polygons in a 1941 installment of *The Spirit* (Eisner 2001: 52). Even if a comic maintains rectangular panels, an individual panel may be accented through contrasting orientation. In *Bitch Planet*, Valentine De Landro isolates tall rectangular panels on two-page spreads of otherwise entirely wide rectangles (Deconnick & De Landro 2015: chapter 1, p. 18, chapter 2, p. 5, 16). On a page that contains other tall panels, Carla Speed McNeil draws two twice as thin as the page norm, accenting them even though each occupies only half as much space (McNeil 2011: 198); as a result, the image content—a climactic moment in which an enraged character about to strike out suddenly calms—is highlighted too.

If gutters are otherwise consistent, individual panels may be highlighted by differences in **spacing** (**Figure 7**):

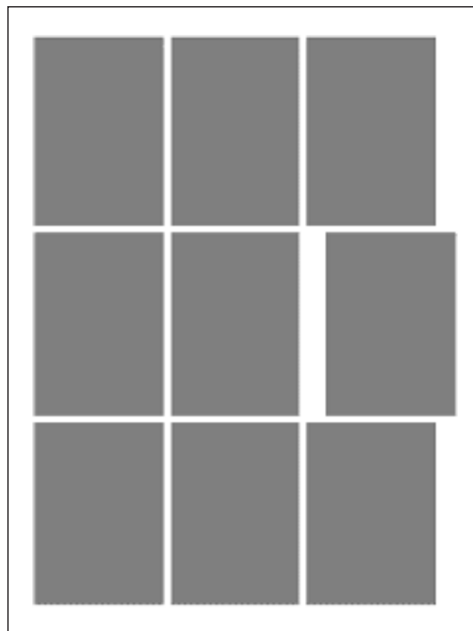


Figure 7: Spacing-accented panel.

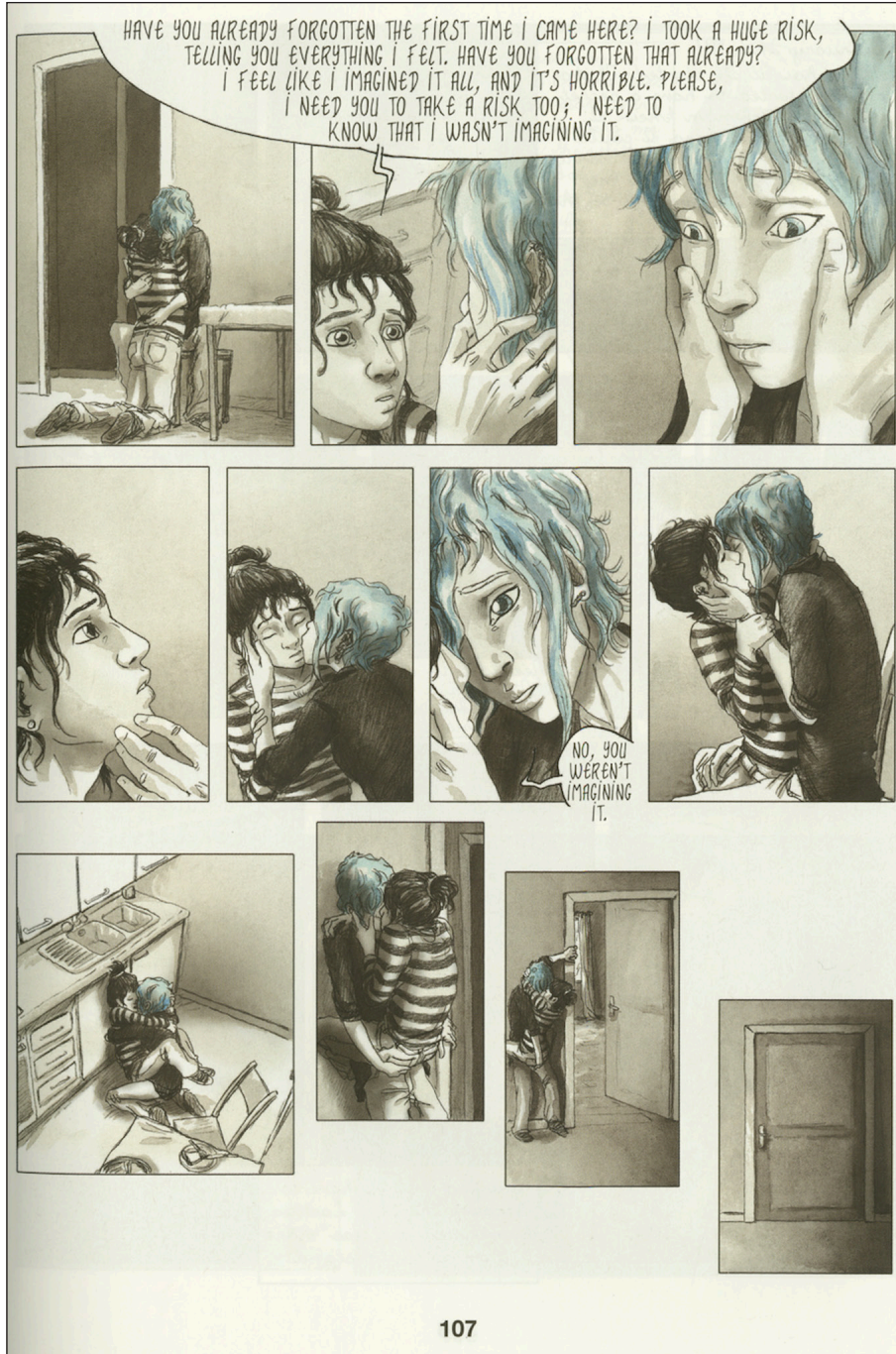


Figure 8: Excerpt from Maroh, J 2013 *Blue Is the Warmest Color*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press. © Arsenal Pulp Press.

In *The Invisibles*, Jill Thompson draws a five-panel page consisting of two two-panel rows and a bottom full-width panel. The otherwise unremarkable first panel of the middle row is surrounded on two interior sides by white space five times wider than other gutters, and so the layout emphasizes it over even the full-width below it (Morrison 2014: 217). David Mazzucchelli emphasizes a panel in the same page position by widening the surrounding white space on all sides (Mazzucchelli 2009: chapter 14, p. 7). Julie Maroh applies the technique to an entire row in *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (Maroh 2013: 107). The additional white space reduces the physical size of the four panels, but by breaking the pattern of rigid gutters of the page-spread, the last row is visually the most important (**Figure 8**).

Thomas Ott creates even more dramatic effects in 'A Wrinkled Tragedy' by using a black page background and dramatically increasing the spacing by drawing an isolated panel roughly 1/5th the size of other panels (Ott 2010: 19, 21, 22, 24, 26).

A reverse technique to spacing, **overlapping** images can draw attention by appearing to be placed overtop other images (**Figure 9**):

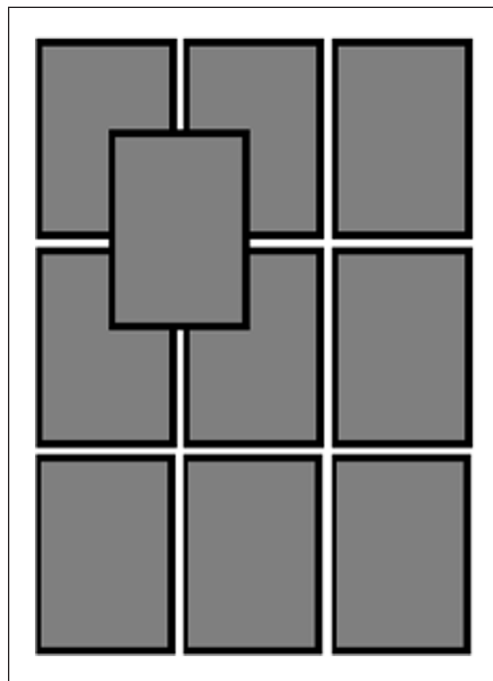


Figure 9: Overlapping panel.



Figure 10: Excerpt from Kornberg, D and Bland, C 2014 *Madonna Comix*. Portland, Oregon: Media F8. © Media F8.

Haspiel applies this technique in the tilted photo-machine panels described above. Cameron Stewart creates the effect repeatedly in *Fight Club II*, drawing pills and rose petals as if they were physical objects resting on top of the literal page (Palahniuk & Stewart 2015). Dianne Kornberg's approach to adapting Celia Bland's poetry into *Madonna Comix* is premised on overlapping images. As Luc Sante explains in the Foreward, Kornberg uses Marjorie Henderson Buell's 1930s comic strip *Little Lulu* as the 'backing scrim' of each page, and 'Atop the strips, half-effacing them, Kornberg draws and paints' (Kornberg & Henderson 2014) (**Figure 10**).

More often, overlapping images have the effect of playing cards arranged with their corners and edges overlapping, now a norm of mainstream comics, as seen in Brian Azzarello and Eduardo Risso's 1999 series *100 Bullets* (2014), Geoff Johns and Phil Jimenez's *Infinite Crisis* (2006), Scott Snyder and Jock's *Wytches* (2016), and Ta-Nehisi Coates and Brian Stelfreeze's *Black Panther* (2016). The approach is as old as the comics tradition, with an example by Raymond de la Neziere from 1886 on display in *Le Musee de la Bande Dessinee* in Angoulême, France.

Insets, which appear as if placed entirely within the borders of a larger image, are another ubiquitous variation of overlapping (**Figure 11**):

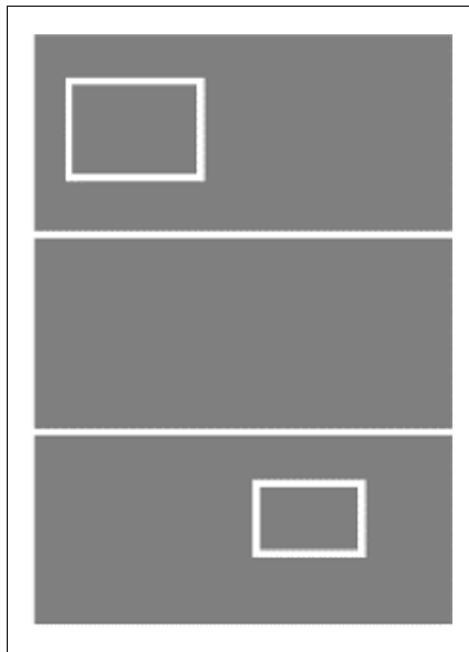


Figure 11: Inset panels.



Figure 12: Excerpt from McGuire, R 2014 *Here*. New York: Pantheon. © Pantheon.

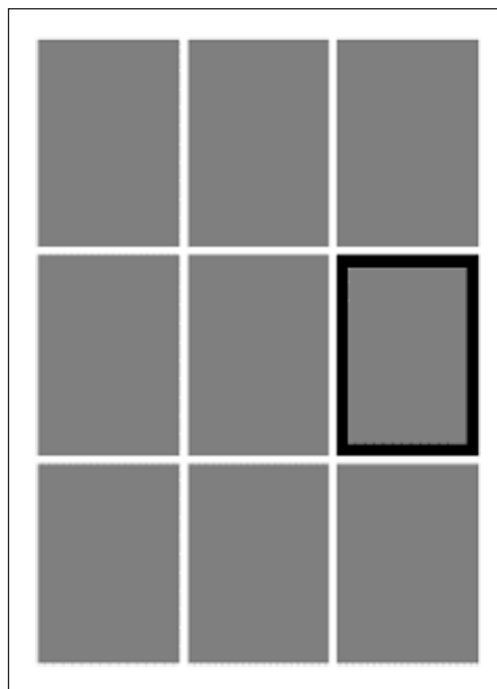


Figure 13: Frame-accented panel.

Richard McGuire's *Here* (2014) demonstrates an unvarying application of an inset approach (**Figure 12**).

Drawing panels as insets over a full-page panel can also emphasize the background image as the page's foundation, a technique more common in mainstream comics, which Dave McKean explores extensively in his and Neil Gaiman's 1988 *Black Orchid*.

Even if images are similarly sized, shaped and arranged, the drawn quality of **frames** can highlight content (**Figure 13**):

In *Hellboy: Seed of Destruction*, Mike Mignola uses a black page background and so black gutters and frames, isolating a single image by framing it in white lines (Mignola & Byrne 2003: chapter 2, p. 5) (**Figure 14**).

In *Elektra: Assassin*, Bill Sienkiewicz draws choppy black lines around images that represent events currently taking place in a psychiatric asylum and no frames between images and white gutters for past events. When a choppy, black frame appears on a page of unframed panels, the framed image is highlighted and identified as representing either a time shift to the present or a thematically related moment, as when the frame appears around a teenaged Elektra attempting suicide (Miller & Sienkiewicz 2012: 12). In *Batwoman: Elegy*, J. H. Williams III draws sharp-edged frames around Batman and ornately curving frames around her antagonist; when ornate elements first appear around Batwoman on a page of otherwise sharp-edge panels, the framing distinguishes the content and visually communicates the antagonist's power over her (Rucka & Williams 2010: chapter 2, p. 10). An image may be accented by including no frame while also removing background content so the white behind the subject is the white of the page, as Noelle Stevenson demonstrates by isolating an unframed dragon in *Nimona* (Stevenson 2015: 76, 153). Seth regularly leaves one or two panels unframed in *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (Seth 2004: 5–9, 13, 14, 16–24). Christophe Blain follows the same technique, while sometimes reversing it by drawing one or two framed panels on pages of predominately unframed images (Lanzac & Blain 2014: 37, 42, 56, 61, 71, 72), an effect Will Eisner also employs occasionally in *Life on Another Planet* (Eisner 2009: 24, 23).

Frames can also accent image content if elements of the content are drawn as if breaking the frames and entering the negative space of the gutter and possibly the space of other images—and so another form of overlapping (**Figure 15**):



Figure 14: Excerpt from Mignola, M and Byrne, J 2003 *Hellboy: Seed of Destruction*. Milwaukee: Dark Horse. © Dark Horse.

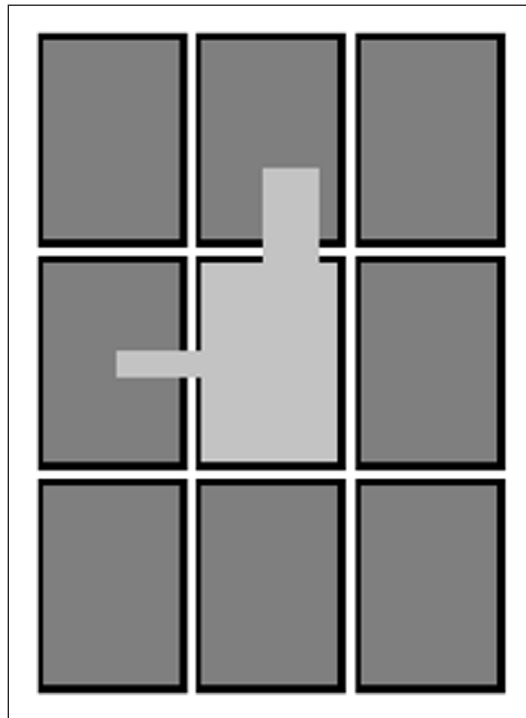


Figure 15: Broken frames.

The effect is often used to depict movement and violence, as if the frame is unable to contain the image subject due to the subject's speed and power, as Sana Takeda demonstrates in *Monstress*, depicting a splash of blood, the swinging of long hair, a head thrown backwards, a bird in flight, and two figures in full combat—though when broken frames become a page norm, they no longer accent content (Liu & Takeda 2016: chapter 1, p. 24, 26, 40, 46, 54, 36) (**Figure 16**).

Christian Ward takes the approach to its extreme in *Ody-C*, drawing panel frames as physical objects that are literally broken by a panel's subject; Ward then redraws the frame shards, including the white gutter previously between panels, in the next iteration of the image, further collapsing discourse and diegesis (Fraction & Ward 2015: chapter 1, p. 19).

Broken frames reveal the impossibility of dividing frames from other drawn elements, providing additional means for highlighting images. If images contrast other images through differences in **style**, they may stand out in the page composition (**Figure 17**):



Figure 16: Excerpt from Liu, M and Takeda, S 2016 *Monstress*. Berkeley: Image. © Image.

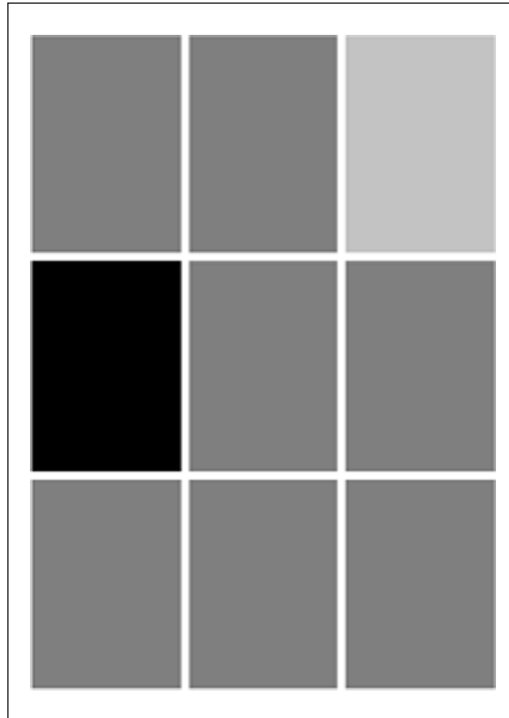


Figure 17: Style-accented panel.

In *Blindspot*, Kevin C. Pyle isolates through color, placing a green panel on a page of brown panels, a black panel on a page of green panels, and a multi-colored panel on an otherwise monochromatic page (Pyle 2007: 3, 10, 51, 57). In *Blue Is the Warmest Color*, Julie Maroh colors individual subject elements—hair, shirt, etc.—blue on otherwise black and white pages (Maroh 2013: 9, 10, 12, 16, 21, 32, 36, 46, 49). Eddie Campbell creates a similar effect in the black and white *From Hell* by leaving the background of an image undrawn and so white in contrast to the darker effect of greater line quantity in surrounding images; the effect is intensified because the white background is non-diegetic, contradicting the representation of the same location in the other images (Moore & Campbell 2000: chapter 12, p. 11). Other isolated changes in style work similarly. In *Age of Bronze*, Eric Shanower draws highly detailed panels and so is able to accentuate an image with an abrupt drop in line quantity, one that also signifies a shift to a character's memories (Shanower 2013: 143). In *CancerVixen*, Marisa Acocella Marchetto highlights the image of a restaurant receipt

by using a photocopy that starkly contrasts the minimalist style of the surrounding images, an effect compounded by tilt and size accenting too (Marchetto 2006: 113) (Figure 18).

Finally, page areas emphasize images over others through **position**. As comics scholar Thierry Groensteen writes: ‘panels find themselves ‘automatically’ reinforced by the fact that they occupy one of the places on the page that enjoys a natural privilege, like the upper left hand, the geometric center or the lower right—and also,



Figure 18: Excerpt from Marchetto, M A 2006 *CancerVixen*. New York: Pantheon. © Pantheon.

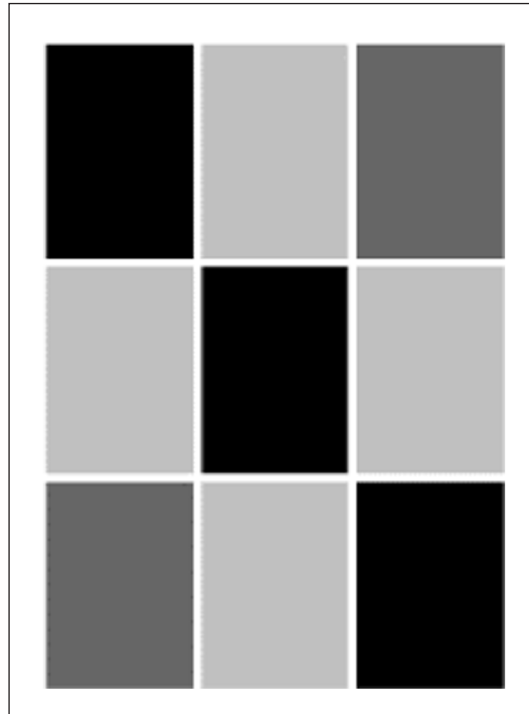


Figure 19: Panel position accents.

to a lesser degree, the upper right and the lower left' (Groensteen 2007: 29). If grids were 'democratic' as Brunetti claims, panels would have the same value; Groensteen instead argues for shades of importance (**Figure 19**):

In *Celeste*, I. N. J. Culbard combines positioning with panel size and shape by varying a 4×3 grid of squares with a first, middle, and last panel that merge two squares into tall rectangles (Culbard 2014: 39–40). Such combinations of accent techniques are common. In *The New Ghost*, Robert Hunter places circular, overlapping panels at page centers (Hunter 2011: 12–13). In *100 Bullets*, Eduardo Risso centers pairs of circular panels drawn in a contrastingly less detailed style and in a single color on a multi-colored page (Azzarello & Risso 2014: chapter 5, p. 9). In *Maui: Legends of the Outcast*, Chris Slane centers a pair of tall, overlapping, single-color panels on a page of primarily wide and square, multi-color panels (Slane & Sullivan 1996: 9) (**Figure 20**).



Figure 20: Excerpt from Slane, C and Sullivan, R 1996 *Maui: Legends of the Outcast*. Auckland: Godwit. © Godwit.

Conclusion

Although undemocratic in Brunelli's sense, the ubiquity of accented panels is evidence of a consensus approach to layout across a wide range of decades and genres. These eight techniques, used independently and in combination, define the norms for differentiating panels and so emphasizing image content in the comics form. These techniques are pervasive but likely not exhaustive, and so future research may expand their range and further detail their applications.

Editorial Note

The diagrams on figures 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17 and 19, which illustrate each method of accenting images, are the author's own creation. An editorial decision was taken to require the inclusion one actual example from each of the methods as evidence the layouts are present in published comics. Unless otherwise stated all third-party material and references to characters and comic art presented on this journal are ©, ® or ™ of their respective owners. No challenge to any owner's rights is intended or should be inferred; images have been included for scholarly purposes only.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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