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RESEARCH

New Choices of the Comics Creator

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Theorisations of comics and graphic narrative have tended to focus on readership rather than creation. Even McCloud's seminal *Understanding Comics* (1993) focuses on interpretation, though the later *Making Comics* (2006) pays more attention to the work of the creator. McCloud incorporates into his theory five 'choices of the comic creator': choices of Moment, Frame, Image, Word and Flow.

However, these may not be the most salient choices for a creator to take; nor do they necessarily occur in that order. Using these alongside McCloud's other notions (notably 'transitions') with a group of sixth form comics creators led me to reconsider approaches to comics creation, as well as reading, in my PhD research 'Making Meanings with Comics: A Functional Approach to Graphic Narrative'. In this work, I take models of meaning-making from the functional linguistics of M.A.K. Halliday, and adapt that framework to specify how comics make meaning. As a linguistics-inspired approach, this takes seriously the production of meaning as well as the reception.

In this graphic article, I give a brief illustrated overview of this view of comics meaning making, and present a set of new 'choices for the comics creator' which arose from it. These new choices include: Choice of Character Design, Choice of 'Verb Style', Choice of Framing, Choice of Density, Choice of Metonymy. I offer a critique of McCloud's choices, and account for the proposed alternatives, indicating the theory that led to them with illustrative examples, drawn in the main from my own comics created in that sixth form workshop alongside students. The article is drawn digitally and incorporates extracts of comics pages as well as diagrams to illustrate the approach to comics that informs the five 'choices' described.

Keywords: Comics; drawing; Halliday; linguistics; McCloud

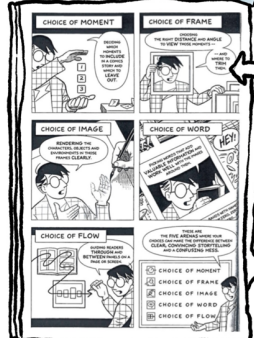
New CHOICES of the COMICS CREATOR

PAUL FISHER DAVIES

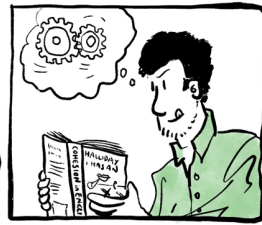
From 2006 -2010 I worked alongside students to create "24-HOUR COMICS" - over a few DAYS each year.



I found it HARD to work out what was happening with my and my students' work, and struggled to find useful THEORY.



McCLOUD suggested FIVE "CHOICES" from his own theory of comics... but these didn't match well to what students were doing and the PROBLEMS that arose...



I needed to figure out a way to ARTICULATE the choices we seemed to be making using a more CONGRUENT model...

What's the MOMENT here? There are MANY!

Why doesn't it "FLOW"? What's FLOW? I'm only doing STICK FIGURES and ANGLE!
- I can't do DISTANCE

Which I found in M.A.K. HALLIDAY'S MODEL of MEANING-MAKING, leading to my PhD!

- A FUNCTIONAL approach - 3 "META-FUNCTIONS" all languages (SOCIAL SEMIOTICS!)
 - 1) IDEATIONAL - representing experiences *MUST ENACT...*
 - 2) INTER PERSONAL - ENGAGING people & INTERACTING
 - 3) TEXTUAL - creating structured TEXTS. *THIS LAST one UNDERPINS the other two...*

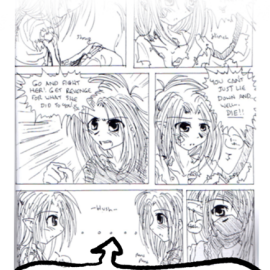


This led to 5 NEW Choices for COMICS CREATORS...

1 Choice of CHARACTER DESIGN

Character design was where I and my students tended to START...

Character design is METAFUNCTIONAL - it serves IDEATIONAL purpose, representing characters, but also TEXTUAL - CHARACTERS are what you DRAW over + over...



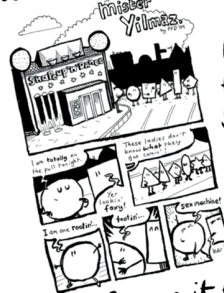
I found some students' wonderful artwork hard to follow because the REPEATED ELEMENTS were INDISTINCT to me...

The choice of STYLE for your characters impacts GENERALITY, GENRE, the SPEED at which you can work, and space for PERSONAL MARKS...

ABSTRACTION tending to serve the INTERPERSONAL function.

My style has tended toward this!

HATS, HAIR, CLOTHES mark IDENTITY and PERSONALITY.



When I tried one year to SIMPLIFY to (JUST SHAPE)

I found it presented its own problem of REPRESENTATION!

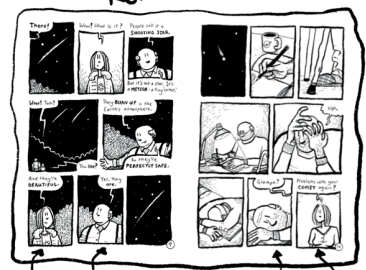


HOW can a CIRCLE COMB his HAIR to get ready to go out?
Where are his POCKETS?

How do LEGS work?
What about ARMS?



But some affordances were PLEASING to readers - the METAPHOR, THIS DEFLATION.



At times, the TEXTUAL and IDEATIONAL didn't work.

Some readers missed the TIME LAPSE implied by the SHIFTS in character design here.

② Choice of VERB STYLE

For HALLIDAY, VERBS aren't just 'doing words'. The PROCESS includes BEING, SENSING, SAYING and more!

| | Composition | Difference | Abstract Line | Verb Supply |
|-------------|-------------|------------|---------------|---|
| Verbal | | | | GREENS! YEE! |
| Mental | | | | THINKS |
| Material | | | | PONE |
| Behavioural | | | | PAW! |
| Relational | | | | Built of wood WOODS! |
| Existential | | | | It was Mark There were more of them. |

In COMICS we need to show what HAPPENS too. Where VERBS work in CLAUSES, comics drawing shows PROCESSES visually.

We can ARRANGE the PROCESSES in a GRID according to the RESOURCES of comics we use...

WE could IMPLY processes by the ORIENTATION and POSES of FIGURES...

WE can use ABSTRACT LINE to make EXPLICIT what happens with CONVENTIONAL CODES...

OR "CHEAT" and incorporate WORDINGS to show the process!

Or through IMPUTATION, a SPOT-THE-DIFFERENCE game between drawings...

And ALL can work SIMULTANEOUSLY to communicate the PROCESSES of COMICS - creators CHOOSE not a "MOMENT" to draw, but compose MANY EVENTS, usually CLUSTERED into PANELS ...

Even "CHEATING" doesn't EVADE the other ways of DRAWING what HAPPENS - it EXPANDS and ENRICHES it!

This leads to: ③ Choice of DENSITY...

In LANGUAGE, WE REALISE PROCESSES by SELECTING a VERB to appear in a CLAUSE in a SYNTACTIC LINEAR SEQUENCE - from a "colour-wheel" - like CONTINUUM OF PROCESS TYPES.

But in COMICS DRAWING it's more simultaneous - the 'VERBS' STACK UP and DRAWING represents MANY.

If you draw someone speaking... OF THINKING... You're COMMITTED to drawing them BEHAVING AND... OF COURSE...

And a READER of COMICS will tend to notice the process types at the TOP of the stack as MOST VALUENT. So if you want attention to the WORLD, it may be BEST to clear out the TALKING and the ACTION.

This is a pattern of TENDENCIES, not a set of LAWS. But it seems to lead to USEFUL ADVICE!

How RICH do you want your STORY to be?

How HARD do you want your READER to WORK?

Do you want a LOT happening at once to slow your reader? Do you want them to DWELL on an image of the world?

REDUNDANCY can help CLARITY of storytelling...

And DENSITY can help RICHNESS. Many ACTIONS in this panel, VERBAL out of the way, the MAP prominent.

I hope you don't mind. I knocked up some breakfast. There wasn't out by the way of bacon or 'sauss'es so it's just eggs.

Thank you. 'sokay.

VERBAL MATERIAL MATERIAL BEHAVIORAL RELATIONAL

PROJECTING FUNCTION ADVANCING WORLD-BUILDING in a CASCADE of COMMITMENTS.

VERBAL + MENTAL MATERIAL BEHAVIORAL RELATIONAL EXISTENTIAL

"PROJECTING" - thought & meaning THINGS HAPPEN in a WORLD BUILT by DRAWING

④ Choice of **FRAMING** reflects McCloud's CHOICE OF FRAME, but distances this from PHOTOGRAPHY - Angle, Distance, Cropping...

FRAMING may be how you INTRODUCE something in a LINEAR, PARATACTIC SEQUENCE...

... OR a matter of NESTING, Two-DIMENSIONAL frames...

LET ME TELL YOU... ONCE UPON A TIME... I MET AN OLD MAN IN THE WOOD...

I READ A BOOK... I HAD A BATH... WHILE I HAD A BATH... I READ A BOOK...

in HYPOTACTIC, subordinating relationships.

TITLE... GET READY FOR... 'OH... THE STORY!

PARATAXIS and SEQUENCE has been STRESSED in COMICS...

But **HYPOTAXIS** and ENCLAVURE is key too! PANELS project WORLDS like word balloons project thoughts!



This sort of NESTING lends comics DEPTH as we enter into characters' MINDS and PASTS... whether the framing is PARATACTIC as handled here...

(with the help of **MODAL** marking of the BORDERS in the introductory frames...)

Or HYPOTACTIC as here, where an element of story STARTS in a "BALLOON" but is then "PROMOTED" to the level of PANEL - with a MATCHING MODAL BORDER. →



And of course we can also use framing in some ways McCloud suggests - to TRIM, EXCLUDE - and to

EVASIVE the COMMITMENT I mentioned previously!



So this leads to ⑤ - choice of METONYMY.

How Much do you NEED to INCLUDE in the frame?

How Much can you LEAVE OUT?

Despite the STACK of COMMITMENTS to RE-DRAW...

we CAN and often DO VARY DRAWINGS to show only PART of the IMAGE...

USING ELLIPSIS and form of SUBSTITUTION to AVOID TIRESOME RE-drawing!

WHY WOULDS HE DRAW THE OTHER 22 PANELS?

This sort of TEXTUAL VARIATION is behind WALLY WOOD'S "22 PANELS" - and it activates READERS' search for COHESION!

| | | | | | |
|-----------------|--|----------------------------|--|-------------------|--|
| Repetition | | with variation | | not - consecutive | |
| Substitution | | metonym / caption | | | |
| Ellipsis | | shape figure of background | | | |
| Semantic fields | | reference | | | |
| Co-reference | | proximity | | | |

The FUNCTIONS served by VERBAL COHESIVE features - where one part of a text DEPENDS on another - join REALISATIONS of similar functions in IMAGES...

REpetition of images of course... But also SUBSTITUTIONS like WOOD'S... METONYMY and SYNECDOCHE!

including ELLIPSIS - drawing NOTHING - substitution by ZERO!

SEMANTIC FIELDS across images (and text) NATURALLY!

And REFERENCE - POINTERS and TAILS and CONNECTORS!

What can be left IMPLICIT, to CARRY OVER from PREVIOUS DRAWINGS?

In a RAPIDLY-DRAWN 24-HOUR COMIC especially, the RELIEF from REDRAWING of dropping your character down a HOLE is welcome!

Even the DARK PATCH OF INK is MULTIFUNCTIONAL!

And TEXT for sound and ABSTRACT line can serve these purposes too - marrying the INTERPERSONAL affordances of the DRAWING with "GAME" of leaving an open text for a reader to ASSEMBLE.

BUMP

So, reflecting on the choices I was making in the light of a METAFUNCTIONAL perspective led to...

1. Choice of CHARACTER DESIGN
How to represent the PARTICIPANTS - in a way that's RE-DRAWABLE + DISTINCTIVE...

2. Choice of "VERB STYLE"
How to represent the PROCESSES that move the text forward, by wording, IMPLICATION and ABSTRACTION...

3. Choice of DENSITY
How MANY such processes to cluster together, bearing in mind how they STACK...

4. Choice of FRAMING
How to PRESENT these and how to show their STATUS in the narrative...

5. Choice of METONYMY
And finally, What to EXCLUDE, how to EVADE REPETITION and keep the text COHESIVE.

IDEATIONAL INTERPERSONAL and TEXTUAL considerations!

END.
PPD SEP '18

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Because I AM
Story examples from 'Because I AM: Stories 2004-2009' by P.F. Davies - Print on Demand at Lulu.com # 14939472.

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Competing Interests

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Comics Extracts

- Davies, PF.** 2011. *Because I Am: Stories 2004–2009*. <http://www.lulu.com/shop/p-f-davies/because-i-am-stories-2004-2009/paperback/product-14939472.html>.

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