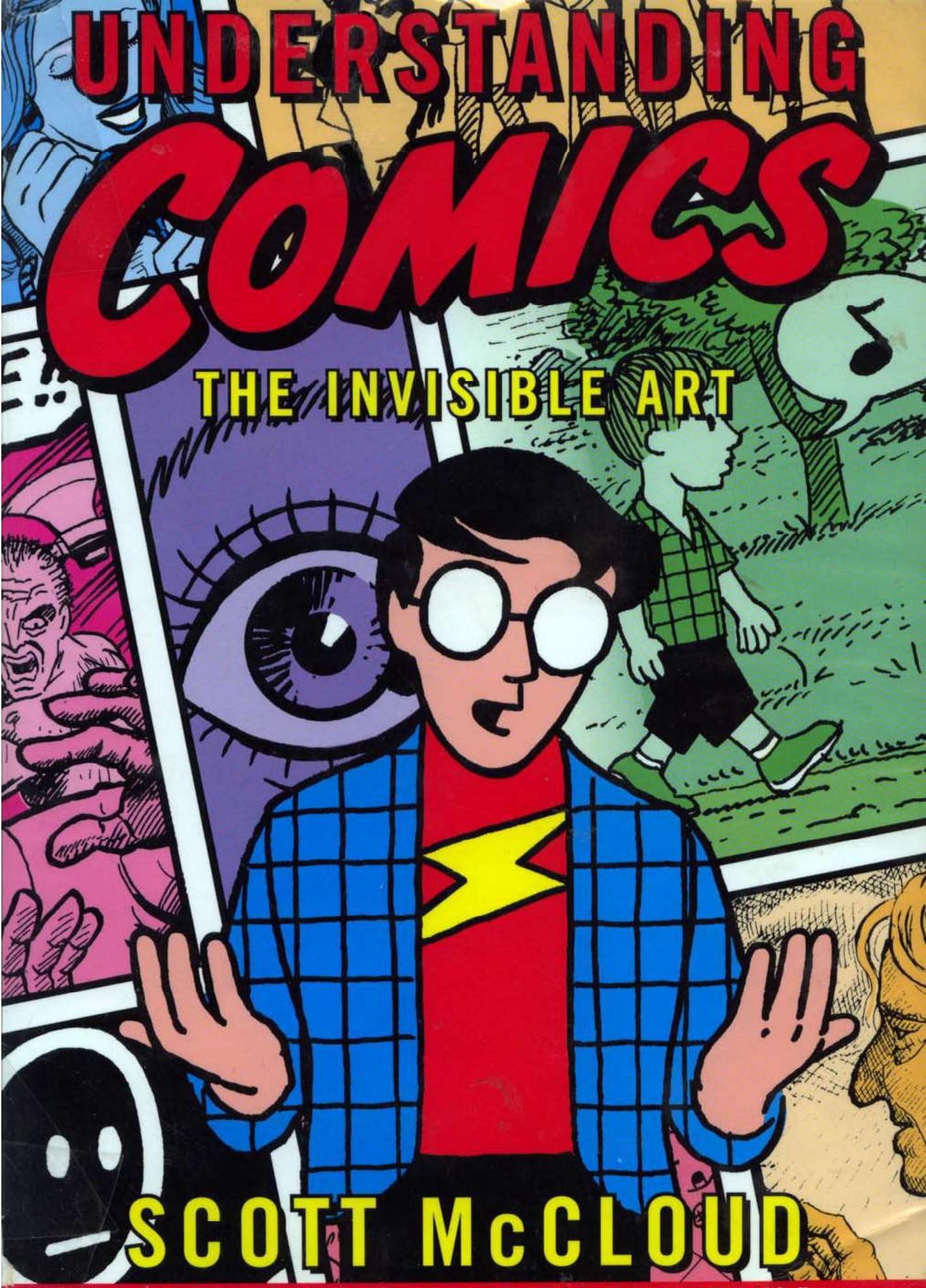


# UNDERSTANDING COMICS

THE INVISIBLE ART



SCOTT MCCLOUD

"A REMARKABLE NEW BAEDEKER OF THE TOONS."

—GARRY TRUDEAU, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

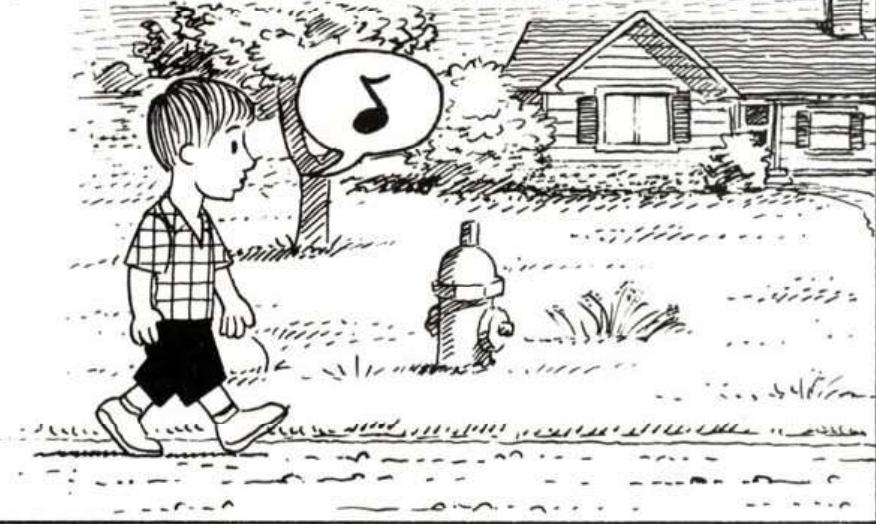
## CHAPTER THREE

BLOOD IN THE GUTTER.

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



**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!**



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

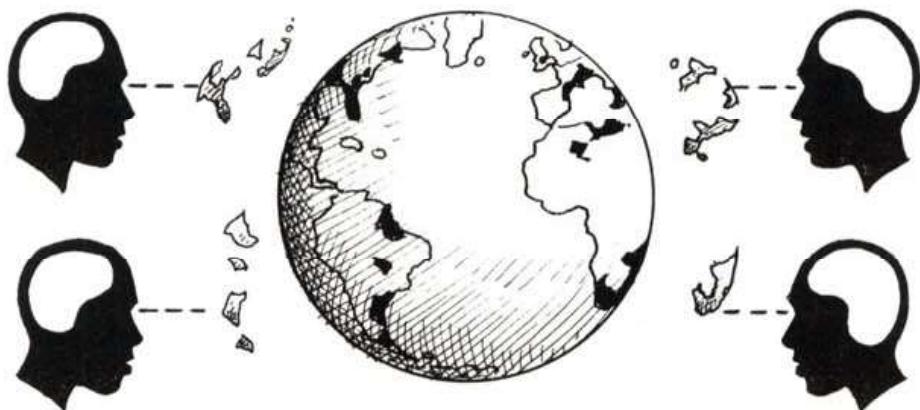
ALL OF US PERCEIVE THE WORLD AS A **WHOLE** THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE OF OUR **SENSES**.

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



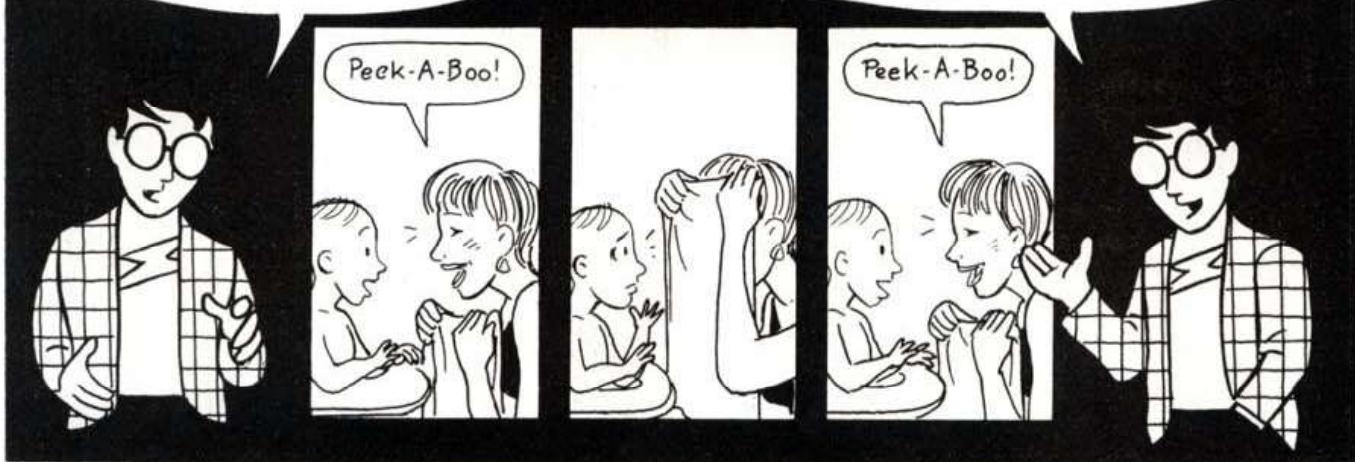
EVEN THE MOST **WIDELY TRAVELED** MIND CAN ONLY SEE SO MUCH OF THE WORLD IN THE COURSE OF A LIFE.

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.**



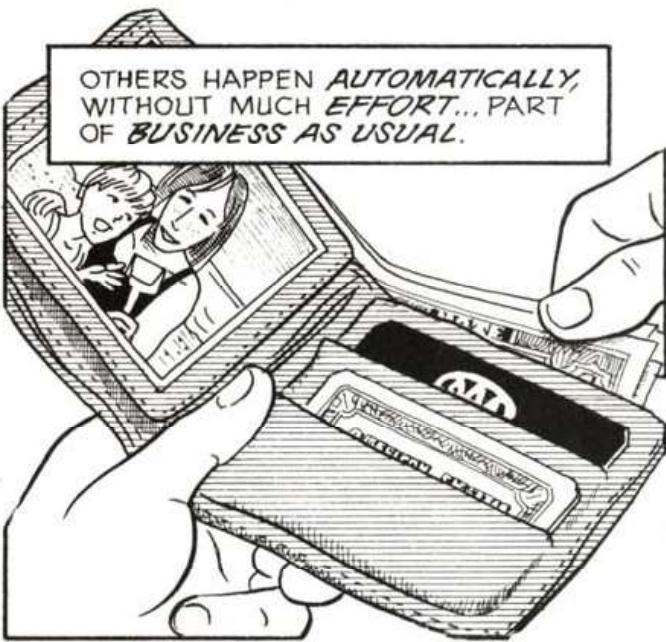
IN OUR DAILY LIVES, WE OFTEN  
COMMIT CLOSURE, MENTALLY  
COMPLETING THAT WHICH IS  
INCOMPLETE BASED ON PAST  
EXPERIENCE.



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



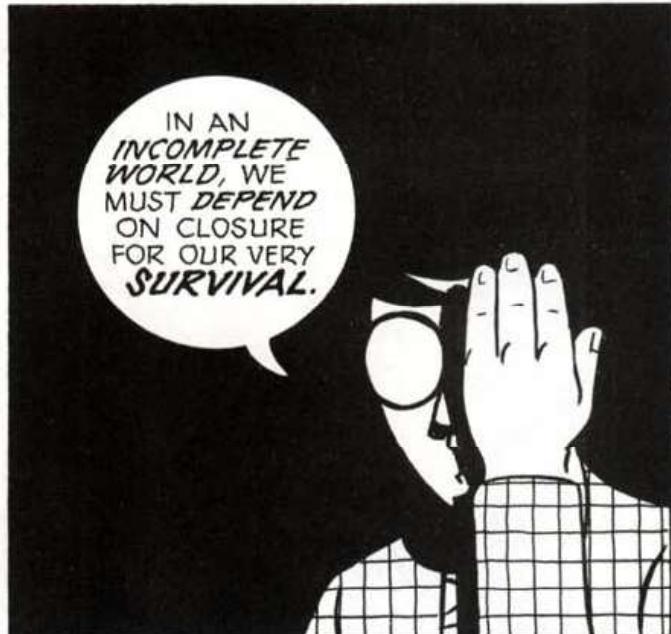
OTHERS HAPPEN AUTOMATICALLY,  
WITHOUT MUCH EFFORT... PART  
OF BUSINESS AS USUAL.



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

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

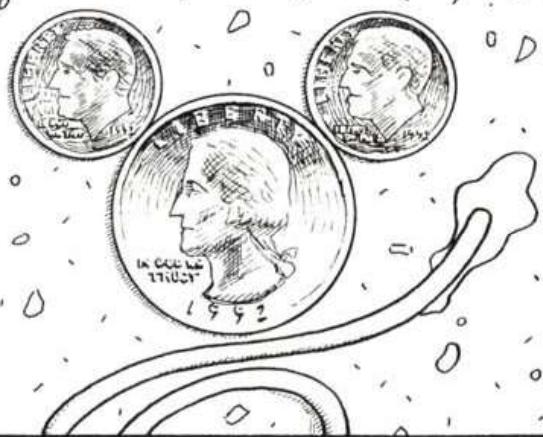


# CLOSURE

# CL S RE

# 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--

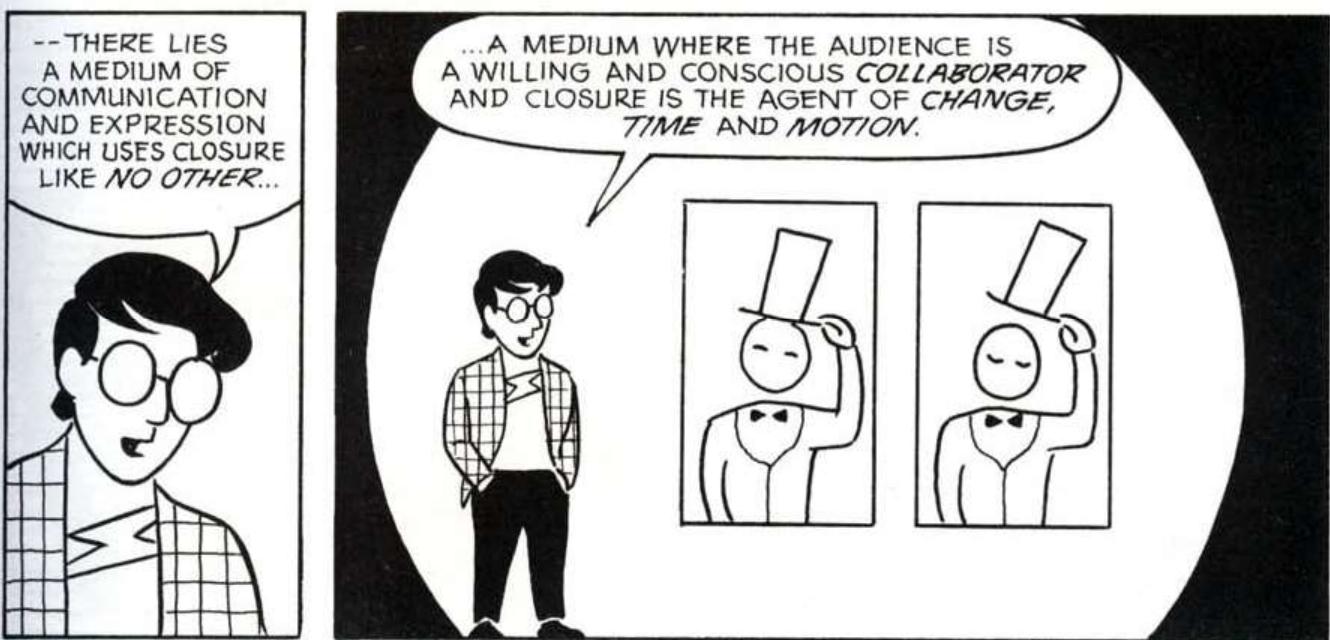
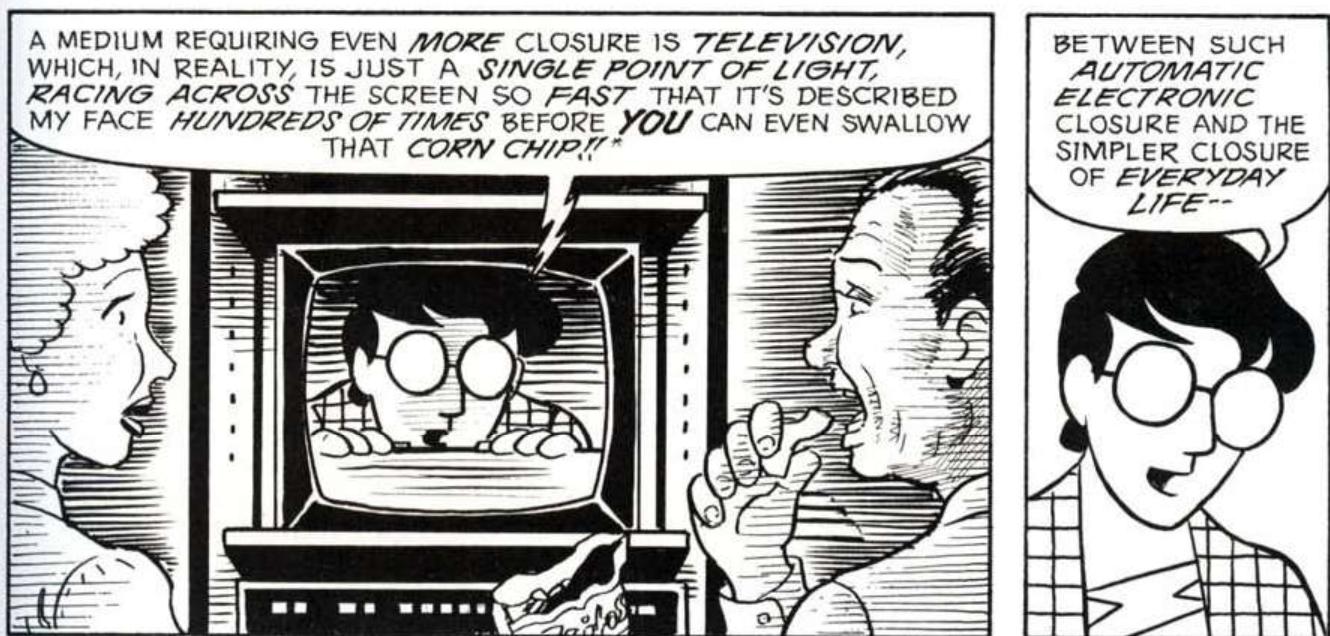
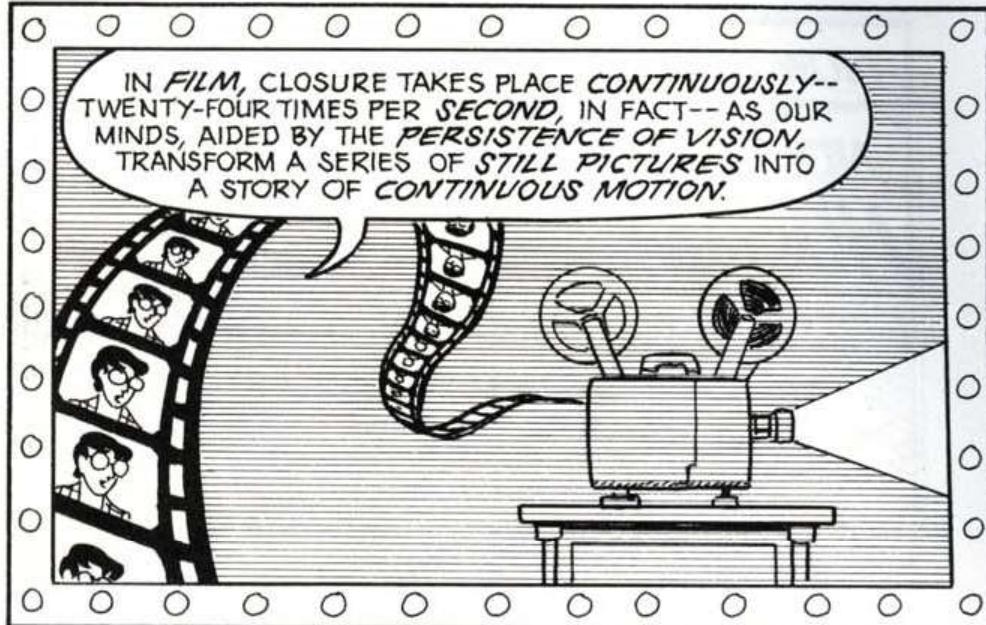


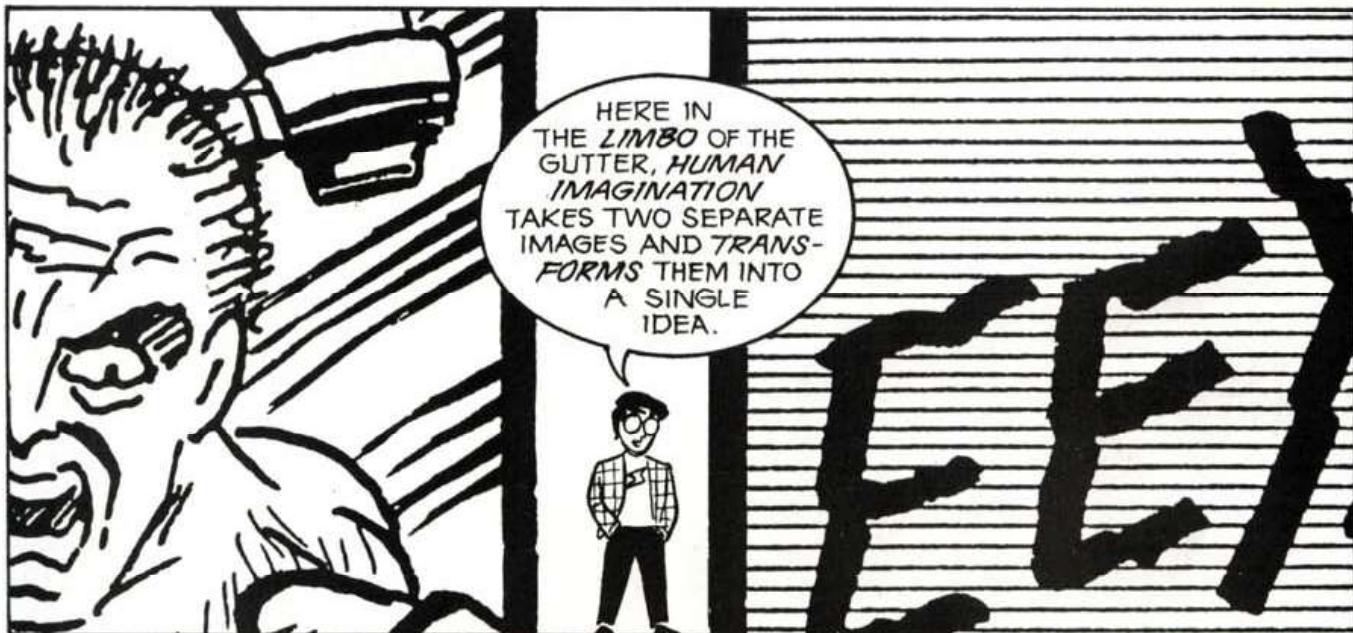
--AND  
OUR MINDS  
TRANSFORM IT  
INTO THE  
"REALITY"--



--OF THE  
PHOTOGRAPH!

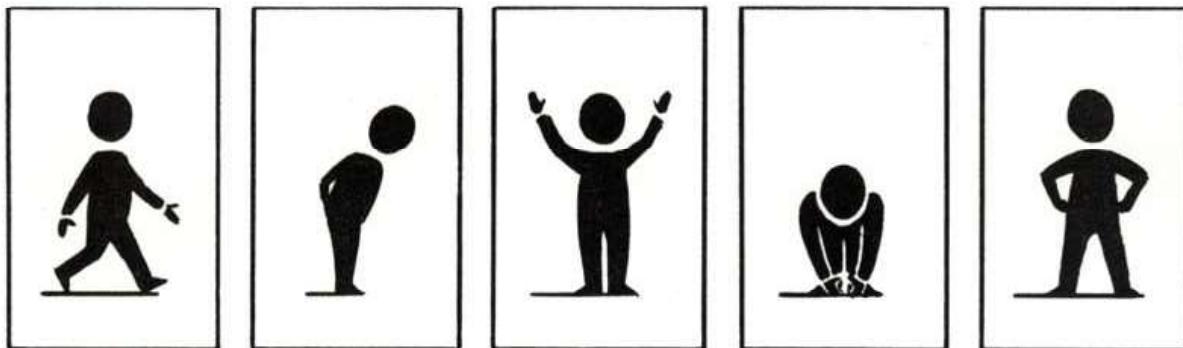




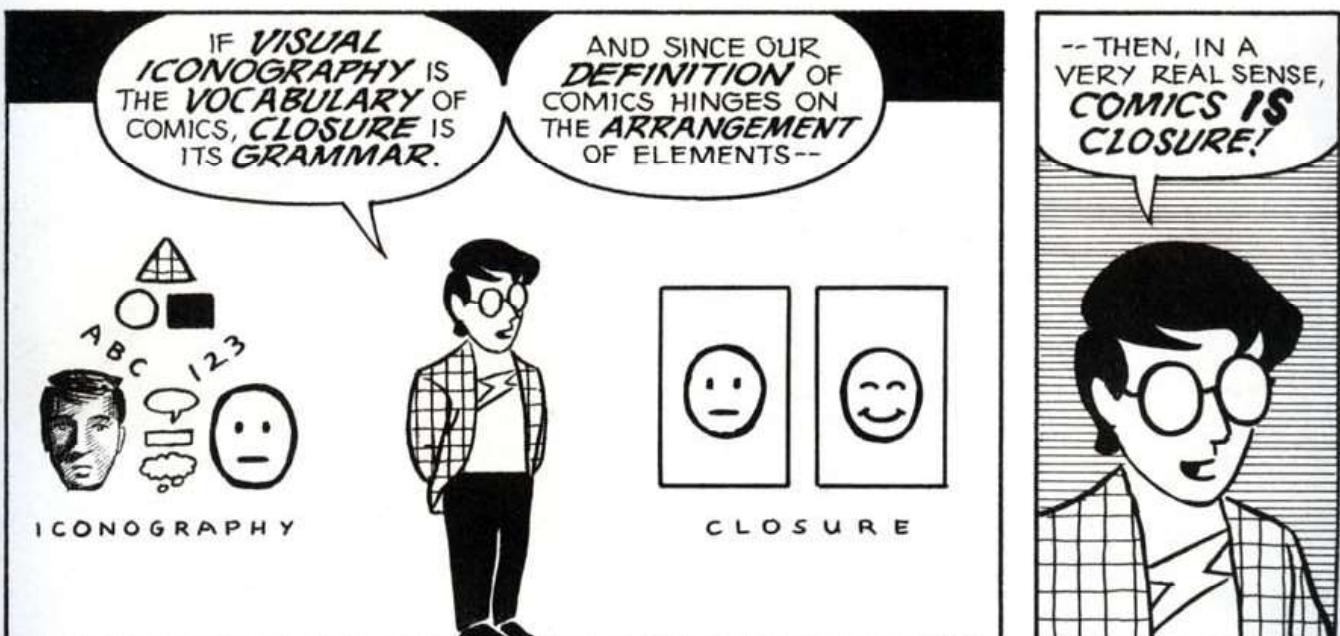


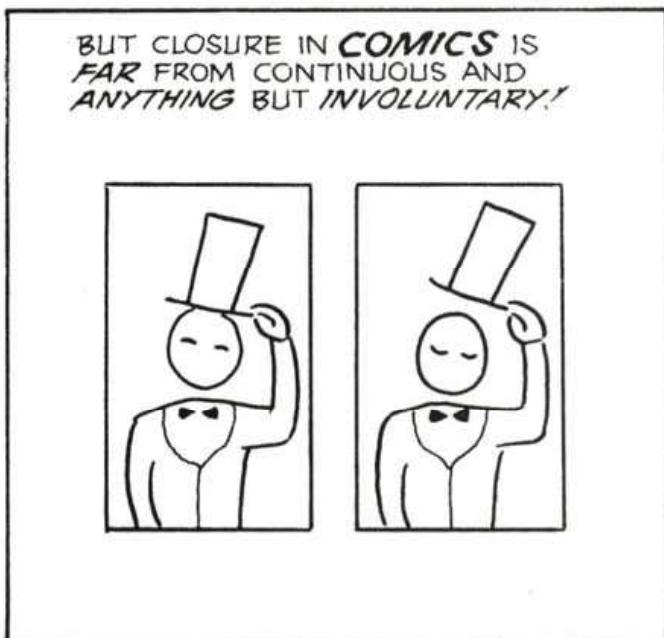
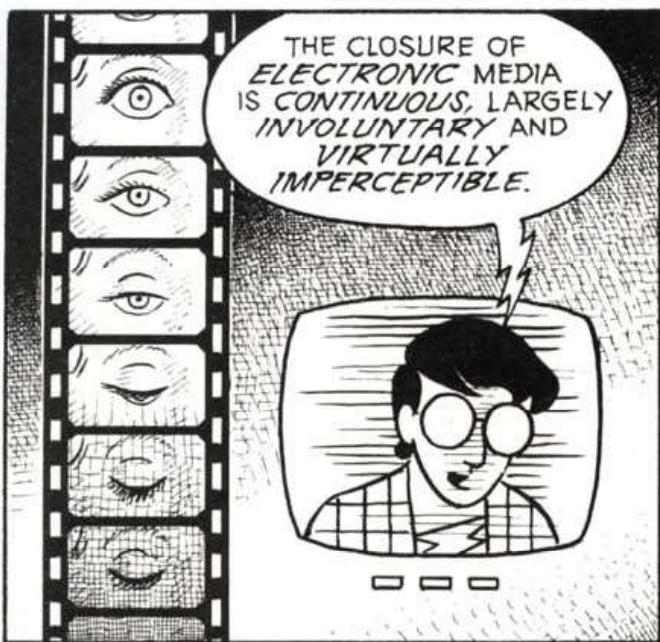


COMICS PANELS **FRACTURE** BOTH **TIME** AND **SPACE**, OFFERING A **JAGGED, STACCATO RHYTHM** OF UNCONNECTED MOMENTS.



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





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.



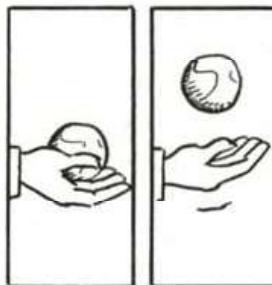
**PARTICIPATION**  
IS A POWERFUL FORCE  
IN ANY MEDIUM.  
FILMMAKERS LONG AGO  
REALIZED THE IMPORTANCE  
OF ALLOWING VIEWERS  
TO USE THEIR  
IMAGINATIONS.



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

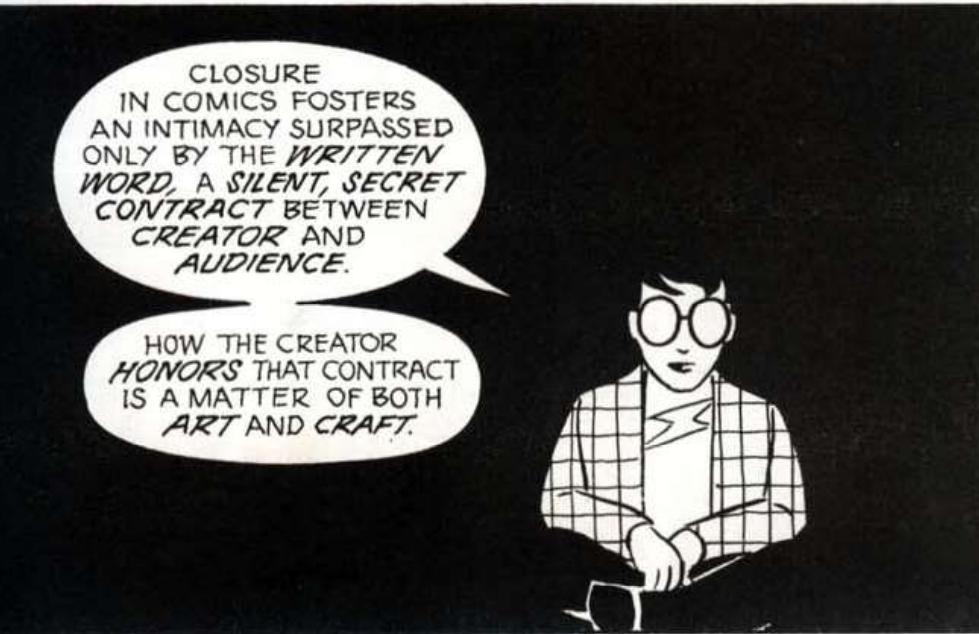


FROM THE TOSSING OF A BASEBALL  
TO THE DEATH OF A PLANET, THE  
READER'S DELIBERATE, VOLUNTARY  
CLOSURE IS COMICS' PRIMARY MEANS  
OF SIMULATING TIME AND MOTION.



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.



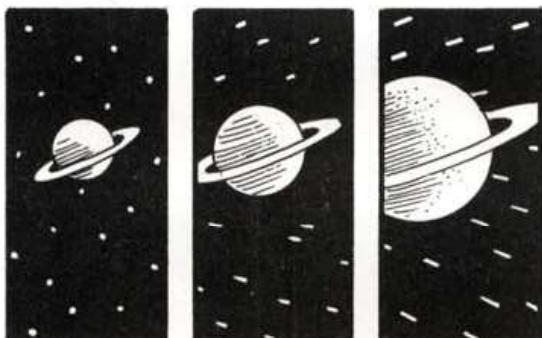
LET'S  
TAKE A LOOK  
AT THE  
**CRAFT.**



MOST  
PANEL-TO-PANEL  
TRANSITIONS IN COMICS  
CAN BE PLACED IN ONE  
OF SEVERAL DISTINCT  
CATEGORIES. THE FIRST  
CATEGORY-- WHICH WE'LL  
CALL **MOMENT-TO-  
MOMENT**-- REQUIRES  
VERY LITTLE  
CLOSURE.



1.



NEXT  
ARE THOSE  
TRANSITIONS  
FEATURING A SINGLE  
SUBJECT IN DISTINCT  
**ACTION-TO-ACTION**  
PROGRESSIONS.



2.



THE NEXT TYPE TAKES US FROM **SUBJECT-TO-SUBJECT** WHILE STAYING WITHIN A SCENE OR IDEA. NOTE THE DEGREE OF **READER INVOLVEMENT** NECESSARY TO RENDER THESE TRANSITIONS **MEANINGFUL**.



3.



DEDUCTIVE REASONING IS OFTEN REQUIRED IN READING COMICS SUCH AS IN THESE **SCENE-TO-SCENE** TRANSITIONS, WHICH TRANSPORT US ACROSS **SIGNIFICANT DISTANCES OF TIME AND SPACE**.



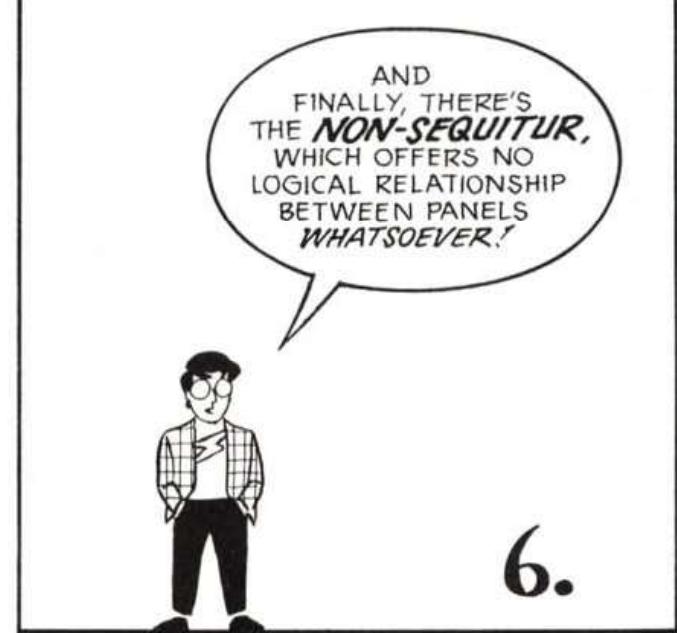
4.



A FIFTH TYPE OF TRANSITION, WHICH WE'LL CALL **ASPECT-TO-ASPECT**, BYPASSES TIME FOR THE MOST PART AND SETS A WANDERING EYE ON DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF A PLACE, IDEA OR MOOD.



5.



6.



THIS LAST CATEGORY SUGGESTS AN INTERESTING QUESTION. IS IT POSSIBLE FOR ANY SEQUENCE OF PANELS TO BE TOTALLY UNRELATED TO EACH OTHER?



PERSONALLY, I DON'T THINK SO.

NO MATTER HOW DISSIMILAR ONE IMAGE MAY BE TO ANOTHER, THERE IS A KIND OF--



--ALCHEMY AT WORK IN THE SPACE BETWEEN PANELS WHICH CAN HELP US FIND MEANING OR RESONANCE IN EVEN THE MOST JARRING OF COMBINATIONS.



SUCH TRANSITIONS MAY NOT MAKE "SENSE" IN ANY TRADITIONAL WAY, BUT STILL A RELATIONSHIP OF SOME SORT WILL INEVITABLY DEVELOP.



BY CREATING A SEQUENCE WITH TWO OR MORE IMAGES, WE ARE ENDOWING THEM WITH A SINGLE--



--OVERRIDING IDENTITY, AND FORCING THE VIEWER TO CONSIDER THEM AS A WHOLE.



HOWEVER DIFFERENT THEY HAD BEEN, THEY NOW BELONG TO A SINGLE ORGANISM.





1.  
MOMENT-  
TO-  
MOMENT

2.  
ACTION-  
TO-  
ACTION

3.  
SUBJECT-  
TO-  
SUBJECT

4.  
SCENE-  
TO-  
SCENE

5.  
ASPECT-  
TO-  
ASPECT

6.  
NON-  
SEQUITUR



MOST MAINSTREAM COMICS IN AMERICA EMPLOY STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES FIRST INTRODUCED BY JACK KIRBY, SO LET'S START BY EXAMINING THIS LEE-KIRBY COMIC FROM 1966.



ALTOGETHER, I COUNT NINETY-FIVE PANEL-TO-PANEL TRANSITIONS. LET'S SEE HOW THEY BREAK DOWN PROPORTIONATELY.



BY FAR, THE MOST COMMON TYPE OF TRANSITION IN KIRBY'S ART IS ACTION-TO-ACTION. I COUNT SIXTY-TWO OF THEM IN THIS STORY--ABOUT SIXTY-FIVE PERCENT OF THE TOTAL NUMBER.



SUBJECT-TO-SUBJECT TRANSITIONS ACCOUNT FOR AN ADDITIONAL NINETEEN--ABOUT TWENTY PERCENT OF THE TOTAL NUMBER.

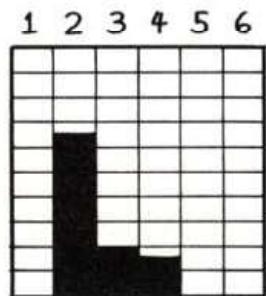


[TRACED AND SIMPLIFIED FOR CLARITY'S SAKE.]

AND SINCE **ALL**  
OF THE REMAINING  
TRANSITIONS ARE FROM  
**SCENE-TO-SCENE**,  
WE HAVE THE  
FOLLOWING  
**BREAKDOWN**.

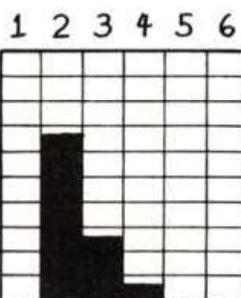
1	—
2	65%
3	20%
4	15%
5	—
6	—

AS A **BAR GRAPH**  
IT WOULD LOOK  
SOMETHING LIKE  
THIS.

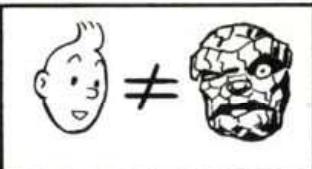


THIS EMPHASIS ON  
**ACTION-TO-ACTION**  
STORYTELLING SUITS  
MOST PEOPLE'S IDEAS  
ABOUT **KIRBY**, BUT  
IS HE **UNIQUE**  
IN THIS RESPECT?

APPARENTLY **NOT!** HERE'S A GRAPH OF  
PANEL TRANSITIONS IN HERGÉ'S **TINTIN**  
AND THE PROPORTION ARE VERY  
**SIMILAR** TO KIRBY'S



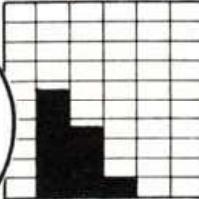
NOW, HERGÉ'S AND  
KIRBY'S STYLES  
ARE **NOT** SIMILAR!  
IN FACT, THEY'RE  
**RADICALLY  
DIFFERENT!!**



IS THERE SOME KIND  
OF UNIVERSAL  
PROPORTION AT  
WORK HERE, OR  
IS THERE ANOTHER  
**COMMON LINK?**  
MAYBE A SIMILARITY  
OF GENRES?

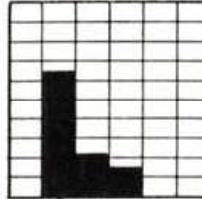
A RANDOM  
SAMPLING OF  
VARIOUS AMERICAN  
COMICS SHOWS THIS  
SAME PROPORTION  
PRETTY  
**CONSISTENTLY.**

X-MEN #1



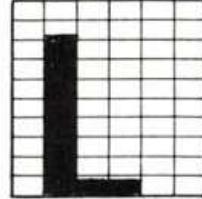
CLAREMONT & LEE

"HEARTBREAK SOUP"



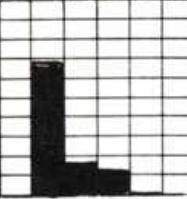
G. HERNANDEZ

BETTY & VERONICA



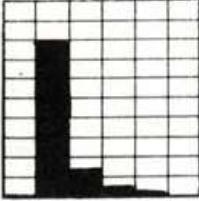
DOYLE & DECARLO

NAUGHTY BITS



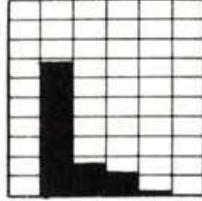
GREGORY

FRANK IN THE RIVER



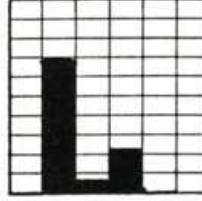
WOODRING

A CONTRACT WITH GOD



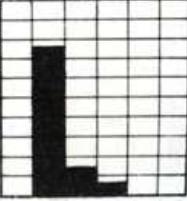
EISNER

MAUS

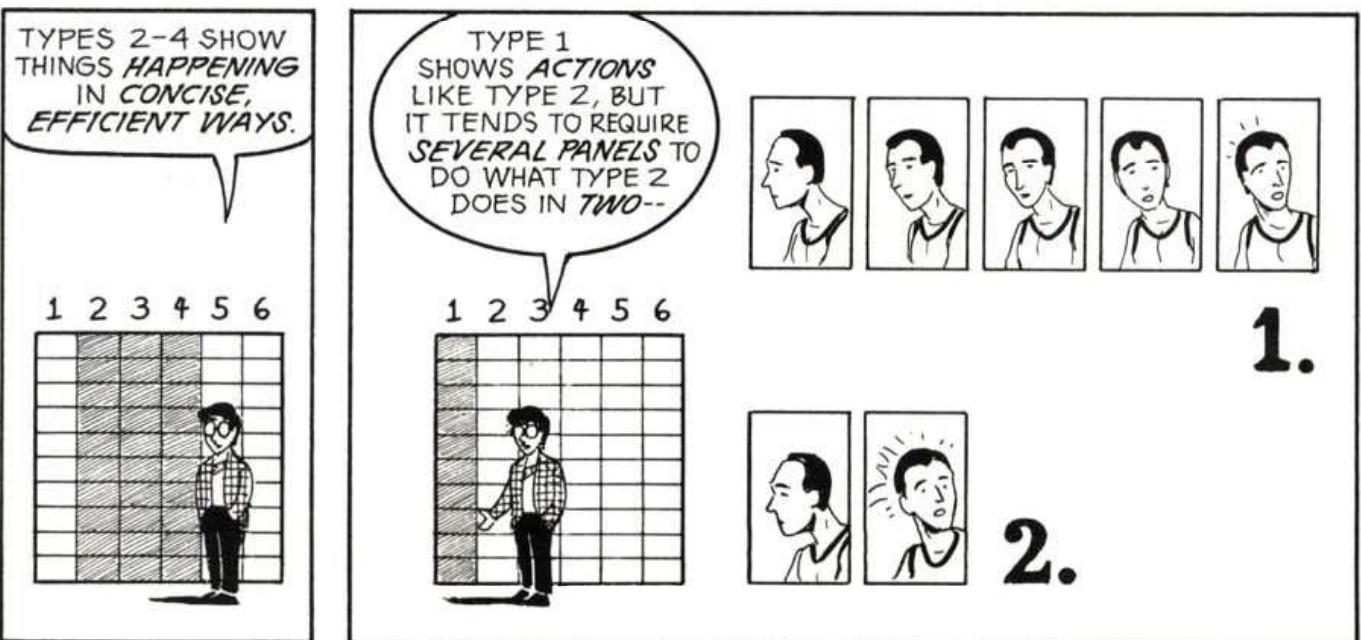
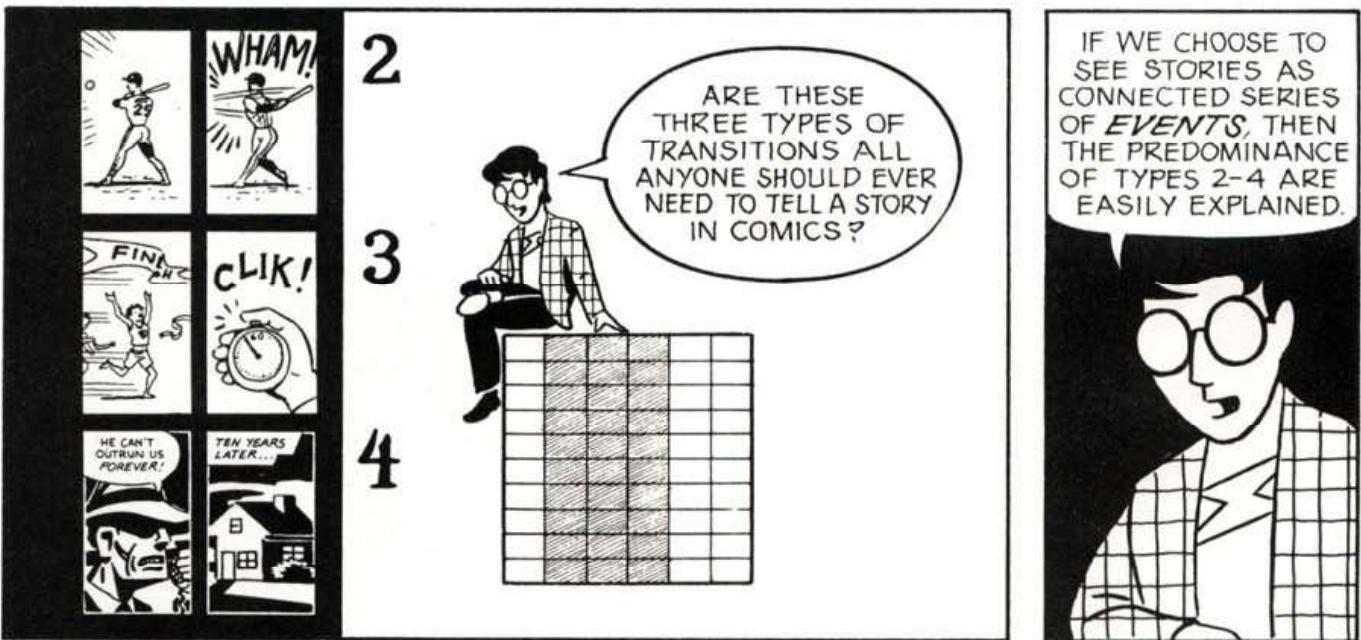
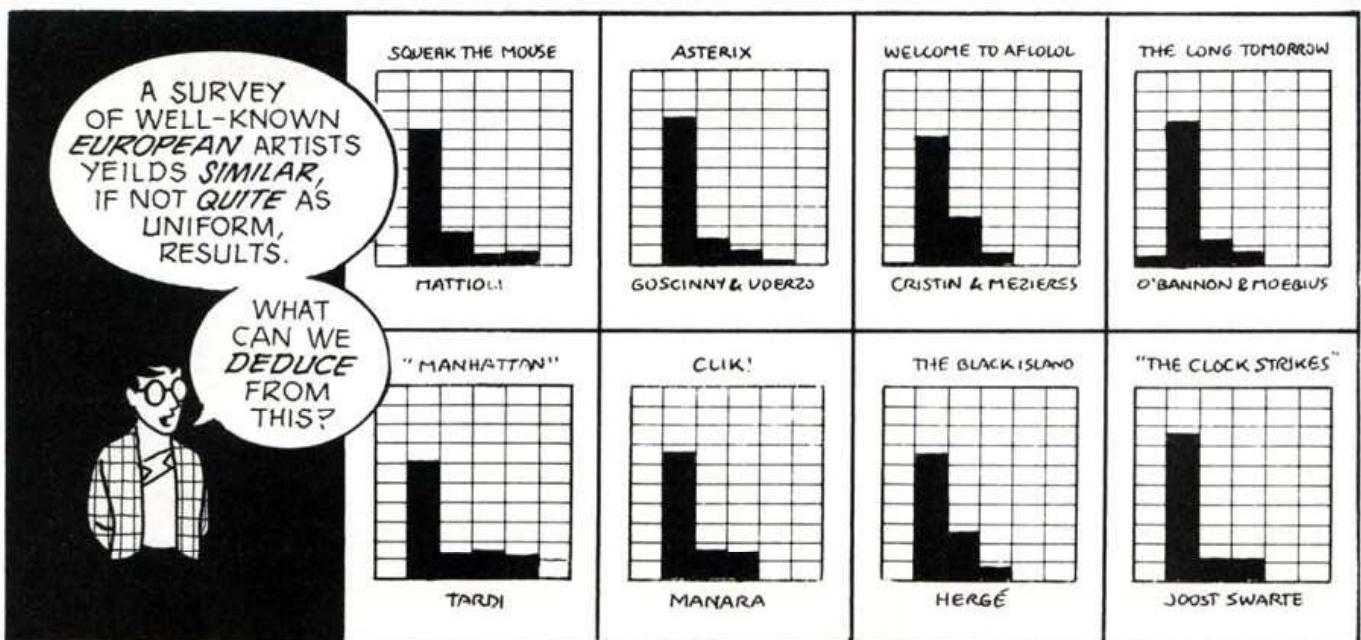


SPIEGELMAN

DONALD DUCK



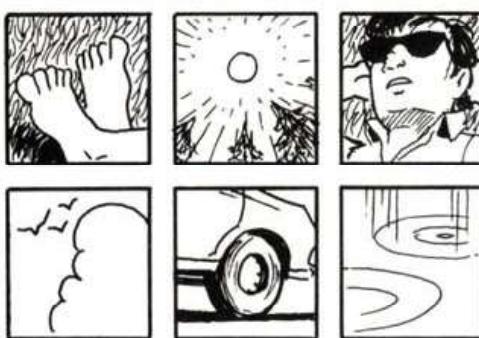
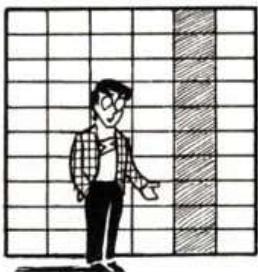
BARKS



-- WHILE IN THE FIFTH TYPE, BY DEFINITION, NOTHING "HAPPENS" AT ALL!

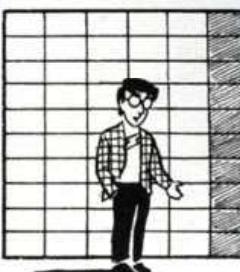


1 2 3 4 5 6



AND, OF COURSE, NON-SEQUITURS ARE UNCONCERNED WITH EVENTS OR ANY NARRATIVE PURPOSES OF ANY SORT.

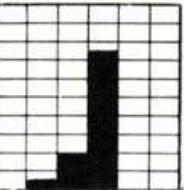
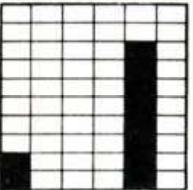
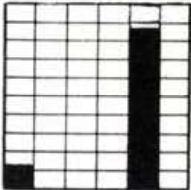
1 2 3 4 5 6



SOME EXPERIMENTAL COMICS, LIKE THOSE OF ART SPIEGELMAN'S EARLY PERIOD, EXPLORE A FULL RANGE OF TRANSITIONS--

--THOUGH GENERALLY IN THE SERVICE OF EQUALLY RADICAL STORIES AND SUBJECTS.

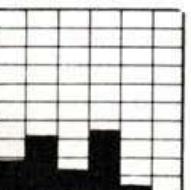
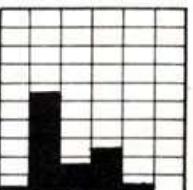
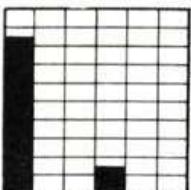
STORIES FROM SPIEGELMAN'S ANTHOLOGY BREAKDOWNS:



"DON'T GET AROUND MUCH ANYMORE"

"INTRODUCTION"

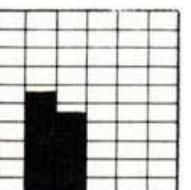
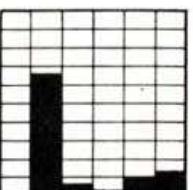
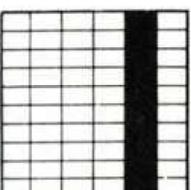
"MAUS" (ORIGINAL)



"SKINLESS PERKINS"

"PRISONER ON THE HELL PLANET"

"CRACKING JOKES"



FRONT AND BACK COVERS

"ACE-HOLE, MIDGET DETECTIVE"

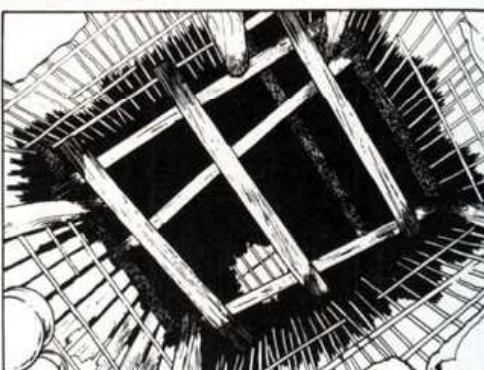
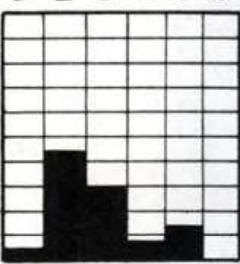
"REAL DREAM" 1975

BUT BEFORE WE CONCLUDE THAT TYPES 2-4 HAVE A MONOPOLY ON STRAIGHTFORWARD STORYTELLING, LET'S TAKE ANOTHER LOOK AT OSAMU TEZUKA FROM JAPAN.

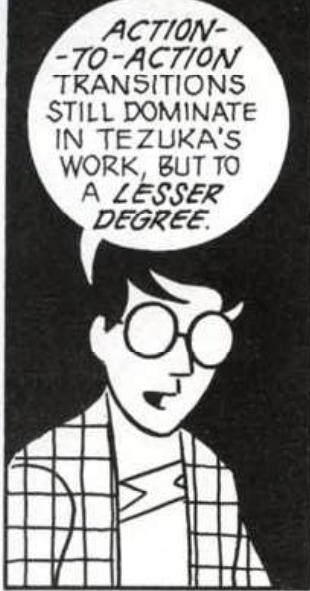


TEZUKA IS A FAR CRY FROM THE EARLY SPIEGELMAN. HIS STORYTELLING IS CLEAR AND STRAIGHTFORWARD. BUT LOOK AT HOW HE CHARTS!

1 2 3 4 5 6



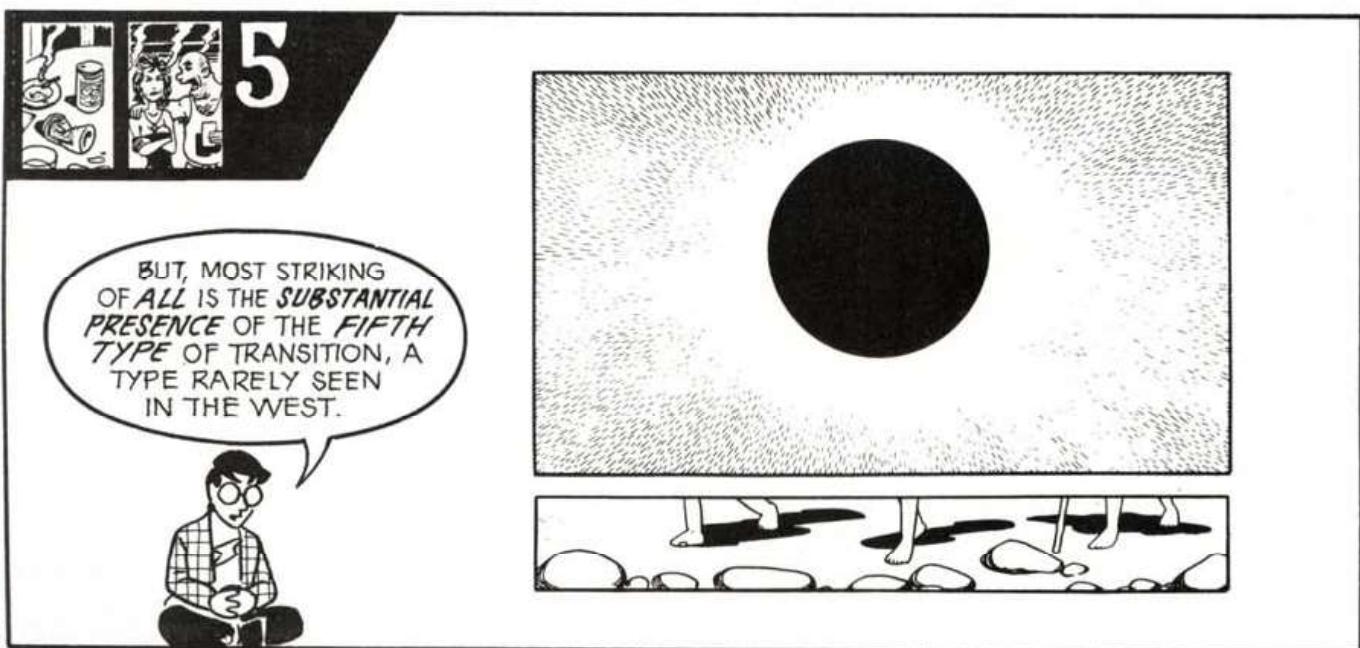
JUST WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?



!TFFEL OT THGIR DAER OT REBMEEMER



ART © OSAMU TEZUKA



ASPECT-TO-ASPECT TRANSITIONS HAVE BEEN AN INTEGRAL PART OF JAPANESE MAINSTREAM COMICS ALMOST FROM THE VERY BEGINNING.



ART © SHIGERU MIZUKI.

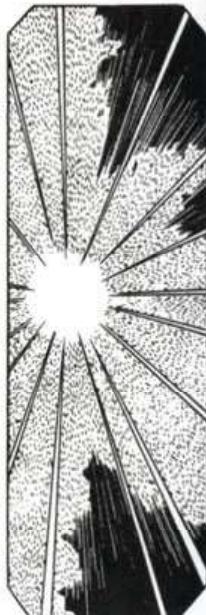
MOST OFTEN USED TO ESTABLISH A MOOD OR A SENSE OF PLACE, TIME SEEMS TO STAND STILL IN THESE QUIET, CONTEMPLATIVE COMBINATIONS.



EVEN SEQUENCE, WHILE STILL AN ISSUE, SEEMS FAR LESS IMPORTANT HERE THAN IN OTHER TRANSITIONS.

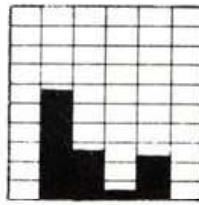


RATHER THAN ACTING AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN SEPARATE MOMENTS, THE READER HERE MUST ASSEMBLE A SINGLE MOMENT USING SCATTERED FRAGMENTS.

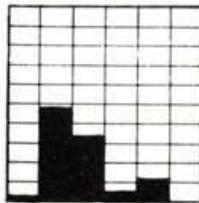


ART © H. SATO.

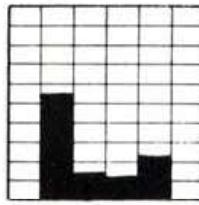
IN EXAMINING  
SEVERAL JAPANESE ARTISTS,  
WE FIND SIMILAR  
PROPORTIONS TO TEZUKA'S,  
INCLUDING A HIGH INCIDENCE  
OF THE FIFTH TYPE.



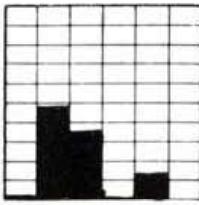
750 RIDER  
(石井いとく?)



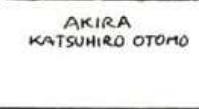
AKIRA  
KATSUHIRO OTOMO



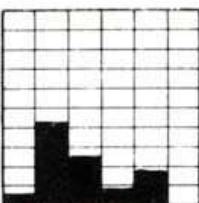
FATHER & SON  
HAYASI & OSIMA



WOLF & CUB  
KOIKE & KOJIMA

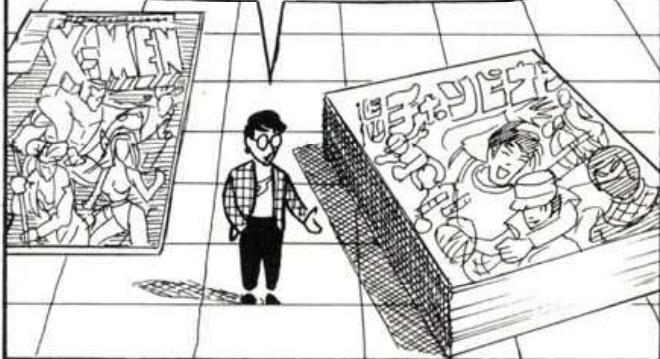


CYBORG 009  
SHOTARO ISHIMORI

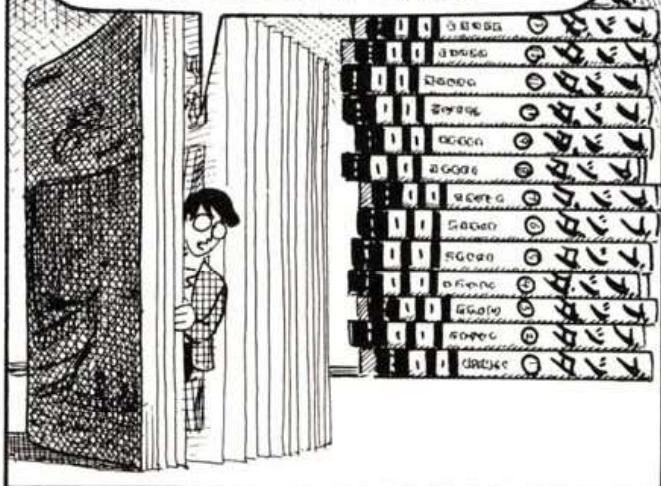


PHOENIX  
OSAMU TEZUKA

LENGTH MAY BE ONE OF  
THE FACTORS AT WORK HERE. MOST  
JAPANESE COMICS FIRST APPEAR IN  
ENORMOUS ANTHOLOGY TITLES WHERE  
THE PRESSURE ISN'T AS GREAT ON  
ANY ONE INSTALLMENT TO SHOW  
A LOT "HAPPENING."



WHEN INDIVIDUAL FEATURES ARE  
COLLECTED, THEY MAY RUN FOR  
THOUSANDS OF PAGES.

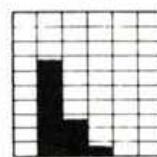


AS SUCH,  
DOZENS OF PANELS  
CAN BE DEVOTED  
TO PORTRAYING  
SLOW CINEMATIC  
MOVEMENT OR TO  
SETTING A MOOD.

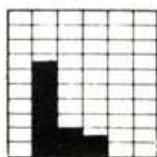
BUT I DON'T THINK  
LONGER STORIES ARE  
THE ONLY FACTOR,  
OR EVEN THE MOST  
IMPORTANT ONE.



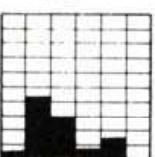
I BELIEVE THERE'S SOMETHING A  
BIT MORE FUNDAMENTAL TO THIS  
PARTICULAR EAST/WEST SPLIT.



HERGÉ

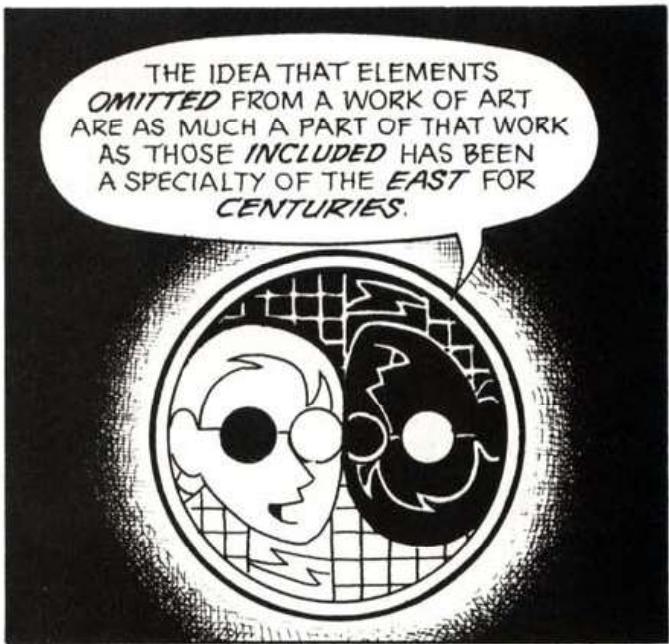


KIRBY



TEZUKA





IN THE GRAPHIC ARTS THIS HAS MEANT A GREATER FOCUS ON **FIGURE/GROUND** RELATIONSHIPS AND "NEGATIVE SPACE."

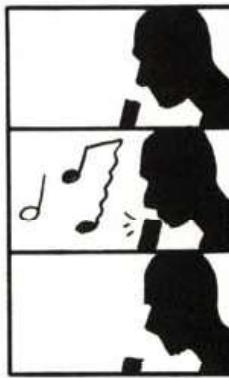


"THE GREAT WAVE OFF KANAGAWA" BY HOKUSAI (c.1829)  
(TURN THIS PICTURE UPSIDE DOWN TO SEE THE OTHER WAVE OF NEGATIVE SPACE...NATURE'S YIN AND YANG.)

IN MUSIC TOO, WHILE THE WESTERN CLASSICAL TRADITION WAS EMPHASIZING THE **CONTINUOUS, CONNECTED** WORLDS OF MELODY AND HARMONY, EASTERN CLASSICAL MUSIC WAS EQUALY CONCERNED WITH THE ROLE OF **SILENCE!**



WEST



EAST

IN THE LAST **CENTURY** OR TWO, AS **WESTERN** CULTURAL INFLUENCES SWEPT THE **EAST**, SO TOO HAVE **EASTERN** AND **AFRICAN** IDEAS OF **FRAGMENTATION** AND **RHYTHM** SWEPT THE **WEST**.



FROM **DEBUSSY** TO **STRAVINSKY** TO **COUNT BASIE**, WESTERN MUSIC HAS GRADUALLY INCORPORATED A STRONG AWARENESS OF THE POWER OF **FRAGMENTATION** AND **INTERVALS**.

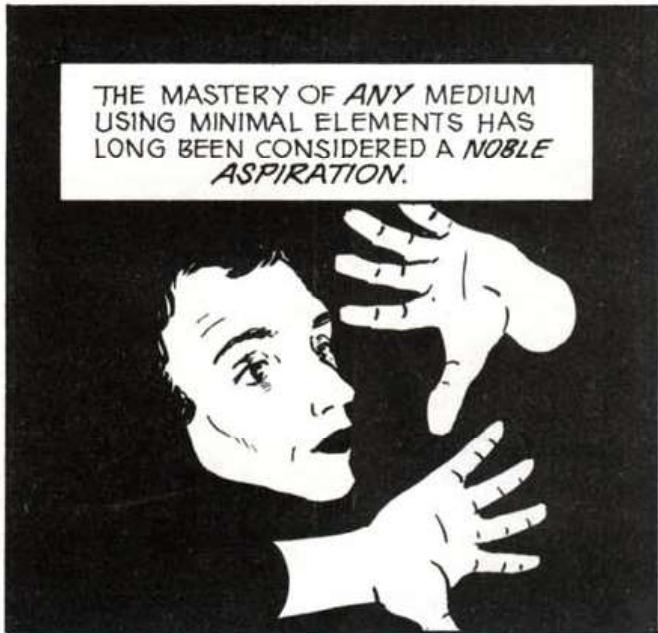
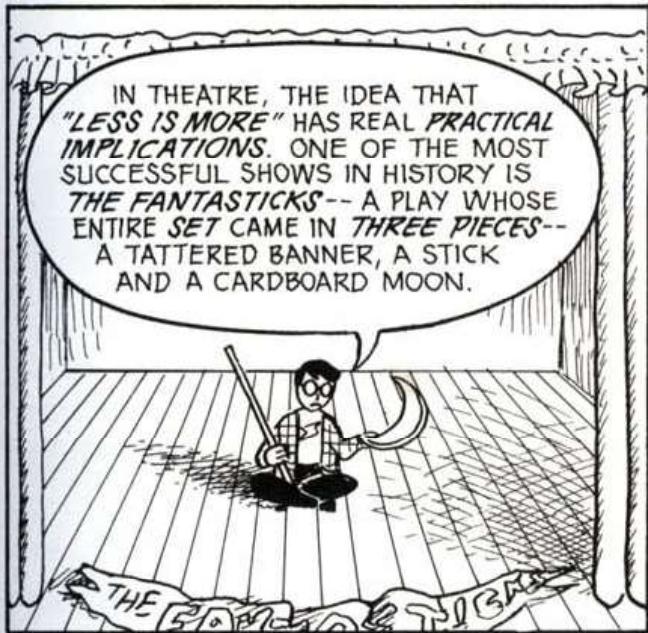


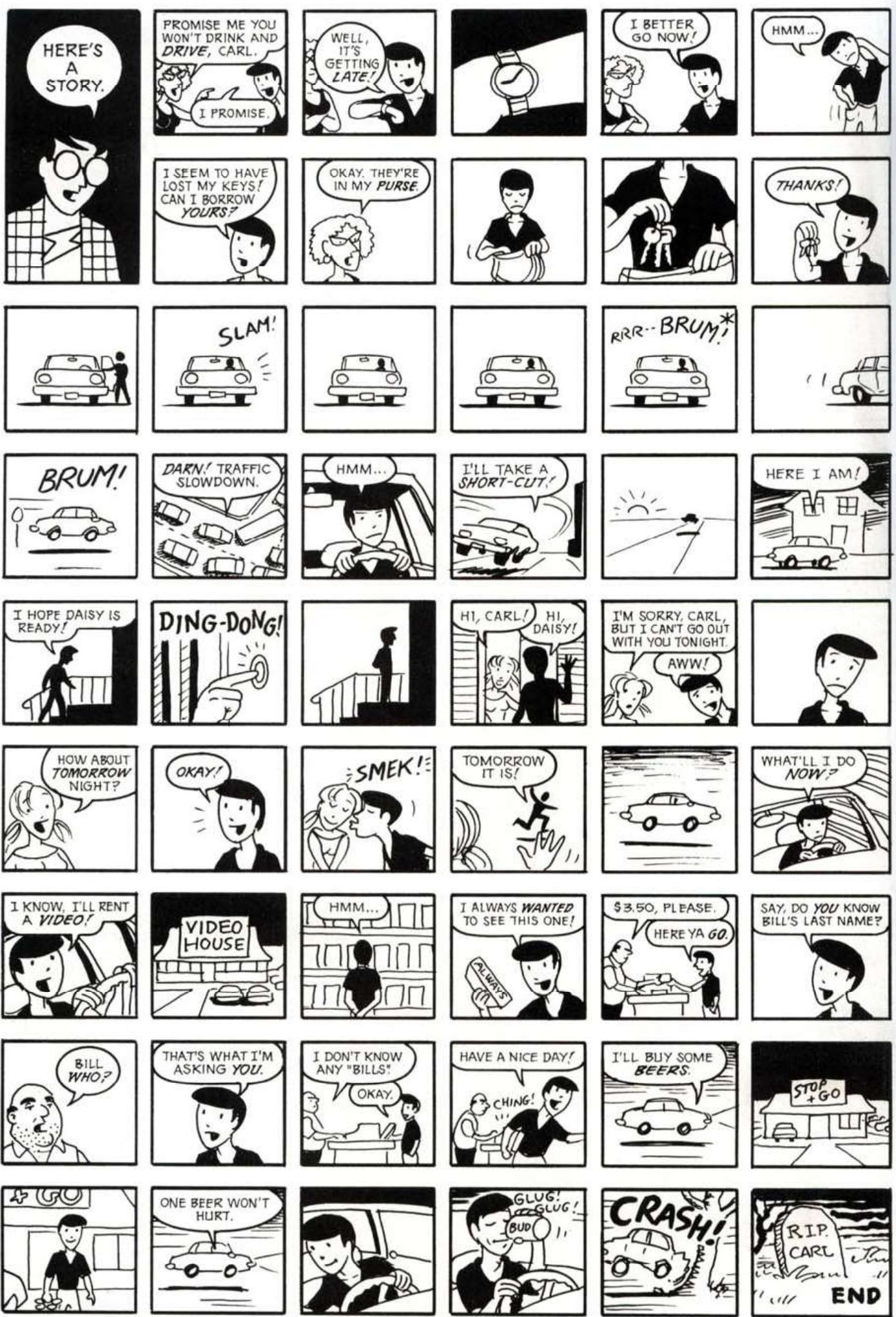


THE TRADITIONAL EMPHASIS IN WESTERN ART UPON THE PRIMACY OF FOREGROUND SUBJECTS AND CONTINUOUSNESS OF TONES GAVE WAY TO FRAGMENTATION AND A NEW AWARENESS OF THE PICTURE PLANE.

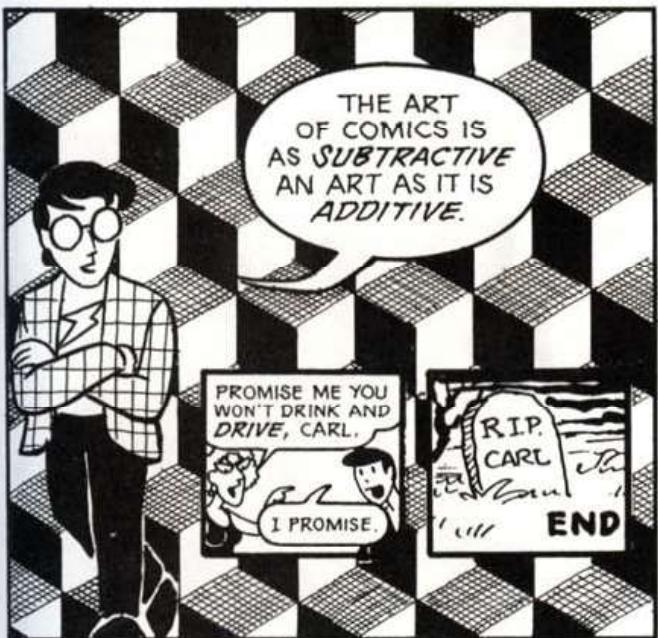


FACSIMILE  
OF 'FIGURE'  
BY PABLO PICASSO  
1948



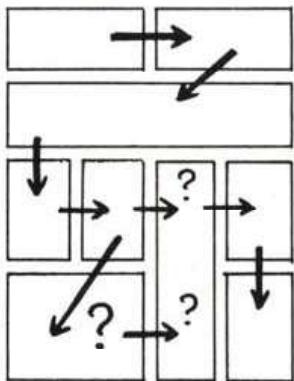


\* 'BRUM' APPEARS COURTESY OF M. FEAZELL



**WE ASSUME AS READERS** THAT WE WILL KNOW WHAT ORDER TO READ PANELS IN, BUT THE BUSINESS OF ARRANGING THOSE PANELS IS ACTUALLY QUITE COMPLEX.

SO COMPLEX, IN FACT, THAT EVEN SEASONED PROS WILL SOMETIMES BLOW IT.



AS CLOSURE **BETWEEN** PANELS BECOMES MORE INTENSE, READER INTERPRETATION BECOMES FAR MORE **ELASTIC**.



AND **MANAGING** IT BECOMES MORE COMPLICATED FOR THE **CREATOR**.

SOME ARTISTS CAN BE **DELIBERATELY AMBIGUOUS**, OF COURSE, AND OFFER US NO STRICT INTERPRETATION TO GO ON.



CLOSURE CAN BE A POWERFUL FORCE **WITHIN** PANELS AS WELL AS **BETWEEN** THEM, WHEN ARTISTS CHOOSE TO SHOW ONLY A SMALL **PIECE** OF THE PICTURE.



COMICS CAN BE **MADDENINGLY VAGUE** ABOUT WHAT IT SHOWS US.



BY SHOWING LITTLE OR NOTHING OF A GIVEN SCENE--



--AND OFFERING ONLY **CLUES** TO THE READER--



--THE ARTIST CAN TRIGGER ANY NUMBER OF IMAGES IN THE READER'S IMAGINATION.



READERS FACED  
WITH PANELS LIKE THESE  
WILL HAVE SUBSTANTIALLY  
DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS.

CLAK! CLAK! CLAK!

BY CONSTRUCTING WHOLE  
IMAGES BASED ON THESE  
FRAGMENTS, READERS ARE  
PERFORMING CLOSURE,  
JUST AS--

**WHOOSH!**

⇒ Slip Slip ⇌



Ding! Ding!

UH-- JUST AS  
READERS COMPLETE  
AN ACTION OR  
IDEA **BETWEEN--**



Ding! Ding!

= AHEM! = I SAY,  
JUST AS READERS  
COMPLETE --



STOP THAT!

Ding! Ding!

OW!

Ding! Ding!

