How spaces in visual storytelling provide a structure for imagination

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Figures

Introduction

"There's a crack in everything – that's how the light gets in." Leonard Cohen, *Anthem*

This dissertation is about the spaces between things, and how they let the outside in. We think of comics and film as authored and created by the artist or director, yet when work is consumed by the reader or viewer, is it possible that they become a work of co-creation, in which the reader plays an integral role?

I want to examine the idea that it's the spaces, gaps, cracks and crevices in stories and storytelling techniques that allow the process of interpretation to happen. Space can be physical, conceptual, a compositional feature, in duration and pauses, or something unresolved or indeterminate in the work. What these have in common is that imagination is required to complete them.

> The frightening existence of things that are beyond the reach of our senses and that yet exercise their power upon us is represented by means of darkness...when objects are partly hidden, 'imagination completes' them.[1]

For the reader or audience, space is an absence to be understood in some way, inviting a process of interpretation. In picturebooks, this has been called the *readerly or* the *didactic* gap.[2] Scott McCloud and Davie Low have drawn attention to gaps in comics. The gutter is

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[1] Iser, W., *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press. (1978).

[2] Beauvais, C, *What's in "the gap"? A glance down the central concept of picturebook theory*, Nordic Journal of ChildLit Aesthetics (2015)

an interstitial space, a blank ribbon of paper that separates comic panels, in which the reader's imagination can flourish. McCloud calls this process *closure*:

> Whatever the mysteries within each panel, it's the power of closure between panels that I find the most interesting. There's something strange and wonderful that happens in this blank ribbon of paper. We already know that comics asks the mind to work as a sort of in-betweener – filling in the gaps between panels as an animator might …[3]

Low describes this idea as a "gutterance", a word he coined to mean a co-constructed meaning that does not live on the page:

> Together, author and reader co-construct a meaning that cannot be said to definitively exist on the page itself, the former employing the ''gutterance'' to invite the latter to re-appropriate the space with her or his own intentions.[4]

This dissertation examines this idea of gutter and interstitial spaces more broadly within visual storytelling, focusing on the use of indeterminacy and spaces within film and comics, and the process of interpretation. Chapter 1 broadly examines the idea of how spaces and indeterminacy are used in art; chapter 2 discusses ideas within film theory and editing techniques, and the use of cuts and collisions in film; chapter 3 focuses on comics, picturebook theory and the interactions between word and image; chapter 4 casts the dissertation author as a participant, discussing the use of space in two graphic novels, *Earthling* and *The System*.

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[3] McCloud, S, and Martin, M., *Understanding Comics* (New York, NY: William Morrow, HarperCollinsPublishers, 2017) p. 68

[4] Low, D.*, "'Spaces Invested with Content': Crossing the 'Gaps' in Comics with Readers in School."* Children's Literature in Education 43 (2012): 368 85.

Chapter 1: Indeterminacy and spaces in art

Indeterminacy, in literature, requires the reader to make their own decisions about a text's meaning. In fiction, indeterminacy can be seen as engaging the reader's imagination. Film removes the mystery of how a chair might appear, however the chair may be described in the text: whereas in the text it is always hazy and indeterminate, and personal to the mind of the reader. Describing houses in Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew*, where two characters have discovered the rooms outside the living room are simply not there, literary critic McHale points out that "all houses in fiction are like this… partly specified, partly left vague".[5] Every text, Umberto Eco has written, "is a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work"[6].

Adjacent to this idea of indeterminacy is the space. The absence of something gives shape and draws attention to what remains:

> Mallarmé conceived poems with absences as well as words. Ralph Richardson asserted that acting lay in pauses. 'I collect silences', said Heinrich Boil.[7]

Absence can challenge our expectations, or is made almost comical by the ceremony that surrounds it: John Cage's *4'33"* is four minutes thirty-three seconds of unbroken silence "rendered by a skilled pianist wearing evening dress and seated motionless on the piano stool in front of an operational Steinway".[8] Ad Reinhardt's *Abstract Painting* appears to be a black square, but on closer examination, revealed only after a period of prolonged looking,

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[5] Nicol, B., *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* (Cambridge Introductions to Literature). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2009), p. 26.

[6] Eco, U. *Six walks in the fictional woods*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press (2004)

[7] Fletcher, A., *The Art of Looking Sideways*, Phaidon Press (2001), p. 370

[8] Barrow, J. *The Book of Nothing.* Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group (2009), p. 15

the eye can detect three different shades of black: “There is a black which is old and a black which is fresh. Lustrous black and dull black, black in sunlight and black in shadow.”[9] In Japanese culture, a concept of space – the word *ma* – permeates architecture, public spaces, and even how people interact with each other.[10] Monks decorated the margins of manuscripts for hundreds of years: every bit of space around the text could be illustrated, annotated, drawn over.

Figure 1 – *Abstract Painting* by Ad Reinhardt

Literature, too, is riddled with holes. Beauvais has pointed out that many works of literature are “as narratively holey as a cardboard target in a shooting range”[11]. In film and in comics, space gets in as a shot fades to black, in pauses between the action, in the blank ribbon of paper between two comic panels. It’s here in the interstitial space, in the gaps, McCloud argues, the reader is sent into imaginative space: “Several times on every page the

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[9] Abstract Expressionist New York, October 3, 2010-April 25, 2011

[10] Kondo, M., ‘Ill seen ill said and the Japanese spatial concept ‘ma’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, vol. 19, 2008, pp. 67–74

[11] Beauvais, C, *What's in “the gap”? A glance down the central concept of picturebook theory*, Nordic Journal of ChildLit Aesthetics (2015)

reader is released – like a trapeze artist – into the open air of imagination… then caught by the outstretched arms of the ever-present next panel!"[12]

Writing on picturebooks, Beauvais has written that gaps are considered a central feature of picturebooks:

> Gaps are seen not just as a feature of the medium, but as its central feature. The visual and the verbal in a picturebook are theorised as akin to pieces from a jigsaw puzzle, waiting for an active reader to put them together, and then find, hopefully, that there are still some missing pieces in the composition. Those missing pieces then define the reader's own creative space.[13]

While I've provided plenty of examples of meaningful spaces, it's necessary to point out that not every margin, gutter and tab is necessarily brimming with potential meaning, nor is it intended to be read that way (though there's only so much control the author has over the mind of the reader). But indeterminacy and spaces play an essential role within visual storytelling. Across all of these examples I've mentioned, I am most interested in the way that indeterminacy and space can lead to *personal interpretation and imagination* inside the mind of the reader.

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[12] McCloud, S, and Martin, M., *Understanding Comics* (New York, NY: William Morrow, HarperCollinsPublishers, 2017) p. 68

[13] Beauvais, C, *What's in "the gap"? A glance down the central concept of picturebook theory*, Nordic Journal of ChildLit Aesthetics (2015)

Chapter 2: Film theory and the active audience

The indeterminate and gappy script

Good stories create a puzzle. Stories that aren't clean cut, simple and resolved invite engagement from the audience: conversation, discussion, and theories. A number of screenwriters have argued that the best stories make the audience work by supplying them with partial information that will need to piece together. Screenwriter and film theorist John Yorke quotes Andrew Stanton and Bob Peterson, writers of *Finding Nemo*:

> Good storytelling never gives you four, it gives you two plus two… don't give the audience the answer; give the audience the pieces and compel them to conclude the answer. Audiences have an unconscious desire to work for their entertainment. They are rewarded with a sense of thrill and delight when they find the answers themselves.[14]

Figure 2 – *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017)

Sometimes no clear answer is given at all. *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) is a film that employs an indeterminate ending. The film is about a woman seeking justice for the rape and murder of her daughter. Mildred pays to erect three enormous billboards blaming the police chief for failing to convict anyone, and at the end of the film,

[14] Yorke, J., *Into The Woods* (New York, NY: The Overlook Press, 2015), p. 113

she and a former cop, Dixon, set off to Idaho potentially murder another morally ambiguous character, a rapist (they think) who was not responsible for her daughter's death, but nevertheless provides an opportunity for symbolic justice. Except the final scene is shrouded in ambiguity: do they really want to kill this man? Neither are sure, and the audience is left to wonder. The film leaves several pieces unresolved: who was responsible for her daughter's murder, and what the mother and the former cop will do next.

The ending has spawned a large number of articles, fan discussions, and controversy.[15] The audience is desperate to know the answer: is Dixon redeemed? Do Mildred and Dixon murder the soldier in Idaho? The main controversy generated by *Three Billboards* seems to be over whether Dixon, the racist cop, is redeemed, since he is painted in a sympathetic light. The furore caused by the film led to the director Martin McDonagh commenting: "I don't think his character is redeemed at all—he starts off as a racist jerk. He's the same pretty much at the end, but, by the end, he's seen that he has to change […] [The film is] deliberately messy and difficult […] we're trying to do something that's a bit little more difficult and more thoughtful."[16]

Stanton argues that not spelling things out is an essential component of successful storytelling, because working things out is critical to the audience's enjoyment of the story. John Yorke describes screenwriting structure as "the presentation of images in such a way an audience are forced to work out the relationship between them"[17] — which sounds very similar to the theories behind Soviet montage. Shots *are* the story, rather than being separate from the editing technique. Screenwriters seem to overwhelmingly agree that

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[15] Wilkinson, A. [online] Vox. Available at: https://www.vox.com/2018/1/19/16878018/three-billboards-controversy-racist-sam-rockwell-redemption-flannery-oconnor [Accessed 14 Jun. 2018].

[16] Hughes, W. (2018). [online] AV Club. Available at: https://www.avclub.com/martin-mcdonagh-addresses-the-three-billboards-backlash-1822889695 [Accessed 14 Jun. 2018].

[17] Yorke, J., *Into The Woods* (New York, NY: The Overlook Press, 2015), p. 113

complexity and ambiguity, involving the audience's hard work and creative thinking, is a vital component of successful storytelling. David Simon, creator of *The Wire*, has written: "Most smart people cannot watch most TV, because it has generally been a condescending medium, explaining everything immediately, offering no ambiguities, and using dialogue that simplifies and mitigates against the idiosyncratic ways in which people in different worlds actually communicate."[18]

Cuts and collisions

For the first twenty years of film history, synchronised sound had not been invented yet, so story in film depended on shots and editing. Sound arrived in 1926; and *Don Juan*, coming out shortly after, featured a score and sound effects, and *The Jazz Singer*, in 1927, featured dialogue.[19] Not everybody thought it was an improvement. Complaints came from some purists including Alfred Hitchcock, who used dialogue as a last resort:

> In many of the films now being made, there is very little cinema: they are mostly what I call 'photographs of people talking.' When we tell a story in cinema we should resort to dialogue only when it's impossible to do otherwise. I always try to tell a story in the cinematic way, through a succession of shots and bits of film in between […] summing it up, one might say that the screen rectangle must be charged with emotion.[20]

Even now sound is commonplace in films, the absence of sound is used to create a dramatic effect. In the fight scene between Sugar Ray Leonard and Jake La Motta in Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull*, the noise of the crowd falls silent, and we focus on Sugar Ray

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[18] Yorke, J., Into The Woods (New York, NY: The Overlook Press, 2015), p. 113

[19] Kushins, J., *A brief history of sound in cinema,* Popular Mechanics 2016 https://www.popularmechanics.com/culture/movies/a19566/a-brief-history-of-sound-in-cinema/ Accessed 16 June 2018

[20] Van Sijll, J., *Cinematic Storytelling*. Seattle: Michael Wiese Productions (2005), p. 4

Leonard pausing before his opponent. The absence of sound is used here to build anticipation and excitement in the audience before the fight begins.

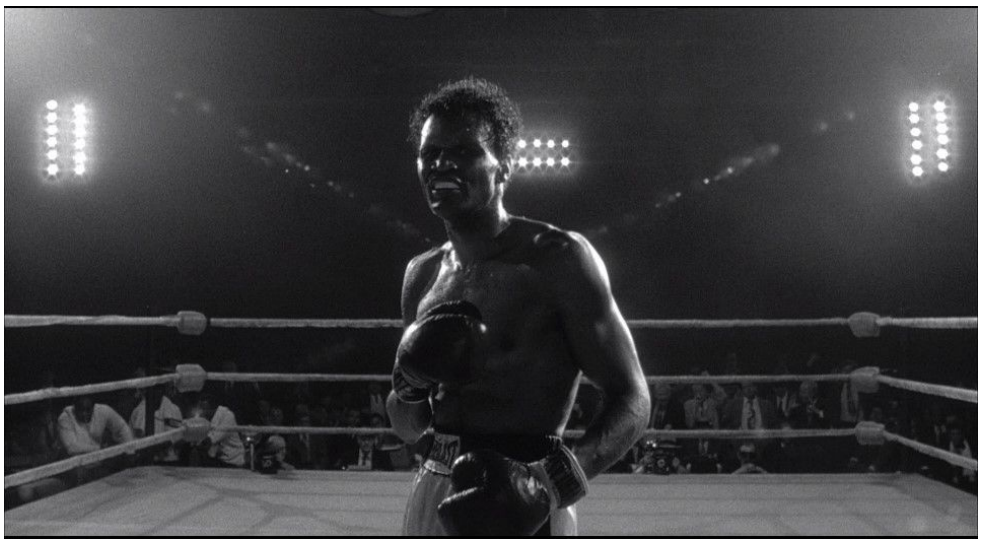

Figure 3 – Scorsese's *Raging Bull*

Cuts in film can be disorientating. They can show contrasts in point of view, the beginning of a new scene, a dramatic build-up. They are also a guide providing "psychological guidance [to] the spectator", according to Vsevold Pudovkin, a Russian film director who contributed to montage theory.[21] In the 1920s Pudovkin described five editing techniques for film: contrast, parallelism, symbolism, simultaneity, and leitmotif.

Visual transitional in film are similar to the gutter in comics. *Cut to black* is a form of pause in the narrative, to mark the end of one scene, to allow time for the audience to react, and providing a space for audience imagination. The shower scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho* is an example of assembly editing, in which a scene is a mosaic of shots that produces a larger idea, involving the viewer's imagination between the cuts. In a rapid succession of cuts, 78 over 45 seconds, we assume the point of view of the murderer.[22]

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[21] Van Sijll, J., *Cinematic Storytelling*. Seattle: Michael Wiese Productions (2005), p. 46

[22] Van Sijll, J., *Cinematic Storytelling*. Seattle: Michael Wiese Productions (2005), p. 52

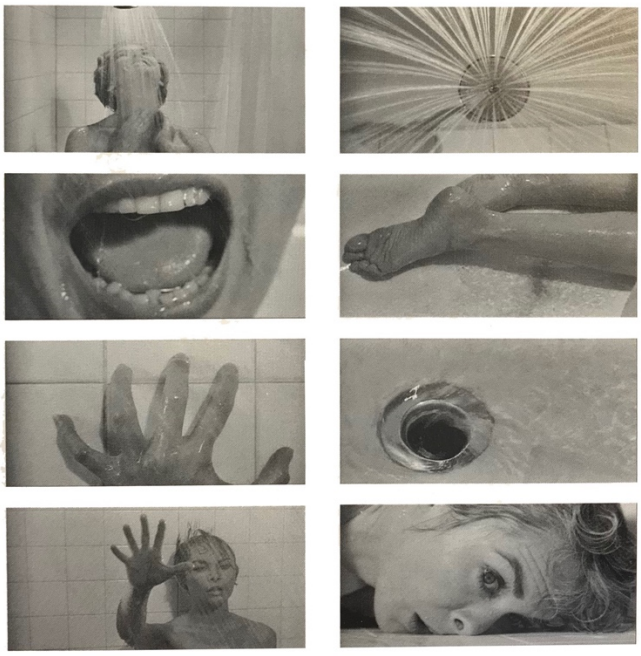

Figure 4 – Hitchcock's *Psycho* – cuts from the shower scene

Mosaic and rapid, partial cuts can be said to represent a gap, since they are partial representations of a bigger scene. The idea of the murder is formed in the viewer's mind. Sergei Eisenstein argued in *Film Form* that watching a film should not be passive entertainment, but a "concrete, active process" in which the audience brings their own creative energy to watching a film:

> The film's job is to make the audience "help itself", not to "entertain" it. To grip, not to amuse. To furnish the audience with cartridges, not to dissipate the energies that it brought into the theatre. "Entertainment" is not really an entirely innocuous term: beneath it is a quite concrete, active process. [23]

[23] Eisenstein, S. *Film form*. Cleveland: World Pub. (1968), p 84

Eisenstein's philosophy is reflected in his use of Soviet montage, in which sequence of shots are used to provoke specific emotions from the audience: similar to the assembly

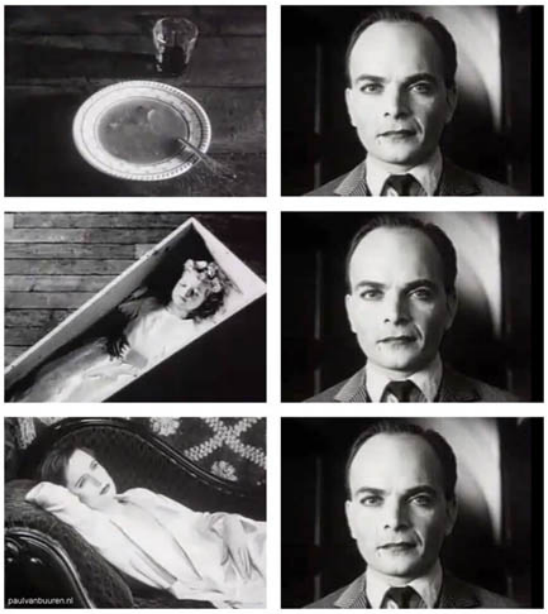

Figure 5 – The Kuleshov Effect

editing technique used in Hitchcock's shower scene in *Psycho*. The Kuleshov Effect led to the formulation of montage and describes how filmmakers have used sequence to evoke specific effects. The Kuleshov Effect is, effectively, a study that examined the audience's reactions and thought processes when presented with disparate images. Their perception of an image was directly influenced by the image before it. In the classic example, Lev Kuleshov played three different clips before the same clip of an actor, Ivan Mosjoukine. The audience believed Mosjoukine was behaving differently in each clip, but it was the same clip each time. This showed that preceding images had a powerful effect on images viewed after it. Sequence is key to how the audience interprets images.

Montage intends to create symbolic meaning through image sequences so that it is the editing of the shots that makes the film, rather than the content alone. In *Film Form*, Eisenstein used examples of ideograms to illustrate what he means by the symbolic or intellectual montage: for example, eye + water = crying, door + ear = eavesdropping. Successful intellectual montages create "collisions", explained as a means of effectively shocking the audience through the use of rapid cuts:

> The word montage came to identify . . . specifically the rapid, shock cutting that Eisenstein employed in his films. Its use survives to this day in the specially created 'montage sequences' inserted into Hollywood films to suggest, in a blur of double exposures, the rise to fame of an opera singer or, in brief model shots, the destruction of an airplane, a city or a planet.[24]

Editing, for Eisenstein, should not be fluid, but shocking.[25] "Montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots – shots even opposite to one another: the "dramatic" principle."[26] Collisions seem to suggest that the film is deliberately presenting images that don't fit together, in an effort to provoke the audience into making a connection. Eisenstein seems to be challenging the audience using this technique.

The success of montage sequences depends on the audience's ability to draw specific conclusions: the work of the audience an essential component of this. In Eisenstein's theoretical approach, empowerment entails **work***:* the idea that the audience needs to actively work instead of simply passively absorbing and being entertained by a film. Eisenstein seems to lay the responsibility at the feet of the filmmaker and make *work* a conscious thing in the mind of the audience; whereas in comics, at least in one theorist's view, the imagination of the audience in reaching closure after reading each panel is something that occurs automatically or unconsciously.[27] Eisenstein's approach of challenging and puzzling the audience with colliding shots fits with the work of screenwriters who construct narratives that are deliberate puzzles for the audience to work out.

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[24] Knight, A. *The Liveliest Art: A Panoramic History of the Movies.* New York: Mentor Books. (1957), p.80.

[25] Berliner, T., *Visual Absurdity in Raging Bull.* In K. Hayes (Ed.), Martin Scorsese's Raging Bull (Cambridge Film Handbooks, pp. 41-68). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2005).

[26] Eisenstein, S., *Film form.* Cleveland: World Pub. (1968), p 49

[27] Jeffries, D, Comic book film style. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017)

Chapter 3: Interstitial space in comics

Full of gaps

Like picturebooks, comics are full of gaps, and the most famous is the gutter between two panels. Panels define the perimeter of the action in comics, and "[establish]… the position of the reader in relation to the scene and [indicate] the duration of the event."[28] While panels contain the action, the gutter in comics splits up the panels, also called the "interstitial 'blank' space between individual panels, […] the intericonic space, the interframes, the between-images, the intericonic gutter, or simply the gutter".[29] Engagement with the gutter is "the switch that activates the reader into using his own ideas in order to fulfill the intentions of the text".[30]

> Every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice. An equal partner in crime known as the reader. I may have drawn an axe being raised in this example but I'm not the one who let it drop or decided how hard the blow or who screamed, or why. All of you participated in the murder. All of you held the axe and chose your spot.[31]

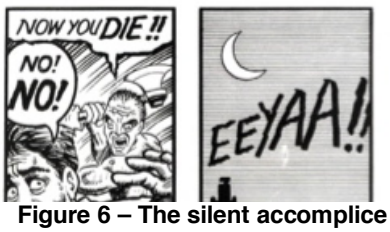

Figure 6 – The silent accomplice

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[28] Eisner, W., *Comics & Sequential Art*, Tamarac (Florida, 1985), p. 26

[29] Low, D.*, "'Spaces Invested with Content': Crossing the 'Gaps' in Comics with Readers in School."* Children's Literature in Education 43 (2012): 368 85.

[30] Iser, W., Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press (1989(, p. 28.

[31] McCloud, S, and Martin, M, *Understanding Comics* (New York, NY: William Morrow, HarperCollinsPublishers, 2017) p. 68

McCloud describes the gutter in action. In figure 6, over two panels, we see someone being attacked. The speech bubble reveals the intention of the man with the axe, but in the second panel, it's less clear initially what has happened. The camera zooms out. There is a sound of a scream. McCloud argues that the reader has imagined a murder which isn't described or drawn. Here, the reader is a silent accomplice in the story, using their mind to fill in the spaces.

Transitions are, arguably, interstitial space, and turning the page is another form of transition. Transitions are similar to transitions in film in that they describe how one scene moves to the next. With a caveat that they are not an exact science, McCloud's classification of comic transitions nevertheless helps us to deconstruct visual storytelling:[32]

1. *movement-to-movement* (basic movements occurring)
2. *action-to-action* (a single subject progressing through a specific movement)
3. *subject-to-subject* (staying within a specific scene)
4. *scene-to-scene* (events taking place across distances within time and space)
5. *aspect-to-aspect* (different aspects occurring simultaneously within the same scene)
6. *non-sequitur* (no logical connection between panels)

Similar to the gutter, but having received far less scholarly attention so far, is the turning of the page. Turning a page, also a form of interstitial space in which the reader physically turns a page, breaks the narrative continuity, and there are questions concerning the

[32] McCloud, S., and Martin, M., Understanding Comics (New York, NY: William Morrow, HarperCollinsPublishers, 2017)

manner in which readers (in this example, early readers) construct meaning or speculate on what might have happened between the pages.[33]

Ideas in picturebook theory

Comics tend to be aimed at adults and adolescents, whereas picturebooks are aimed at a much younger audience: children who are learning to read. Because of the young audience of picturebooks, it's been of particular interest to academics researching childhood literacy. Much has been written about the gaps in picturebooks, in particular, and what can be found within them; and there have been a number of studies looking at what children understood and found within this gap[34].

The classification systems devised by scholars are useful lenses for us to apply also to comics, particularly when describing how text and image work together to create meaning. Doonan devised a number of sub-categories for the interaction of words and pictures: elaborate, amplify, extend, complement, contradict, and deviate.[35] Golden describes five different types of relationships in picture storybooks: "text and picture are symmetrical; text depends on picture for clarification; illustration enhances, elaborates text; text carries primary narrative, illustration is selective; and illustration carries primary narrative, text is

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[33] Low, D*., "'Spaces Invested with Content': Crossing the 'Gaps' in Comics with Readers in School."* Children's Literature in Education 43 (2012): 368 85.

[34] Beauvais, C, *What's in "the gap"? A glance down the central concept of picturebook theory*, Nordic Journal of ChildLit Aesthetics (2015)

[35] Doonan, J., *Looking at pictures in picture books.* Stroud, England: Thimble Press (1993)

selective"[36]. Agosto described *interdependent storytelling* to mean “both forms of media [must be considered] concurrently in order to comprehend the story”, and *parallel storytelling* to mean images and text saying the same thing – effectively said twice.[37] Agosto’s definitions are particularly interesting, because they imply a synergistic kind of reading, in which both forms of information have to be processed in order to produce meaning.

Pantaleo conducted a study of children interpreting eight picturebooks, concluding that half of the children successfully interpreted the texts interdependently[38]. However, in a metacritical analysis of how academics research the picturebook gap, Beauvais argued convincingly that research on children’s picturebooks betrays an unhelpful “reverence” and “fascination” with the child’s interpretation. Beauvais seems to question the use of terms such as “co-authorship” in her analysis, given the reverence academics seem to give to a child’s response: “children’s responses are thus seen as lying outside of the scholarly reading of the picturebooks”[39] and the adult cannot predict what can be found in gaps:

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[36] Golden, J. M., *The narrative symbol in childhood literature: Explorations in the construction of text.* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter (1990)

[37] Agosto, D., *One and Inseparable: Interdependent Storytelling in Picture Storybooks.* Childrens Literature in Education (1999).

[38] Pantaleo, S., *“Reading” Young Children's Visual Texts.* Early Childhood Research & Practice. 7. (2005)

[39] Beauvais, C, *What's in “the gap”? A glance down the central concept of picturebook theory*, Nordic Journal of ChildLit Aesthetics (2015)

> the gap is turned into a blind spot of adult authority, which the child is at leisure to fill with anything*and then tell us. This telling is akin to teaching, and it is not simply teaching about what could be in the gap, but also about the childly mode of thinking which dominates these discoveries.[40]

Picturebook theory studies of children's interpretations are intensely focused on *what* can be found in the minds of children when faced with a gap, perhaps because of their role as a teaching aid in child literacy. It is more interesting, in my personal view, to consider the gap as a switch for imaginative responses.

Reading comics: constant gap-filling

Lossiness is a term that describes the loss of data during encoding, resulting in inexact approximations to represent content. Comics are effectively *lossy* when compared with film. Films can use as many frames and states as required to show the action and fluidity of movement: "an idea or emotion can be expressed by hundreds of images displayed in fluid sequence at such speed as to emulate real movement"[41].

> In a comic book, each panel is available indefinitely for the reader's contemplation; in a film, by contrast, each frame has exactly one twenty-fourth of a second and each shot has a predetermined duration to make an impression on the viewer.[42]

Time is a central idea and component of visual storytelling, since both film and comics tell a story over a period of time — while arguably both are lossy mediums compared with

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[40] Beauvais, C, *What's in "the gap"? A glance down the central concept of picturebook theory*, Nordic Journal of ChildLit Aesthetics (2015)

[41] Eisner, W., *Comics & Sequential Art*, Tamarac (Florida, 1985), p. 20

[42] Jeffries, D, Comic book film style. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), p. 45

the richness and immediacy of the real world, in comics we lose the fluidity of frames, sounds, and other aspects we associate with films.

> We construct a jumpy narrative, like a movie shown with the projector not quite in sync. Just as, when seeing a representation, we form and test some hypothesis about what is depicted, so, with comics, we construct and check a narrative that makes sense of the scenes.[43]

The lossy nature of comics means the reader's imagination is constantly engaged in filling in the gaps in the narrative. Jared Gardner argues that comics are "a form that depends on an active and imaginative reader capable of filling in the gaps in time. As a form that works with traditionally incommensurate systems of meaning — text and image — to tell its story it also requires its readers at every turn to make active decisions as to how to read the two in relationship to a larger narrative."[44]

Comics have been called a synergistic language, making them more than a combination of images and words.[45] As discussed in the section on ***Picturebook Theory****,* Agosto coined interdependent storytelling[46] to mean that a conclusion is only reached after interpreting more than one form of information. Low writes that reading a comic is "primarily a medium of conjunction. Each panel is dependent upon the reader linking it and its semiotic content—

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[43] Ibid.

[44] Gardner, J. *Projections*. Stanford University Press, 2012.

[45] Low, D.*, "'Spaces Invested with Content': Crossing the 'Gaps' in Comics with Readers in School."* Children's Literature in Education 43 (2012): 368 85.

[46] Agosto, D. *One and Inseparable: Interdependent Storytelling in Picture Storybooks.* Childrens Literature in Education (1999).

through her or his interpretive imagination—to the panels around it".[47] In Guy Gauthier's view, comics are "an original ensemble of productive mechanisms of meaning"[48] — and that "the discrete units generated in the drawing style of Peanuts can be compared to the units of the first articulation of language".[49]

Reading comics can be tricky, since it's a process of near constant interpretation and gap-filling. There are pictures, words, captions and thoughts contained within panels, and repeatable, identifiable concepts recognisable across the story. The complexity involved in reading a picturebook is multiplied by panels in often complex, varying, and dense layouts. Reading a comic depends on the reader's attention, an ability to interpret multi-modal information, and to be able to (consciously or unconsciously) form a conclusion after each panel in the story. Compared with film, Jared Gardner argues, the emergence of the comic narrative in the reader's mind is hard work:

> The panel is easily contained by and takes part in the sequential continuum. This signifies that at the perceptive and cognitive levels the panel exists longer for the comics reader than the shot exists for the film spectator. When watching a film, "the cinema spectator does not experience… the sensation of being placed in front of a multitude of narrative utterances of the first order that accumulate piece by piece to give birth to the second order narrative utterance, the entirety of the filmic story." The comics reader, on the contrary, experiences precisely a sensation of this type.[50]

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[47] Low, D.*, "'Spaces Invested with Content': Crossing the 'Gaps' in Comics with Readers in School."* Children's Literature in Education 43 (2012): 368 85.

[48] Groensteen, T. The System Of Comics (Univ Pr Of Mississippi, 2009), p. 4

[49] Ibid.

[50] Gardner, J. *Projections*. Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 26

Groensteen disagrees, writing that even though the story is "full of holes […] it projects me into a world that is portrayed as consistent, and it is the continuity attributed to the fictional world that allows me to effortlessly fill in the gaps of the narration."[51] It's the reader's ability to fill in the spaces in their mind – effectively 'tweening' (in-betweening) the story – which makes reading comics possible. Potentially, the work of tweening and filling in the spaces can make comics a more difficult medium than film. Arguably, readers of comics may not even be aware of this imaginative role of reading comics. Jeffries has written that for "the comics-literate reader this becomes a largely unconscious collaborator in the construction of the narrative, with closure occurring automatically."[52] Similarly, in picturebook theory, Lewis argues that reading a picturebook is a process:

> the picture book always has a double aspect, an ability to look in two directions at once and to play off the two perspectives against each other . . . the picture book is thus not just a form of text, it is also a *process*, a way of making things happen to words and to pictures.[53]

This process is part of the difficulty of reading comics. A form of synergistic[54] and interdependent reading[55], comics contain words and pictures that can say different things, or appear to be contradictory. There's also a risk that words take the role of interpretation away from the reader, through the "gravity" that they create:

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[51] Jeffries, D, Comic book film style. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), p. 45

[52] Ibid.

[53] Lewis, D. (2001). *Reading contemporary picturebooks*: Picturing text. London: RoutledgeFalmer (2001)

[54] Low, D.*, "'Spaces Invested with Content': Crossing the 'Gaps' in Comics with Readers in School."* Children's Literature in Education 43 (2012): 368 85.

[55] Agosto, D. *One and Inseparable: Interdependent Storytelling in Picture Storybooks.* Childrens Literature in Education (1999).

> The moment you add words and captions, there's a real gravity. People look at them and they believe what the words are saying rather than interpreting them for themselves. That's a problem. Also it's got a set pace. Reading has a kind of kinetic flow. Pictures are more like a map. You can wander around them. There's not a line as such, a beginning, middle and end.[56]

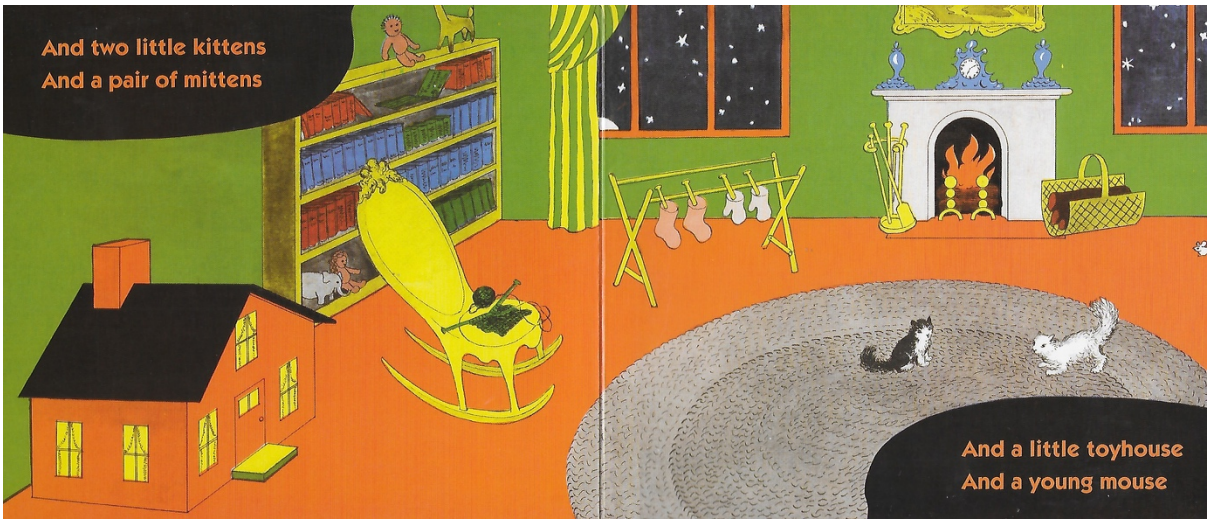

Figure 7 – Goodnight Moon

Words add gravity and bring their linear rules to reading, whereas pictures can be wandered around in. The interplay between words and pictures is a delicate balance. Comics should not "reduce […] to mere words – or conversely, [to be treated] as merely a sequence of images – [because that] leaves aside what defines this art form, the integration of words with pictures".[57]

Goodnight Moon (figure 7) is an example of words anchoring a composition, while allowing the reader to wander around in the pictures. Words are used to direct the reader's attention to different parts of an image. The imagery is rich and detailed, and the words invite us to identify the objects despite not being in proximity to them. The placement of the

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[56] Gravett, P, Comics Art (London: Tate, 2013), p. 34

[57] Jeffries, D., *Comic book film style.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), p. 52

words creates a puzzle for the reader: the text “two little kittens” are on the opposite page from the kittens in question, so the reader has to hunt for the image being referenced. This creates a more interesting and challenging children’s reading experience than simply providing a parallel reading experience, in which objects in the image are labelled.

Limiting or removing the words

If words add gravity and detract from the task of interpretation, limiting or removing them can help to shift reader focus onto the interpretation of images. Spiegelman has described wordless comics as being like a hunt for meaning:

> the process of flipping pages back and forth, hunting for the salient details and labelling them, shakes the words loose the yield meaning. Wordless novels are filled with language, it just resides in the reader's head rather than on the page.[58]

The language from a wordless comic, according to Spiegelman, resides in the reader’s head: the words they’ve chosen are their own.

There is no language barrier to reading a silent comic. For distribution purposes, there’s no need for translation; images are almost universally accessible, with the caveat that the concepts displayed are recognisable and shared between cultures. In his graphic novel *The* System, Peter Kuper explains his rationale for avoiding words as being able to remove barriers to language, engage the reader’s imagination, and to challenge conventional attitudes to the comic book form:

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[58] Spiegelman, A., ‘Reading pictures: a few thousand words on six books without text’, *Lynd Ward: six novels in woodcuts*, New York (2010)

> Wordless comics eliminate language barriers and invite readers to interpret the visuals and invent dialogue. This also removed a comic book convention: the word balloon, a visual cue that led non-comic book readers to dismiss the form as one indistinguishable genre.[59]

Wordless comics are particularly good for evoking a dreamlike state: "In contrast to the babble of illustrated speech balloons, the constraint of silence in comics seems particularly effective in evoking dream-like states. The absence of sound, the inability to hear or say anything, is puzzling, even unnerving."[60]

Reader as co-author

There are mixed feelings over whether gutters and gaps constitute a promotion of the reader to co-author. It's a grandiose way of describing the process of interpretation, but nevertheless is effective for communicating the work of the reader. Beauvais writes dismissively of the child reader as co-author in her metacritical analysis of the gap in children's picturebooks, giving the slightly fawning words adults use to describe what children find in the gaps, and questions the assumption that children are better "gap-fillers" than adults. Beauvais writes:

> It is not an exaggeration to say that the child symbolically becomes angelic through such descriptions, passing on a message to the adult which she/he has to interpret in turn. The child thus temporarily be- comes a teacher to the adult by navigating picturebook gaps.[61]

Beauvais argues that:

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[59] Kuper, P., The System (PM Press, 1997)

[60] Gravett, P., Comics Art (London: Tate, 2013), p. 50

[61] Beauvais, C, *What's in "the gap"? A glance down the central concept of picturebook theory*, Nordic Journal of ChildLit Aesthetics (2015)

It is beyond the picturebook, beyond even the experience of reading and of exploring children's experiences of reading, that the fundamental indeterminacy of the picturebook gap can be truly said to dwell.[62]

Writing on the gutter in comics, rather than picturebooks, Low writes more optimistically about a collaboration between an author and reader in "co-constructing" "continual, active communication":

> I have often referred to the phenomenon in which readers are forced to close gaps by the term ''gutterances,'' stressing that the gutter figuratively speaks to the reader, demanding to be filled in, and that the reader, in filling it in, speaks right back to the gutter. In order to determine what narrative content may reasonably occupy the gutter, there is a continual, active communication between author and reader. This communication is the ''gutterance.'' Together, author and reader co-construct a meaning that cannot be said to definitively exist on the page itself, the former employing the ''gutterance'' to invite the latter to re-appropriate the space with her or his own intentions.[63]

Words like *participation*, *co-operation* and *co-authorship* seem to pepper the scholarly debate about the gutter and gaps in visual stories:

> Participation is a powerful force in any medium. Filmmakers long ago realised 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.[64]

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[62] Beauvais, C, *What's in "the gap"? A glance down the central concept of picturebook theory*, Nordic Journal of ChildLit Aesthetics (2015)

[63] Low, D., *"'Spaces Invested with Content': Crossing the 'Gaps' in Comics with Readers in School."* Children's Literature in Education 43 (2012): 368 85.

[64] McCloud, S, and Martin, M, *Understanding Comics* (New York, NY: William Morrow, HarperCollinsPublishers, 2017) p. 69

Artists seem to acknowledge the role of the reader's participation in reading comics. Shaun Tan, author of *The Arrival*, set out consciously create a space for the personal reflections of the reader:

> I believe that the personal reflections of the reader are far more important than those of an author. My own practice […] really just involves crafting a space in which the thoughts of another person can flourish, especially in ways that are impossible to conceive until you actually start reading, writing, or drawing.[65]

Whether or not we can call the reader a co-creator, the participation of the reader is an idea emerges persistently and appears to be vital for the success of a picturebook, comic or film.

[65] Gravett, P., *Comics Art* (London: Tate, 2013), p. 54

Chapter 4: A critical examination of the use of space in 'Earthling' and 'The System'

In which I become a participant

Much deference has been given to children's interpretation of picturebooks, with Beauvais suggesting that there is a bias towards thinking that the interpretations by children are somehow "better" than the interpretations of adults[66]. In this section, I will cast myself in the role of creative participant and discuss and interpret two graphic novels, using the lenses of space and indeterminacy that I have discussed in my dissertation so far.

I have chosen to discuss *Earthling* by Aisha Franz and *The System* by Peter Kuper. Other contenders for this comparison included *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan and *Flood* by Eric Drooker. Both *Flood* and *The Arrival* are wordless comics in that they use no dialogue or text at all. *The System* and *Earthling* use dialogue in a limited fashion, making them good candidates for *interdependent storytelling*[67] comics which employ the use of identifiable gaps.

While Franz uses limited dialogue, Kuper uses no dialogue, but uses words in the form of ephemera to surface plot points and the political life of the world: the names of businesses, newspaper headlines, and so on, which help the reader to grasp what's going on in this world. After the preface, a quote by William Blake sets the mood for the graphic

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[66] Beauvais, C, What's in "the gap"? A glance down the central concept of picturebook theory, Nordic Journal of ChildLit Aesthetics (2015)

[67] Agosto, D. *One and Inseparable: Interdependent Storytelling in Picture Storybooks.* Childrens Literature in Education (1999).

novel: “I must create a system or be enslaved by another man’s.” Arguably, this quote colours interpretation of the story.

Earthling is an intergenerational, coming-of-age graphic novel dealing mainly with the day-to-day lives of three women, while also exploring their inner lives. *The System* is a portrait of corruption in New York city, arguably making use of our own expectations and experiences associated with known character archetypes: depending on our “commonality of experience”[68].

An example of the use of visual ephemera in *The System* is shown in figure 10. A woman walks towards the news stand, and in the next shot we see headlines concerning a political candidate: “Muir fights big business”, and “President Muir?”. The headlines act as seeds for potential events in the story: the words act as clues for forthcoming plot points, significant some way: because words are used so rarely in this graphic novel, the headlines become signals in the verbal noiselessness. Despite the restricted use of words, the images of the city are extremely noisy: we can hear the train approaching in the subway, the hubbub and chatter in the streets.

[68] Eisner, W., *Comics & Sequential Art*, Tamarac (Florida, 1985)

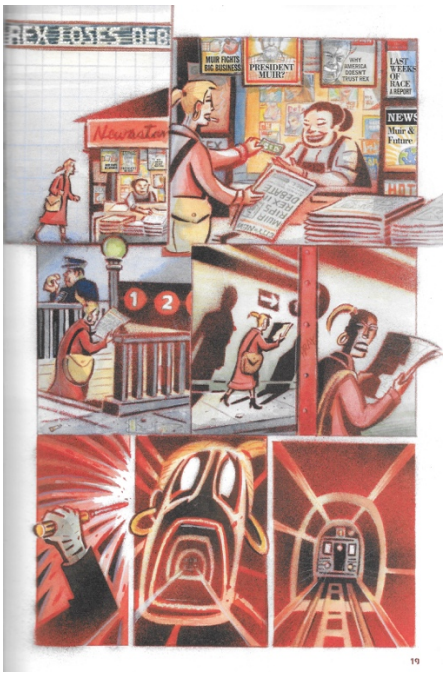

Figure 8 – *The System* – visual ephemera

The System makes extensive use of character archetypes and stereotypes: in the first few pages we see a homeless man, a stripper, a frowning man in a suit smoking a cigar, a policeman accepting a bribe, an evangelist holding a Bible, pointing[69]. We're being strongly directed towards certain conclusions about these characters that might rely on our existing knowledge and expectations associated with how the characters appear; knowledge that may be culturally localised. I'm divided in thinking that the use of these archetypes fails to leave much room for imagination, because they present us with such cartoonish caricatures; but perhaps because they rely so much on an existing understanding in the mind of the reader, they do leave enough breathing space for a range of interpretations.

In figure 9 we see another example that makes extensive use of stereotypes: a setup of a sleazy deal. There's low lighting, plans being pulled out from a man's sleeve, and champagne being popped – all of which contribute to this sense of underhand sleaziness, and perhaps rely on a cultural appetite of James Bond films. As this section is about my personal interpretation of this graphic novel, it's difficult for me to read this image in any

[69] Kuper, P., *The System* (PM Press, 2014), p. 17–27

other way. The graphic iconography throughout focuses on instantly recognisable concepts, at least within a certain cultural context which happens to be focused sharply on a dark vision of New York: political and business corruption.

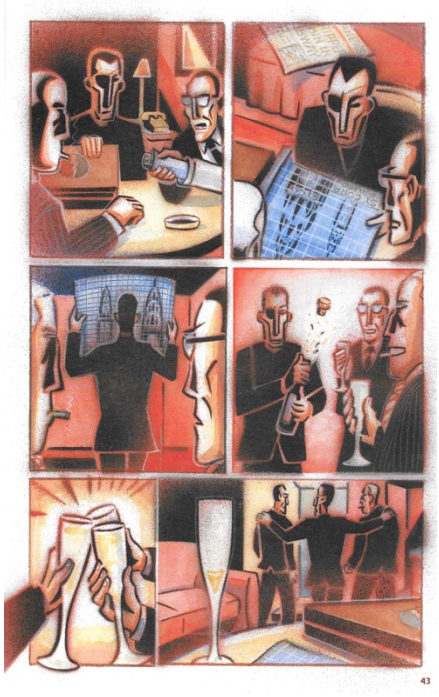

Figure 9 – *The System* – a suspect deal taking place

The ‘camera’ seems to reflect the mind’s flow of attention. In figure 10 we see the man in the red baseball cap embracing his friend in hospital, when his attention travels to the headline on the television. The camera then zooms in on the scene of a reporter interviewing a woman, and suddenly we’ve arrived at the scene. Instead of using pure cuts, Kuper uses a novel transitional state to link scenes, creating a sense of connectedness. And yet this is, in

a way, a *lack* of space – we're being led by the hand as we're given a tour of the world in *The System.*

Figure 10 – The System – follow the camera into the TV

Kuper has rendered his graphic novel using spray paint and stencils, and vivid colour. Franz uses pencil entirely. Nothing in *Earthling* uses colour except for the characters on the cover, but when preparing artwork for this dissertation I realised I had named a file "red_balloon" (figure 11) despite red being nowhere in the description or visuals. From my personal interpretation, I would argue that a lack of colour can also represent a use of space, in that the viewer can imagine the colours in their mind – even if they don't initially realise it.

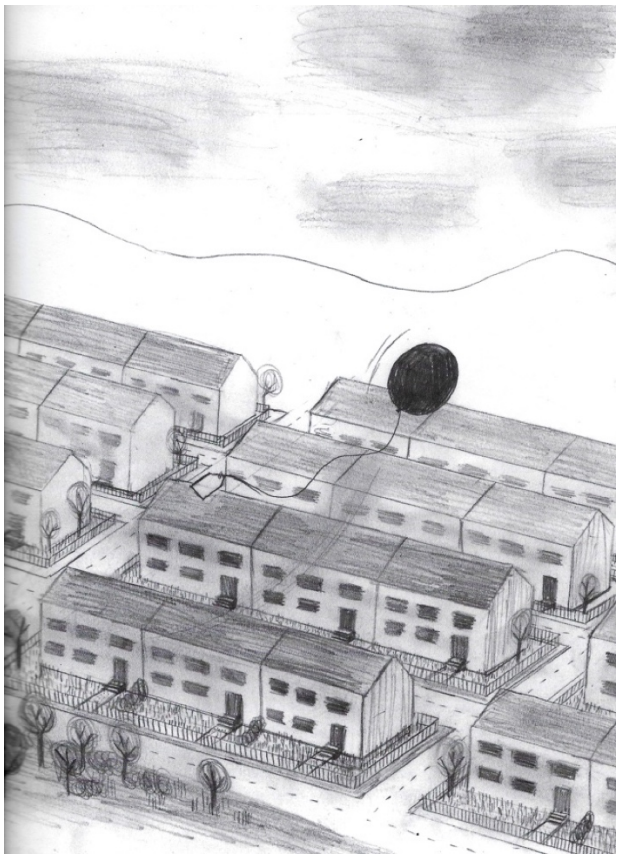

Figure 11 – *Earthling* – the balloon

Earthing focuses on inner lives of three women: unlike *The System* we see little of the political world these women live in, but we do have insights into their imagination, dreams, hopes, and regrets. *Earthling* isn't completely free from dialogue, but the dialogue it does use is highly restricted, and pages run wordlessly at a time, while still conveying key plot points. It tells an intergenerational story of a disillusioned mother and her two daughters, with the story shifting between the characters. The graphic novel takes its title from the story of the youngest daughter, Mädchen, who discovers and then hides an alien in the house.

The cinematic style of Franz' *Earthling* relies strongly on the use of imagery to carry the story. Words are so minimal that they alone cannot tell the story. Structurally, each section features an image akin to an establishing shot, followed by a story told over a grid of images from which she rarely deviates; and a line to show the gutter, rather than white space. The regular, tight grid in Earthling seems to convey a consistent passing of time, even as it jumps back in time and to dreamlike states.

The mood is set with an establishing shot of a balloon: the entire page is dedicated to the shot of the balloon floating over the roofs of the houses. The opening sequence shows the younger daughter Mädchen spotting a balloon pass by her bedroom window, before strapping on some roller skates and chasing it to a field. She eventually catches up with the balloon. The balloon pops, and it has a tag attached to it, which says: "Whoever reads this is stupid!" In his personal interpretation of this comic, Sean Collins argues that many of her other interactions continue in this vein – and the opening scenes are good summaries of each of the characters' experiences in the story.[70] The use of words in *Earthling* direct the reader towards certain interpretations – like the use of visual ephemera in *The System*, they are clues into the world of the characters.

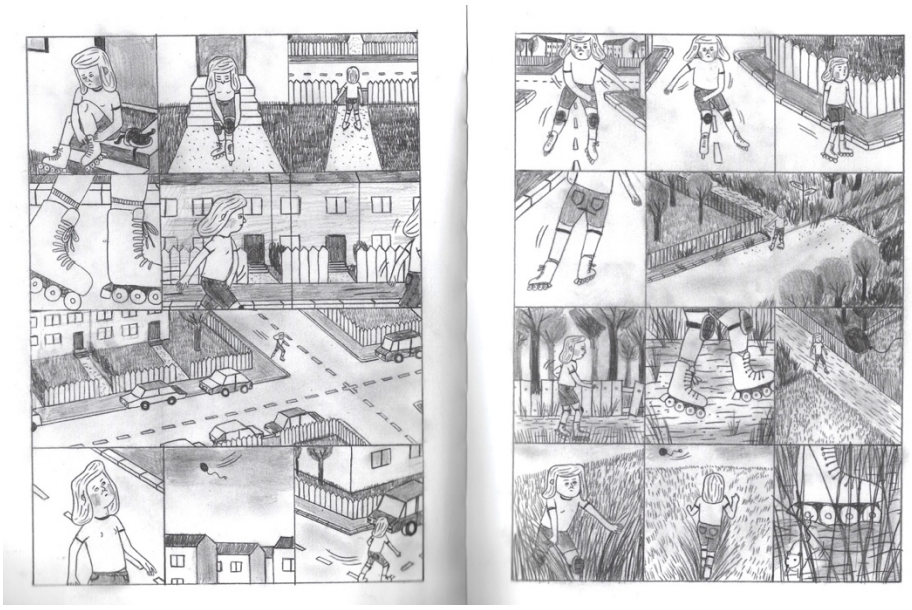

Figure 12 – *Earthling* – opening scene

[70] Collins, S. (2014). *Earthling | The Comics Journal*. [online] Tcj.com. Available at: http://www.tcj.com/reviews/earthling/ [Accessed 12 Jun. 2018].

While the grid is rarely deviated from, it occasionally stretches the length of the page to include two or three of the other panels, Franz makes use of whole pages to convey longer transitional shots. In figure 16, we see the older sister waiting for a visitor. The use of space in this scene seems to reflect the passing of time. If this is a gutter, it is a full-page gutter: we're left hanging, wondering what will happen and whether Daniel will turn up, while the camera moves to another section of the story.

Figure 13 – *Earthling* – time passes

In figure 14, we see the older sister and her friend enter a pipe in a field, in swift moment-to-moment action, before rolling down the hill in a blur. We can gather this from the pictures, but none of it is described in the text. Instead of experimenting with layout in the grid, Franz uses repetition and swift moment-to-moment action to show the girls rolling down the hill in the pipe, becoming increasingly abstracted in the image to the right. The action unfurls over 35 panels, and use highly restricted dialogue: there's a total of six short speech exchanges. The text on page one: "There it is!", "Let's go!". Page two: "Oof, tight squeeze!" "We probably just got fatter!" "Ah!" "Ow!" The final page uses no dialogue. The mostly onomatopoeic words provide a soundtrack to the images.

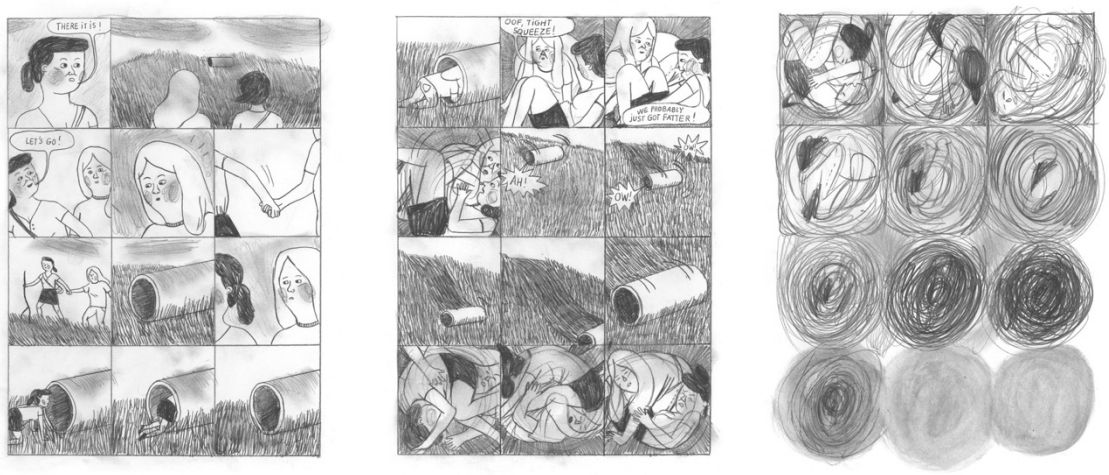

Figure 14 – *Earthling* – rolling down the hill in a pipe

The following sequence shows their exit from the pipe and their entrance into a dream world, which is one of two times the layout changes drastically to support the events (the other time is during a dream). The characters are drawn in a different, yet identifiable style, their eyes have become large and cartoonish, and they've evidently re-entered a dizzy dream world where flowers can speak. The shape of the frame reflects the new world and reality they've entered.

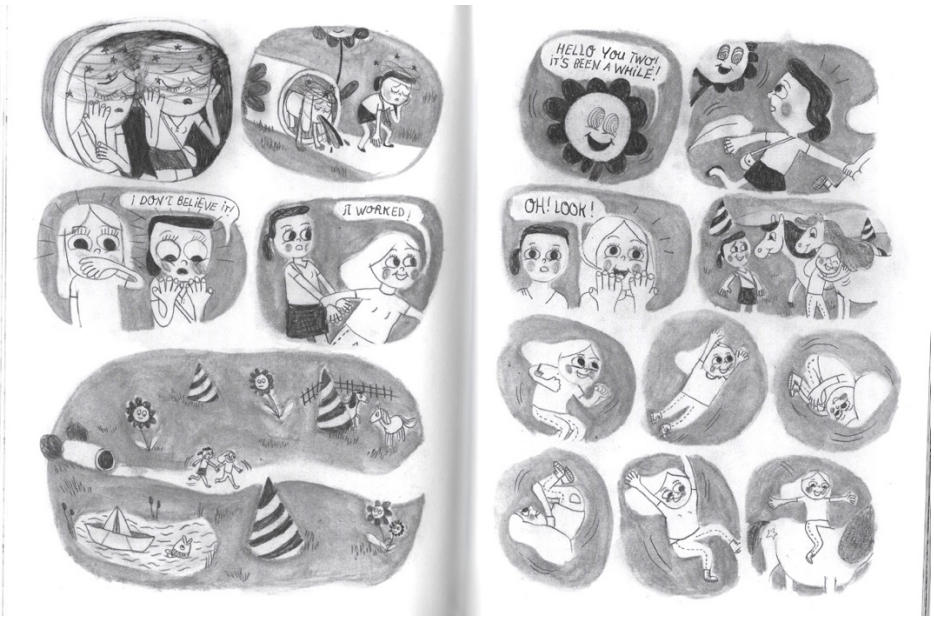

Figure 15 – *Earthling* – entry to a dream world

Earthling uses mainly moment-to-moment transitions, which convey small, slightly mundane moments from life which we can nevertheless understand and identify with. We aren't bored by these images, since we understand what Franz is trying to convey, and we're curious about the emotional world of the protagonist. It's impossible to discuss the use of space and indeterminacy in these graphic novels without also discussing the subject matter. While the events in *Earthling* happen within a microcosm of a family, The *System*'s subject matter is a macrocosmic system of a corrupt city, relying more on our personal archetypes to understand what's going on. Despite the increased accessibility of graphic novels that use restricted words, due to its ability to cross boundaries, it relies more heavily on an understanding of cultural context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, spaces are used extensively across film, screenwriting, comics and picturebooks. Audiences often are, as Eisenstein envisaged, active participants in the consumption of visual storytelling[71]. The process of reading a comic using words and images is synergistic[72] and interdependent,[73] requiring a process of interpretation, co-operation, and participation.

Can we call readers co-authors? The word *co-author* is a provocative term, and useful for thinking in terms of the reader's creativity; however, co-authorship on the part of the reader doesn't exist on the page, so their co-authorship remains personal and intangible. As Beauvais argues:

> It is beyond the picturebook, beyond even the experience of reading and of exploring children's experiences of reading, that the fundamental indeterminacy of the picturebook gap can be truly said to dwell.[74]

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[71] Eisenstein, S., *Film form*. Cleveland: World Pub. (1968)

[72] Low, D.*, "'Spaces Invested with Content': Crossing the 'Gaps' in Comics with Readers in School."* Children's Literature in Education 43 (2012): 368 85.

[73] Agosto, D. *One and Inseparable: Interdependent Storytelling in Picture Storybooks.* Childrens Literature in Education (1999).

[74] Beauvais, C, *What's in "the gap"? A glance down the central concept of picturebook theory*, Nordic Journal of ChildLit Aesthetics (2015)

However the intangibility of the gap, we see evidence of it: internet fandoms[75] and fan fiction are visible expansions and extensions of worlds that have been imagined; they are evidence of reader imagination that has burst the walls of its designated space, nourished in the indeterminate spaces of stories.

It's worth pointing out that the act of co-creation and completion isn't a special feature of comics, picturebooks and film: literature, too, is full of holes, and at a semiotic level, humans are constantly involved in decoding and interpreting.[76] Beauvais has pointed out that picturebook theorists seem to place more importance on children's interpretation of the gap (in picturebooks) and that they are somehow better gap-fillers.[77]

To identify some areas that deserve further research: *page turning* in picture and comic books[78] piques curiosity but has so far been neglected in studies; and while children's interpretations of picturebooks has been extensively studied, more research is required to understand the interpretations of older readers and the role of spaces in comics; and since co-authorship is highly personal to the reader, more research could be done to understand the nuances of the process of closure.

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[75] Burt, S. (2018). *The Promise and Potential of Fan Fiction*. [online] The New Yorker. Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-promise-and-potential-of-fan-fiction [Accessed 15 Jun. 2018].

[76] Eco, U. *Six walks in the fictional woods*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press (2004)

[77] Beauvais, C, What's in "the gap"? A glance down the central concept of picturebook theory, Nordic Journal of ChildLit Aesthetics (2015)

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