

50. [Introduction] Time Frames

Scott McCloud is the Aristotle of comics, showing the way for contemporary thinkers who would seek to rigorously analyze emerging media.

What Aristotle did for Attic drama in the *Poetics*, McCloud has done for the neglected form of comics. He has explained what the most talented comic artists knew, although only Will Eisner had begun to articulate it—how the comic format works, and what its underlying structures and techniques are. He began by rigidly defining comics as “sequential art” (or, if further explication is necessary, “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence”). McCloud then found that, based on this definition, comics are as old as the ancient Egyptians. From there, he went on to consider many of the important higher-level techniques of the comic artist: How does the variation between generic and specific representation of people work? What “happens” in between the panels of the comic images we read? What are the uses of color in the comic art form? And, as is discussed in the chapter excerpted here, how can time be represented in a medium which is (although it is read over a period of time) purely spatial? It is hardly necessary to even mention that McCloud’s work has implications for combining text and image, but it provides other lessons and examples.

Many of those involved with new media are pleased by McCloud’s deft metacomic tricks, a number of which are represented in this chapter. Since McCloud uses a narrative medium suited to general exposition, he was able to write a comic about comics, and take advantage of this to illustrate (in every sense of the word) his points. Other similar attempts are not always as successful: although there have been buildings constructed mainly to comment on architecture, these are not usually popular or very habitable structures. While the first edition of George Landow’s *Hypertext* was issued by Johns Hopkins on disk as *Hypertext in Hypertext*, this edition never gained wide scholarly currency—not being as widely cited as the book it was based upon—and Landow’s *Hypertext 2.0* was not issued in a similar format. Some interest in hypertextual criticism of hypertext remains, as can be seen in the September 2002 special issue of the *Journal of Digital Information*, edited by Jill Walker and Susana Tosca. Perhaps this will build upon other nonfiction hypertext work to provide interesting results; it may also simply be dancing about dance.

Looking to *Understanding Comics* can provoke new media insight, but it’s certainly not the case that all of McCloud’s techniques can be easily dragged and dropped into the digital realm. What McCloud’s work nevertheless shows is that new forms, even those that have not been studied seriously for centuries or even decades, do indeed have certain conventions and rules, and that if the form being studied is considered with care and thought, these rules can be determined, benefiting those who work in the form and are striving to improve the practice of their art.

—NM

Further Reading

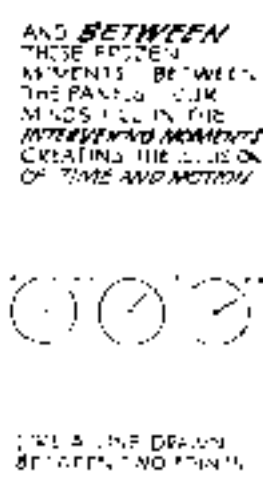
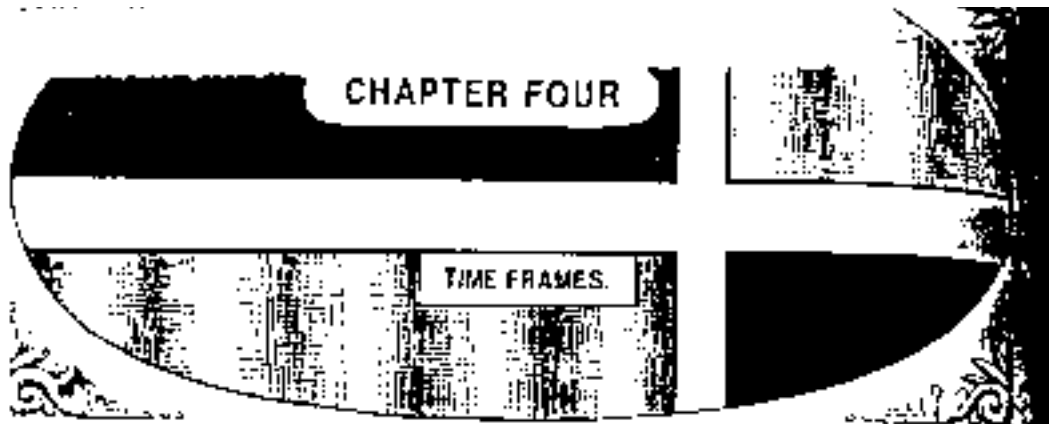
Eisner, Will. *Comics & Sequential Art*. Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 1985.

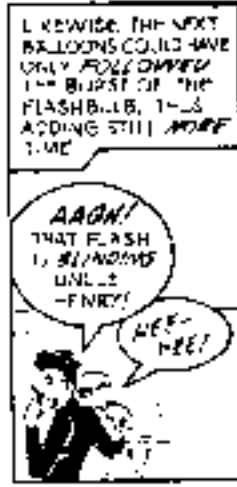
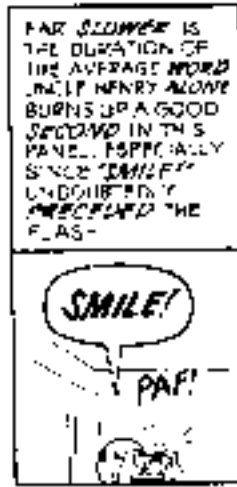
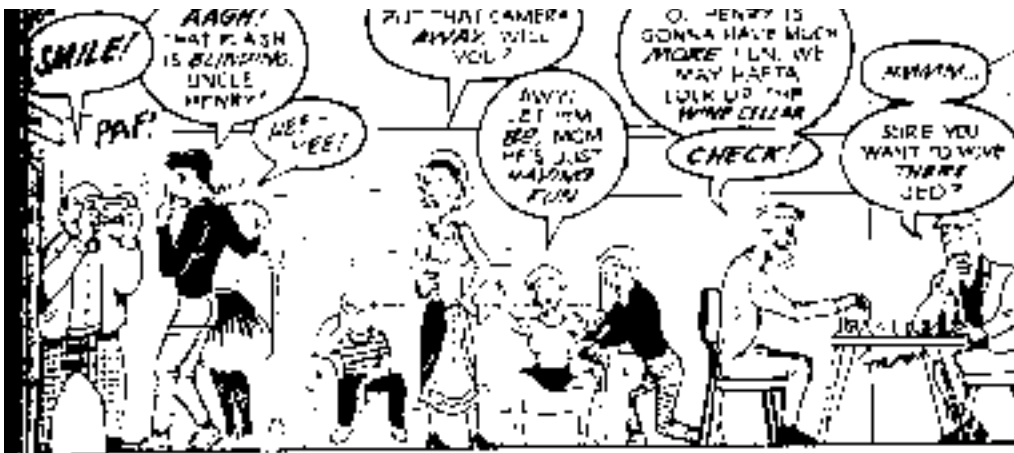
Landow, George P. *Hypertext in Hypertext*. 2 3.5” disks; Macintosh and Windows versions. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.

McCloud, Scott. *Reinventing Comics*. New York: Harperperennial, 2000

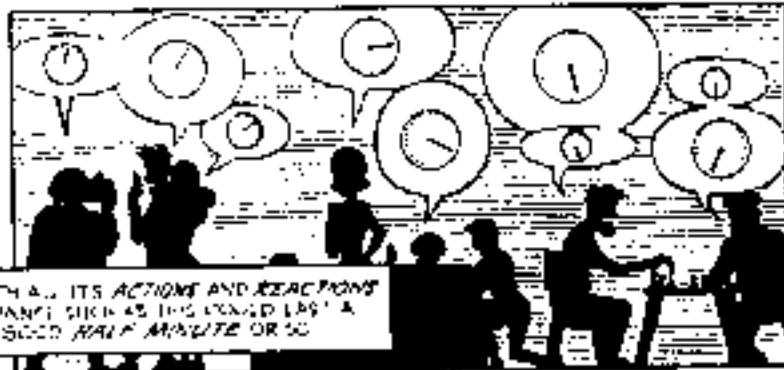
See Brenda Laurel’s essay (◊38) for a direct application of Aristotelian dramatic ideas to new media.

Some new media practitioners have also begun to consider their own work as a type of sequential art. Given that thumbnails and storyboards are already used by many new media systems designers, perhaps viewing a particular path through such a system as a comics-like sequence is a logical next step. New media tends not to have the continual movement of the motion picture (storyboarding’s most high-profile application), but rather periods of reading and navigation more closely aligned with the experience of comics. In *Reinventing Comics* McCloud has also considered how the specific form of comics may be transformed by new media and what forms might emerge. It’s fitting, then, that Ted Nelson employed an underground comics format to communicate the user experience he wanted new media systems to have—an example of which appears in his 1974 *Computer Lib / Dream Machines*.

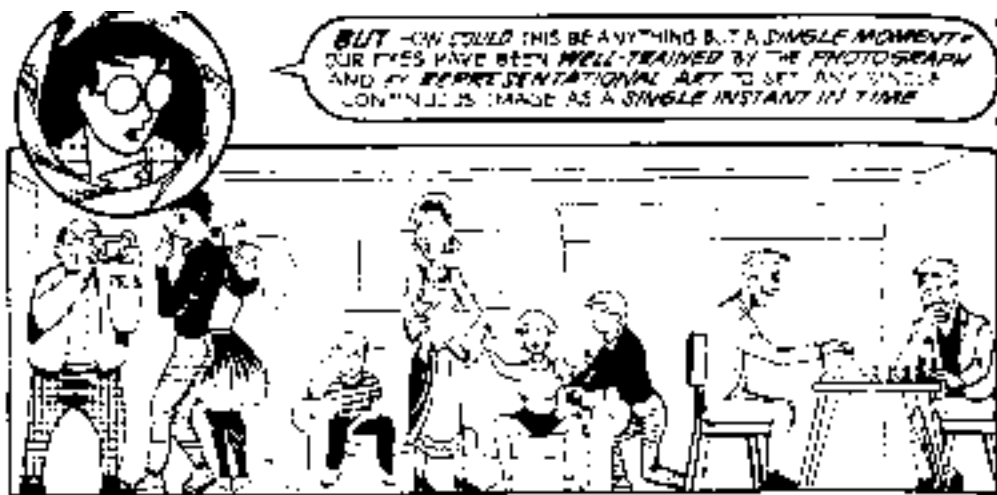




JUST AS PICTURES AND THE INTERVALS BETWEEN THEM CREATE THE ILLUSION OF TIME THROUGH **CULTURE WORDS** INTRODUCED TIME BY REPRESENTING THAT WHICH CAN ONLY BE IN TIME - **SOUND**.



WITH ALL ITS ACTIONS AND REACTIONS A PANEL TAKES AS LONG AS 1/2 A GOOD HALF MINUTE OR SO



THOSE FIGURES
FACES AND WORDS
ARE MATCHED IN
TIME AS IN LIFE

THE PROPERTIES OF THE SINGLE
CONTINUOUS **IMAGE** MEANWHILE TEND
TO MATCH EACH FIGURE WITH EVERY
OTHER FIGURE

PORTRAYING TIME
ON A LINE MOVING
LEFT TO RIGHT
THIS PLAYS ALL THE
IMAGES ON THE
SAME LETTERS

SINGLE
IMAGE

SINGLE
MOMENT

AND **TANGLES UP** TIME
BEYOND ALL RECOGNITION!

SNAP SNAP

CRASH!

PERHAPS WE'VE BEEN TOO
CONDITIONED BY PHOTOGRAPHY TO
PERCEIVE SINGLE IMAGES AS SINGLE
MOMENTS. AFTER ALL, IT DOES
TAKE AN EYE TIME TO MOVE ACROSS
SCENES IN REAL LIFE

EACH FRAME IS
ARRANGED FROM
LEFT TO RIGHT IN
THE SEQUENCE WE
WILL READ THEM,
EACH OCCUPYING A
DISTINCT TIME
SLOT

IN SOME RESPECTS THIS PANEL BY FRAME ACTUALLY FITS OUR
DEFINITION OF COMICS. ALL IT NEEDS IS A FEW GUTTERS
THROWN IN TO CLARIFY THE SEQUENCING.

CRACK!

ASH!
THE FURN
IS BURNING
WELL
WENTY!

OH, ABOUT
ALL THAT CHAIR
AWAY AT
THE...

ALL A
LITTLE
BEFORE
THE
WINDY
EON

WELL, I
S' SUPPOSE
I CAN GET THAT
SEVERE PAIN AT
MAY HAVE
LACK OF THE
MOVEMENT

CRACK!

WOW!

THEY'VE
BURNED
THE
JED!



NOT ALL PANELS ARE LIKE THAT -- A COLUSE

A SCENE PANEL SUCH AS THIS ONE WOULD BE SAID TO DEMIC A SINGLE MOMENT



IT'S GIVIN' US THIS **ALL** FOLKS

I'LL GO AND INTRODUCE THE TEASER TO YOU



BUT IN AN OTHERWISE ALPHABETICALLY CAPTIONED PANEL THE SINGLE MOMENT CAN BE HELD



HE WAS GOING TO HIS AZZ, KAREN

THESE VARIOUS SHAPES WE CALL PANELS HOLD THE BORDERS ALL OF THE COMES THAT ADD UP TO THE VOCABULARY OF COMICS



ALL EXCEPT ONE



FOR JUST AS THE BODY'S LARGEST ORGAN -- OUR SKIN -- IS SELDOM EMPLOYED AS AN ORGAN --



...SO THIS IS THE PANEL *ITSELF* OVERLOOKED AS COMICS MUST IMPORTANT *ICON!*

THESE PANELS OR "FRAMES" HAVE NO **FIXED** OR **ABSOLUTE MEANING**, LIKE THE KEYS OF **LANGUAGE, SCIENCE** AND **COMMUNICATION**.

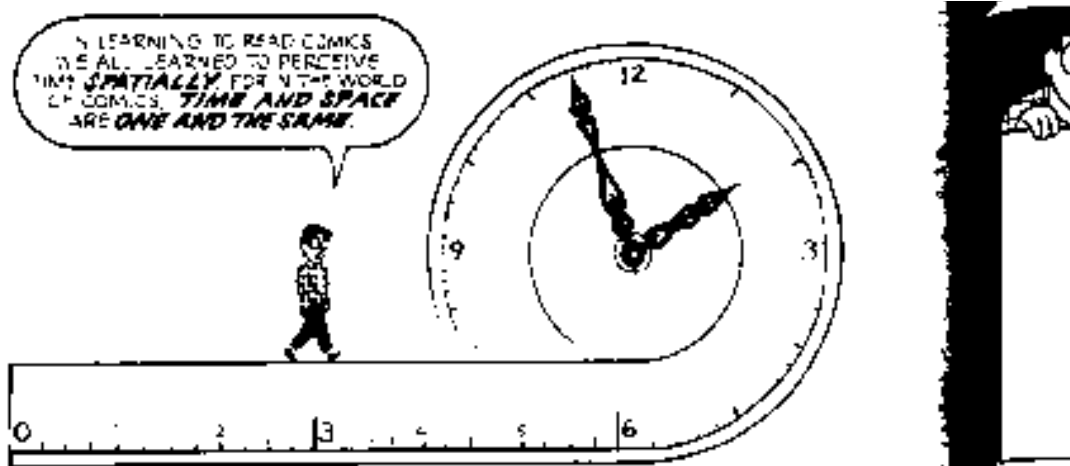
MEANING IS **FLUID** AND **MALLEABLE** AS THE SORTS OF **ICONS** WE CALL **PICTURES**.

PANEL ACTS AS A SORT OF **GENERAL INDICATOR** THAT **TIME** OR **SPACE** IS BEING **DIVIDED**.

"THE **DURATIONS** OF THAT **TIME** AND THE **DIMENSIONS** OF THAT **SPACE** ARE **DEFINED** MORE BY THE **CONTENTS** OF THE **PANEL** THAN BY THE **PANEL ITSELF**."

PANEL **SHAPES** VARY **CONSIDERABLY** THOUGH AND WHILE DIFFERENCES OF **SHAPE** DON'T AFFECT THE **SPECIFIC MEANING** OF THOSE **PANELS** **VIS-A-VIS** **TIME**, THEY CAN AFFECT THE **READER'S EXPERIENCE**.

WHICH BRINGS US TO THE **STRANGE** **RELATIONSHIP** BETWEEN **TIME** AS **DEPICTED** IN **COMICS** AND **TIME** AS **PERCEIVED** BY THE **READER**?



BUT IF THE CREATOR OF THIS SCENE WANTED TO *LENGTHEN* THAT PAUSE, HOW COULD HE OR SHE DO SO? ONE OBVIOUS SOLUTION WOULD BE TO ADD MORE PANELS. BUT IS THAT THE ONLY WAY?

IS THERE ANY WAY TO MAKE A SINGLE SILENT PANEL LIKE THIS ONE SEEM *LONGER*? HOW ABOUT WIDENING THE SPACE *BETWEEN* PANELS? ANY DIFFERENCE?

AS UNLIKELY AS IT SOUNDS, THE PANEL *GAP* CAN ACTUALLY MAKE A *DIFFERENCE* IN OUR PERCEPTION OF TIME. EVEN THOUGH THIS LONG PANEL HAS THE SAME BASIC MEANING AS ITS SHORTER VERSIONS, STILL, IT HAS THE *FEELING* OF GREATER LENGTH.

The comic strip is divided into three horizontal sections. Each section begins with a character with glasses asking a question in a speech bubble. The first section shows a sequence of five panels: a character speaking, followed by four panels of a woman in a thinking pose. The second section shows a sequence of three panels: a character speaking, a woman in a thinking pose, and another woman in a thinking pose. The third section shows a sequence of three panels: a character speaking, a single wide panel of a woman in a thinking pose, and another woman in a thinking pose. A character with glasses also appears in a separate panel on the right side of the second section, pointing upwards.

IS THERE ANY WAY TO MAKE A SINGLE SILENT PANEL LIKE THIS ONE SEEM *LONGER*? HOW ABOUT WIDENING THE SPACE *BETWEEN* PANELS? ANY DIFFERENCE?

AS UNLIKELY AS IT SOUNDS, THE PANEL *GAP* CAN ACTUALLY MAKE A *DIFFERENCE* IN OUR PERCEPTION OF TIME. EVEN THOUGH THIS LONG PANEL HAS THE SAME BASIC MEANING AS ITS SHORTER VERSIONS, STILL, IT HAS THE *FEELING* OF GREATER LENGTH.

EVER NOTICED HOW THE WORDS "SHORT" OR "LONG" CAN REFER EITHER TO THE **FIRST** DIMENSION OR TO THE **FOURTH**?

IN A MEDIUM WHERE TIME AND SPACE MERGE SO COMPLETELY, THE DISTINCTION OFTEN **VANISHES**.

THE **PANEL BORDER** IS OUR GUIDE THROUGH TIME AND SPACE, BUT IT WILL ONLY HOLD US **SO FAR**.

AS MENTIONED, PANELS COME IN MANY SHAPES AND SIZES, THOUGH THE **CLASSIC RECTANGLE** IS USED MOST OFTEN.

MOST OF US ARE SO USED TO THE STANDARD **RECTANGULAR** FORMAT THAT A **VERTICAL** PANEL SUCH AS THIS CAN TAKE ON A **TIMELESS** QUALITY.

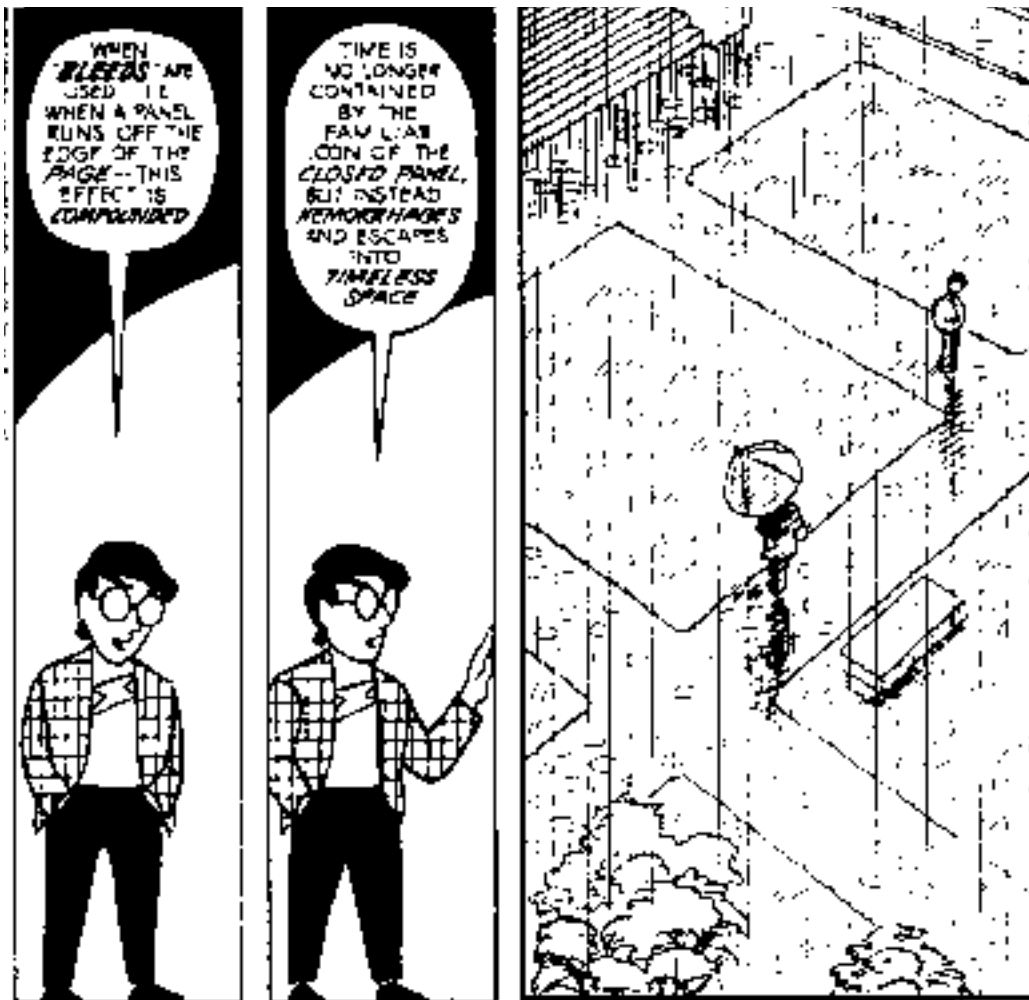
MR. HUBBARD: BEEN LISTENING TO ME?

I GUESS.

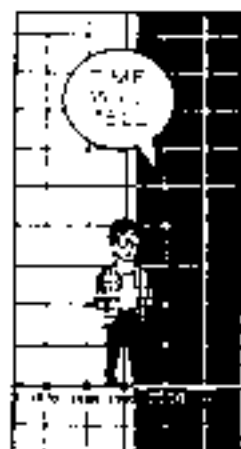
WHEN THE **CONTENT** OF A SINGLE PANEL OFFERS NO CLUES AS TO ITS **DURATION**, IT CAN ALSO PRODUCE A SENSE OF **TIMELESSNESS**.

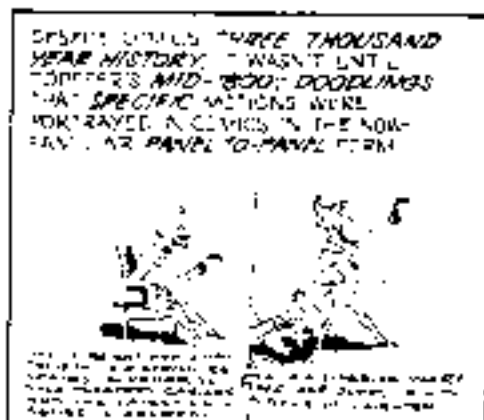
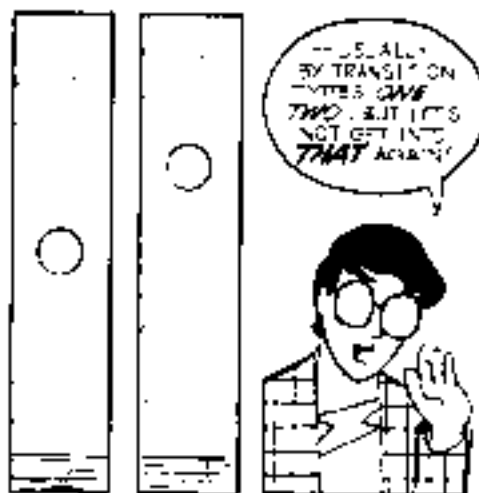
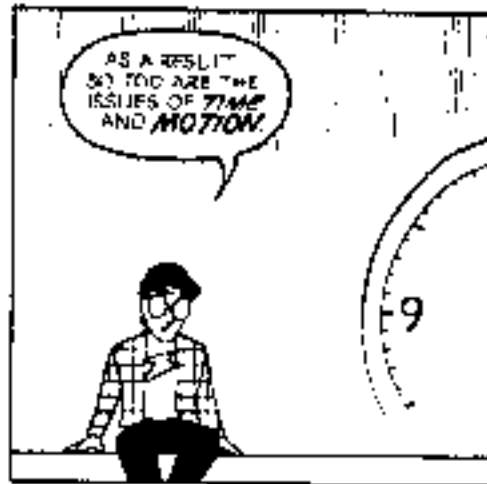
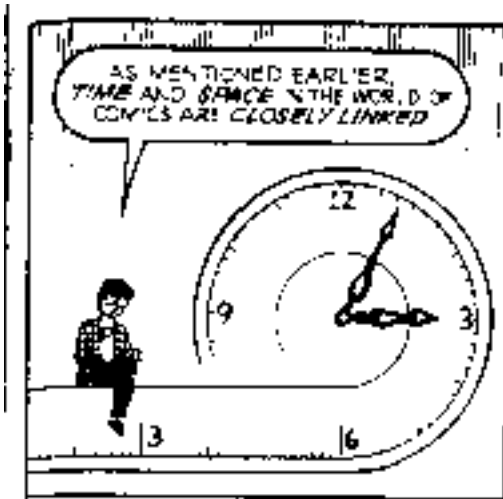
BECAUSE OF ITS **UNRESOLVED NATURE**, EVEN A PANEL MAY **LINGER** IN THE READER'S MIND.

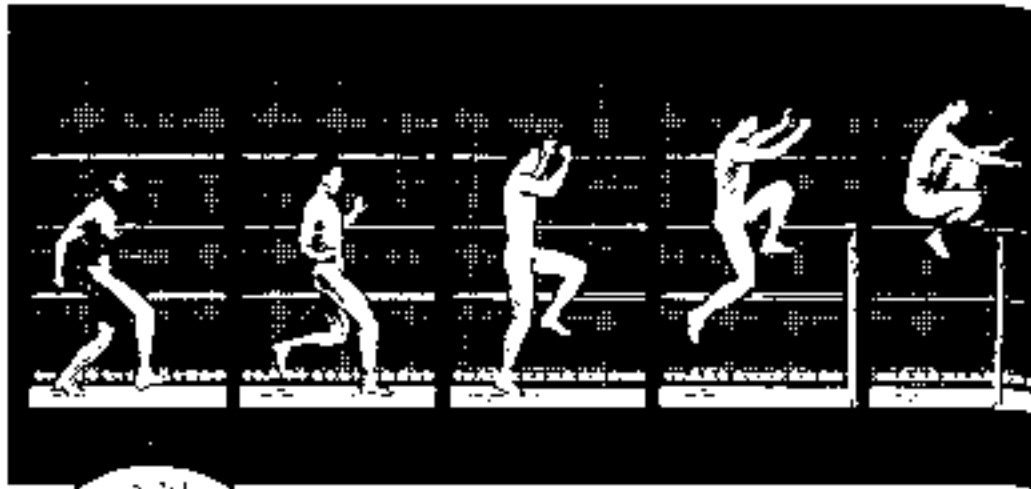
AND ITS PRESENCE MAY BE FELT IN THE PANELS WHICH FOLLOW.











THE LAST GLASSER OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY "STEM" LIKE EVERYONE WAS TRYING TO APPLIED IN THE "ROLE" SCIENCE!

BY 1860 ALL ACROSS THE WORLD OVER "NEW" "MOVING PICTURES" WERE JUST FINDING THE OTHER "EVERYONE" WANTED TO BE FIRST!

"STROBOSCOPE" IS SUPERIOR IN EVERY WAY TO THE OBSOLETE ZOOETROPE!

BAN THE PRAXINOSCOPE IN ALL!

FOOLS! THE KINEMATOSCOPE WILL SHOW YOU NA CHILD'S PLAY! THE FEARFUL MERE TOYS NEXT TO THE REAL PHANTASMATROPE!

FORBID ALL THE ZOOPRAXINOSCOPE FILM!

THOMAS EDISON. TAKE OUT THE "KINEMATOGRAPH" PATENT ON A PRESSING STRIP OF CLEAR PLASTIC INSIDE AND FILM WAS OFF AND RUNNING!



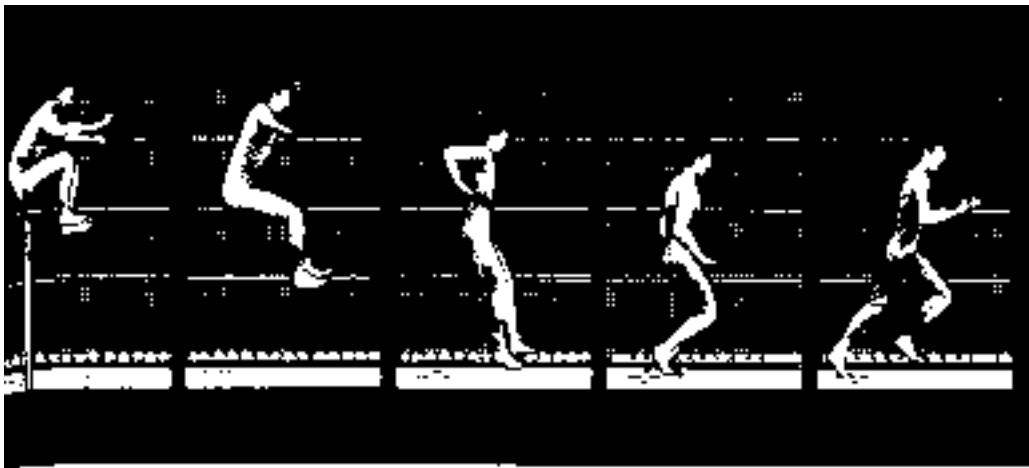
AS THE MOVING PICTURE RELEASED OPTICAL ARRAYS OF THE MORE RADICAL PAINTERS OF THE DAY EXPLORED THE IDEA THAT MOTION COULD BE EFFECTED BY A SINGLE IMAGE ON CANVAS

THE FUTURISTS IN 1910 AND MARCEL DUCHAMP IN FRANCE BEGAN THE SYSTEMATIC DECOMPOSITION OF MOVING IMAGES IN A STATIC MEDIUM

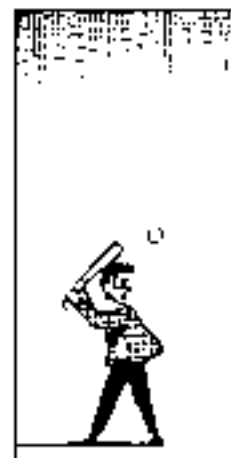


WAS IT A GAP YEAR?





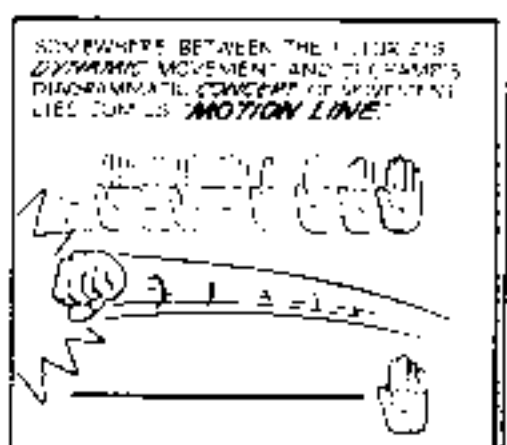
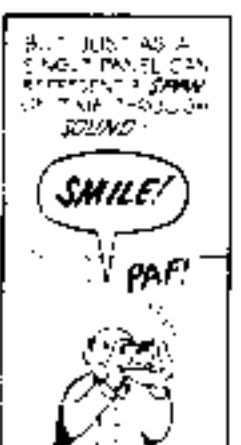
SPACE-TIME PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN BY EADWEARD MUYBRIDGE





FROM ITS EARLIEST DAYS THE MODERN COMIC HAS GRAPPLED WITH THE PROBLEM OF SHOWING MOVEMENT IN A STATIC MEDIUM

HOW DO YOU SHOW THIS ASPECT OF TIME IN AN ART WHERE TIME STANDS STILL?



IN THE BEGINNING MOTION LINES -- OR "ZIP-RIBBONS" AS SOME CALL THEM -- WERE WILD, MESSY, ALMOST **DESPERATE** ATTEMPTS TO REPRESENT THE PATHS OF MOVING OBJECTS THROUGH SPACE.



OVER THE YEARS THESE LINES BECAME MORE **REFINED** AND **STYLIZED** -- EVEN **DIAGRAMMATIC**.

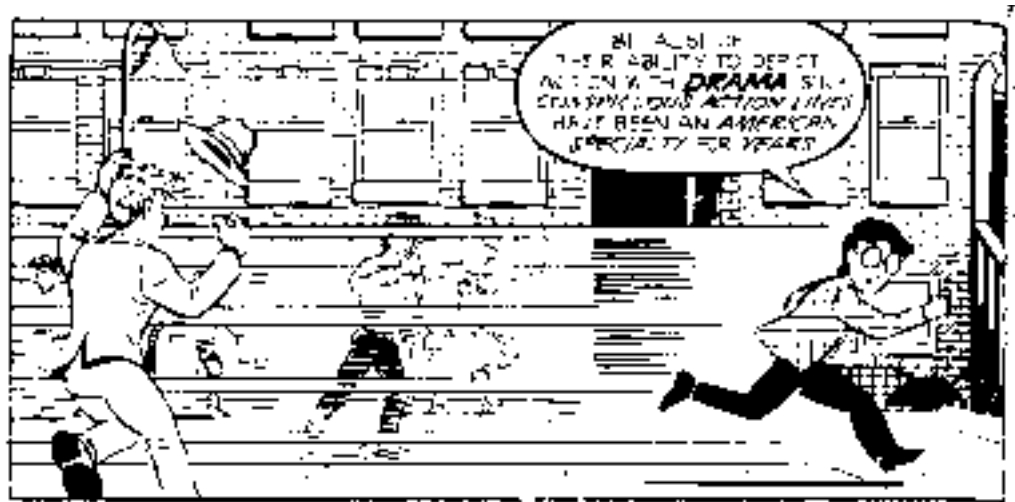


EVENTUALLY, IN THE HANDS OF HEROIC **FANTASY** ARTISTS LIKE **BILL EVERETT** AND **JACK KIRBY** --



-- THOSE SAME LINES BECAME SO **STYLIZED** AS TO ALMOST HAVE A **LIFE** AND **PHYSICAL PRESENCE** **ALL THEIR OWN!**





IN THIS APPROACH BOTH THE **MOTION** OF THE OBJECT AND THE **BACKGROUNDS** ARE DRAWN IN A CLEAR, ARTICULATED STYLE AND THE **PATH** OF MOTION IS MAPPED OVER THE SCENE.



