Guidelines for Interpreting Visual Elements of Sequential Art

When you examine the visual aspects of piece of sequential art, you need to look at both the individual panels and at how they are put together to form a narrative. There is no one definitive scheme for analyzing sequential art, but here are some guidelines I have found useful.

The four basics aspects of sequential art (an amalgam of Scott McCloud, Will Eisner, and Robert C. Harvey)

For any given work of sequential art, or any given episode in it, there are four main aspects you can examine. Here are the aspects, along with some questions you can ask yourself when you are analyzing a particular episode within a piece of sequential art. Note that not all aspects or questions will be equally significant.

1. Narrative Breakdown

How the story/episode is divided into panel units. The tempo of the piece depends on how the story is divided into panels. A single action or narrative sequence can be stretched out for a slower tempo or compressed for a faster tempo. The breakdown also determines what parts of the overall action are emphasized or passed over. (*UC* 84-85). Questions:

- <u>Length</u>: How many pages does a creator devote to a particular episode? Why does she give it the amount of space it has? Why was the episode not shorter or longer?
- <u>Tempo</u>: What is the tempo of the episode as a whole? How does it relate to the tempo of other episodes in the work? Does the tempo change within the episode?
- <u>Emphasis</u>: What is emphasized through the breakdown? What parts of the overall action does the creator choose to show, and why? What parts are not shown, and why? (*UC* 84-85)
- <u>Transitions</u>: What kinds of transitions join the panels together (*UC* 70-74)? Does the type of transition change over the course of the sequence? What is the effect of the transitions and the changes, if any? How hard does the reader have to work to achieve closure?
    - Moment to moment
    - Action to action
    - Subject to subject
    - Scene to scene
    - Aspect to aspect
    - Non-sequitor
- <u>Fluidity</u>: Do the panels run together smoothly, or is it harder to piece them together to form a narrative? Are the cuts between panels smooth and fluid, or abrupt?
- <u>Relationship of Words and Pictures</u>: What relationship exists between the words and the pictures in the sequence? Does the relationship remain constant or change? (*UC* 153-60)
    - Word specific
    - Picture specific
    - Duo-specific: Same message
    - Additive: Words amplify image or vice versa
    - Parallel: separate, not intersecting
    - Montage: Words are part of the picture
    - Interdependent: Words and pictures together convey something they couldn't alone.
- <u>Other options</u>: Are there any other observations to be made about how the story is broken up into panels? How else might the creator have broken down the episode, and why did she choose this particular way?

2. Layout

The size, shape, and arrangement of the panels on the page. Layout works together with breakdown to determine tempo, flow, and emphasis.
- Shape: Do the panels have a particular kind of shape? Does the shape of the panels on a page change or remain constant? What is the significance of the shape? How does it relate to what is happening in the panel?
- Borders: Do the panels have a particular type of border, or no border at all? What is the effect or meaning of the borders?
- Size: What is the size of the panels? Does the size remain constant within a page or between pages, or change? Why?
- Containment: Do the objects stay within the panels or do they extend outside of them?
- Arrangement: How are the panels arranged on the page? How easy is it to figure out which order to read them in? How does the arrangement of panels affect our sense of time (*UC* 100-03)?
- Whole page: How do all the panels on the page contribute to the appearance and effect of the page as a whole? How does the narrative flow within the page? Does the panel constitute a montage?

3. Composition

Arrangement of pictorial elements within the panel, and between panels. For each of the elements below, ask yourself why the creator made the choices he did, and how his choices effected the reader.

1. Within Panels (mise en scène)

- Content: What elements are shown in the panel? What is not shown? Note that an element's absence in a panel can be as significant as its presence.
- Proportion: How much of each element is included in the panel? This depends on positioning within the panel, lighting, and distance from the object. The less that is shown of a given element, the more the reader has to work to supply the missing part (closure again).
- Relationships: What are the visual relationships between elements within the panel? What are the centers or focuses of attention? Some factors to consider:
    - Size of elements: Larger elements are more emphasized, possibly more dominant.
    - Foreground versus background: Foreground elements are more emphasized, possibly more dominant.
    - Height: Elements higher up in the panel are not necessarily more emphasized, but are generally seen first and may be dominant over elements in the lower part.
    - Left versus right: elements on the left are generally encountered first.
    - Proximity: Elements that are close or overlapping in the panel can suggest intense interaction. Elements farther apart in the panel or separated by other visual elements can suggest coldness, separation. Look for changes in relative position over panels.
    - Visual patterns: Look for dominant lines or shapes: peaceful horizontals, dynamic diagonals, majestic verticals (of course, these lines can have other meanings, but these are common). Is the relationship between the elements in the panel curvilinear, triangular, or square?
    - Balance: Is the panel symmetrical, which suggests stasis, or asymmetrical, which suggests movement, energy?
- Perspective and focalization: From what position do we view the elements in the panel? Eye-level view is normal. Examine the distance and angle, and identify where they place us as viewers—how does it make us feel? Where are the vanishing point and horizon? Do we see from a particular character's point of view?
- Chronological Relationships: What is the chronological relationship between different visual elements within the panel, or between visual and written elements within the panel? Does the panel represent a single time frame, or does it represent overlapping or separate time frames?
- Color and light: Is the palette broad or restricted? Are the colours vivid or muted (*UC* 188-92)? Are particular colours associated with particular elements? Are colours used for purposes of symbolism or atmosphere? What is light and what is dark in the panel? Is the light evenly distributed or is it divided into extremes of brightness and shadow? Where is the light coming from? Is there a meaning associated with the lighting?
- Aural elements: What aural elements (words, sound effects) are present in the panel, and how are they represented?

2. Between panels

Positions of Objects: If the same objects exist in two adjacent panels, how does their position change? Is the same general arrangement maintained from one panel to the next, but with new objects taking up the spaces in the second panel?

Cinematic Effects: Is there a particular kind of cinematic shot that the panels, as a sequence, brings about, and why does the creator use that effect? Examples of basic cinematic effects are:

- Zooming in or zooming out: gradual movement closer or further away from an object
- Pan shot: showing a scene from one side to another from a stationary position (like turning your head from side to side)
- Tilt shot: like a pan shot, but going up and down (like nodding your head up to down or vice versa)
- Dolly shot: showing a scene from a horizontally moving position (scene passes by, like walking along a sidewalk with your head staring straight to the side). A single scene broken up by frames into a polyptych or by speech bubbles into a left-to-right sequence can function like a dolly shot. (*UC* 95, 115)
- Boom shot: like a dolly shot, but moving up or down.
- Arc shot: Subject is encircled by the camera
- Follow shot/tracking shot: Moving subject is trailed by a moving camera (subject seems stationary, the background moves by)

4. Style

The idiosyncratic style of the artist: types of lines used, amount of detail/realism, characteristic layout, how she draws particular things like faces, or feet, or buildings.

- Pictorial vocabulary: Where would you place the art in McCloud's triangle of reality, language and the picture plane? (*UC* 51). What is the relationship of the artistic style to the content of the story and the purpose of the creator? How does it affect the reader?
- Stylistic Variation: Do all elements in the art (e.g. characters versus backgrounds) have the same visual characteristics, or are some different—for example, more or less iconic or abstract? Do the visual characteristics of elements change over time, or at particular points in the work? Note that in general the more iconic or cartoonish a particular element is, the more we tend to internalize it (*UC* 28-45); the more realistic, the more it is external to us.
- Line: How would you characterize the line the creator uses? (*UC* 124-26)
- Idiosyncrasies: Are there any other features of the creator's art that seem particularly characteristic or distinctive, such as the way that particular elements (faces, buildings, etc.) are drawn, the degree of detail associated with different elements, use of shading or light, or repeated use of any of the other aspects listed above? How do these idiosyncrasies relate to the contents and theme of the work, and how do they affect the reader's experience of the work?

Other things to think about

- Objective versus subjective orientation: To what degree do elements in the panels represent material reality and to what degree do they represent psychological reality? Elements depicted can be any of the following (or any combination of the following):
  - Objective representations of material reality (realism)
  - Representations of material reality altered to reflect subjective states or emotions (expressionism)
  - Representations of purely internal states with no material reality (symbolism, surrealism, allegory)
- Symbols: Are there any symbolic associations to elements in a panel?
- Visual Motifs: Are there any visual motifs that run throughout the work: repeated images, objects, situations, scenes, visual patterns, colours, or characters? How do those motifs tie together the work? Does their meaning change over the course of the work?
- Influences: Does the work show signs of being influenced by any other artist, work, or medium?

- <u>Other elements in the panel</u>: What other elements are in the panel besides those that are the focus of attention (e.g. the elements of the setting)? Why are they there? Is the artist trying to manipulate the reader's attention?

Useful Resources

What to Read

<u>Books</u>

Gravett, Paul. *Graphic Novels: Everything You Need to Know*. New York: Collins, 2005.
Kennenberg, Gene. *500 Essential Graphic Novels: The Ultimate Guide*. New York: Collins, 2008.
Weiner, Stephen. *The 101 Best Graphic Novels*. New York: NBM, 2006.

<u>Web sites</u>

Librarian's Guide to Anime and Manga http://www.koyagi.com/Libguide.html
No Flying, No Tights http://www.noflyingnotights.com/whatFAQ.html
Artbomb www.artbomb.net

How to Interpret It

<u>Books</u>

Eisner, Will. *Comics and Sequential Art*. New York: Norton, 2008.
---. *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*. New York: Norton, 2008.
McCloud, Scott. *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels*. New York: Harper, 2006.
---. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper, 1994.

<u>Web Sites</u>

The Comics Journal http://www.tcj.com/
ImageText http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/
Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t914454983~db=all
International Journal of Comics Art http://www.ijoca.com/IJOCA.htm

Other Key Works (Alternative Comics)

Art Spiegelman, *Maus*
Frank Miller, *Batman: The Dark Night Returns, Sin City, 300*
Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (for Moore, also see *V for Vendetta* and *From Hell*)
Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan, Building Stories*
Charles Burns, *Black Hole*
Hayao Miyazaki, *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*
Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis I and II*
Daniel Clowes, *Ghost World, David Boring*
Guy Delisle, *Pyongyang*
Adrian Tomine, *Summer Blonde*
Howard Cruse, *Stuck Rubber Baby*
Ho Che Anderson, *King*
Chester Brown, *Louis Riel, Yummy Fur, I Never Liked You Anyway*
Will Eisner, *The Spirit, A Contract With God*
Joe Sacco, *Safe Area Gorazde, Postcards from Gaza*

Neil Gaiman, The *Sandman* series
Alison Bechtel, *Dykes to Watch Out For, Fun Home*
Craig Thompson, *Blankets, Goodbye Chunky Rice*
Harvey Pekar, *American Splendor*
Epileptic, *David B*
Emmanuel Guibert, Didier Lefevre, Frederic Lemercier, *The Photographer*
Jason Lutes, *Jar of Fools, Berlin*
Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez, *Love and Rockets*
Katsuhiro Otomo, *Akira*
Seth, *It's a Good Life If You Don't Weaken, Clyde Fans*
David Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp*
David Small, *Stitches*
Julie Doucet, *My New York Diary, Dirty Plotte*
Jessica Abel, *La Perdita*
Keiji Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen*
Dave Sim, *Cerebus* series