


UNDERSTANDING COMICS

A black and white comic book cover illustration. The background is a collage of comic panels. The central panel features a large, detailed eye with long, thick eyelashes. To the left, a hand is shown holding a cigarette. To the right, a boy in a plaid shirt is walking. At the bottom, a portion of a comic panel with a grid pattern is visible.

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 **HarperPerennial**
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

The book you're about to read took 15 months to produce and many of the ideas it contains had been on the back-burner for over nine years, so acknowledging all of those who have helped in its development may be next to impossible. Furthermore, since its initial publication in the comics industry, I've received tremendous support from hundreds of fellow travelers in all corners of the publishing world. My apologies to anyone who is not listed below and should have been.

My deepest gratitude to Steve Bissette, Kurt Busiek, Neil Gaiman, Larry Marder and Ivy Ratafia who all reviewed my original draft in detail and offered many valuable critiques. Their contribution to the project cannot be overstated. I was also fortunate to receive detailed analysis from the talented Jennifer Lee and beyond-the-call-of-duty proofreading and good advice from Bob Lappan. Special thanks are also due to the magnificent (and magnanimous) Will Eisner who offered many words of encouragement and excellent advice in the project's later stages. Will Eisner's work has been an inspiration to me, and to thousands of artists, for many years. Eisner's COMICS AND SEQUENTIAL ART was the first book to examine the art-form of comics. Here's the second. I couldn't have done it without you, Will. Thanks.

I'm deeply indebted to all of the friends and family who offered their thoughts on the manuscript as it was being prepared. Among this long list are Holly Ratafia, Alice Harrigan, Carol Ratafia, Barry Deutsch, Kip Manley, Amy Sacks, Caroline Woolf, Clarence Cummins, Karl Zimmerman, Catherine Bell, Adam Philips and the legendary Dewan Brothers, Ted and Brian.

In the comics world, special thanks go to Richard Howell, Mike Luce, Dave McKean, Rick Veitch, Don Simpson, Mike Bannon (technical support), Jim Woodring, and all of the wonderful clan at San Diego '92. Thanks also to the numerous professionals who have lent their support and

endorsements to the project. I'm particularly indebted to Jim Valentino, Dave Sim and Keith Giffen who used their own books as a forum on my behalf. In the retail sector, my thanks to the generous members of the Direct Line Group, to the many stores which played host during our first tour and especially to the Mighty Moondog himself, Gary Colobuono. Thanks, as always, to Larry Marder, Nexus of All Comic Book Realities, for his tireless efforts on my behalf.

Thank you to the legion of journalists in print, radio and television who have been able to talk about this book without quoting sound effects from the old Batman TV show; especially Calvin Reid and the whole gang at PW.

Early influences on the ideas in this book are harder to trace, but no less important. Kurt Busiek introduced me to comics long ago and was my best guide for many years. Eclipse Editor-in-Chief cat yronwode helped shape my critical faculties over seven years on ZOT! and is one of the very few people in comics who really understood where I was coming from. Art Spiegelman, like Eisner, offered me a role-model for serious inquiry into comics as an art-form and, in his short comics-essay "Cracking Jokes," clarified comics' potential for non-fiction and made this book a possibility. Other important early influences include Syracuse professor Larry Bakke, Richard Howell and Carol Kalish.

My thanks to all the fine people at Tundra Publishing, Kitchen Sink Press and HarperCollins.

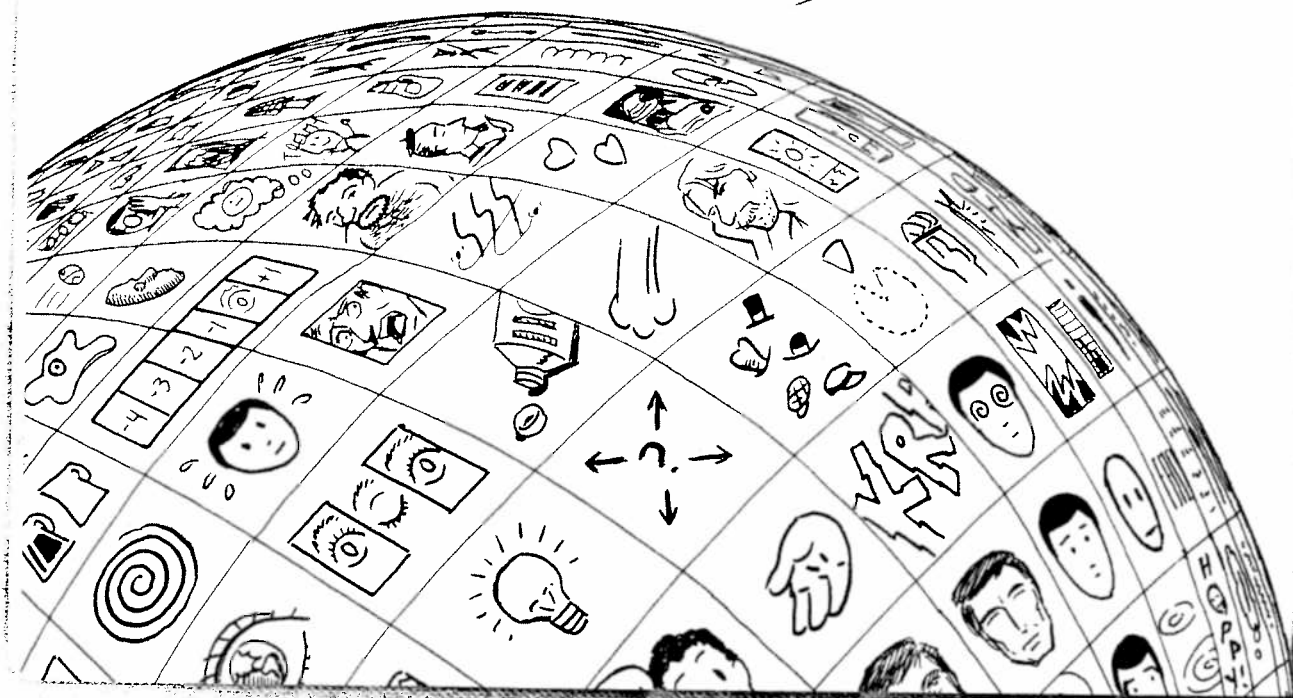
Without Kevin Eastman this book might have never seen the light of day. Thank you, Kevin.

Without Ian Ballantine, you wouldn't be holding it in your hands today. Thank you, Ian.

And without you, Ivy, it wouldn't have been much fun. I love you madly. Let's take tomorrow off.

♡ Scott

Scott McCloud



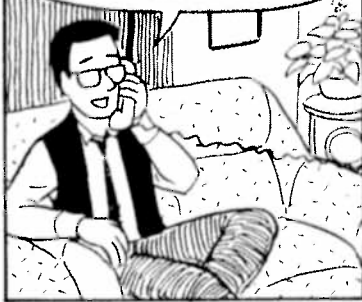


INTRODUCTION



MY OLD PAL **MATT FEAZELL** CALLED THE OTHER DAY.

SO, SCOTT, WHAT'S YOUR NEXT PROJECT GOING TO BE NOW THAT YOU'VE FINISHED "**ZOT**"?



WELL, IT'S A BIT HARD TO **DESCRIBE**, MATT. IT'S SORT OF A **COMIC BOOK** ABOUT **COMICS**!

YOU MEAN LIKE A **HISTORY**?



NOT **EXACTLY**, NO... ALTHOUGH THERE IS SOME HISTORY **IN** IT... IT'S MORE AN EXAMINATION OF THE **ART-FORM** OF COMICS, WHAT IT'S CAPABLE OF, HOW IT WORKS.



YOU KNOW, HOW DO WE **DEFINE** COMICS, WHAT ARE THE **BASIC ELEMENTS** OF COMICS, HOW DOES THE MIND **PROCESS** THE LANGUAGE OF COMICS--THAT SORT OF THING.



I HAVE A CHAPTER ON **CLOSURE**--ALL ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS **BETWEEN** THE PANELS, THERE'S ONE ON HOW **TIME** FLOWS THROUGH COMICS, ANOTHER ON THE INTERACTION OF **WORDS** AND **PICTURES** AND **STORYTELLING**.



I EVEN PUT TOGETHER A NEW **COMPREHENSIVE THEORY** OF THE **CREATIVE PROCESS** AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR COMICS AND FOR **ART IN GENERAL**!!



OH.



AREN'T YOU KIND OF **YOUNG** TO BE DOING THAT SORT OF THING?



CHAPTER SIX

SHOW AND TELL.



THIS
IS MY
ROBOT.



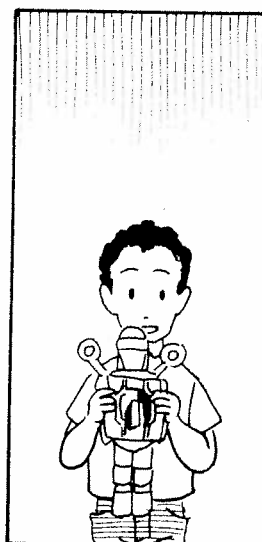
WHAT CAN YOU
TELL US ABOUT
YOUR ROBOT,
TOMMY?



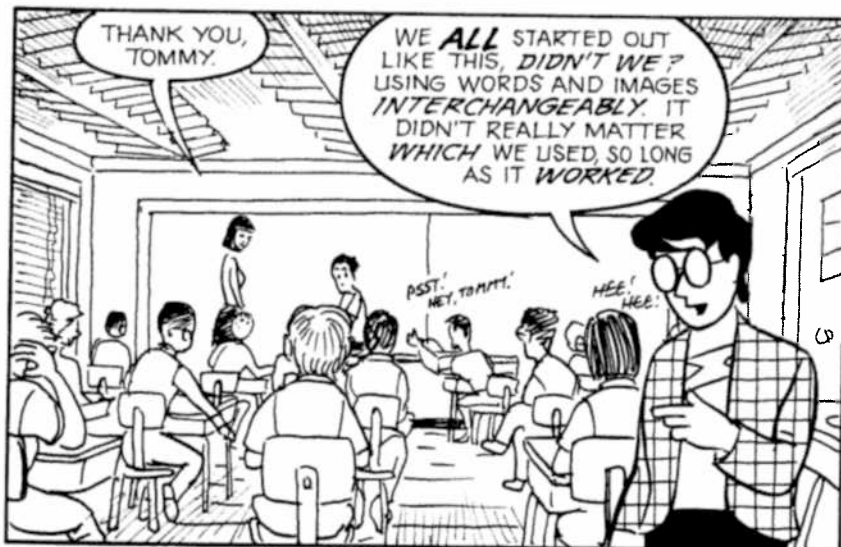
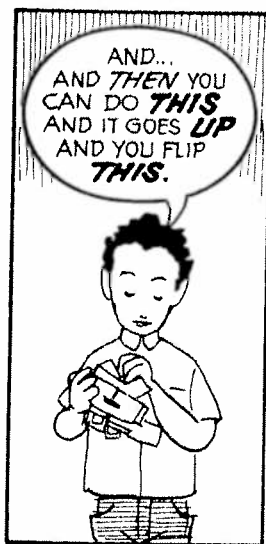
WELL,
UH... I LIKE
IT 'CAUSE...
'CAUSE, UH...

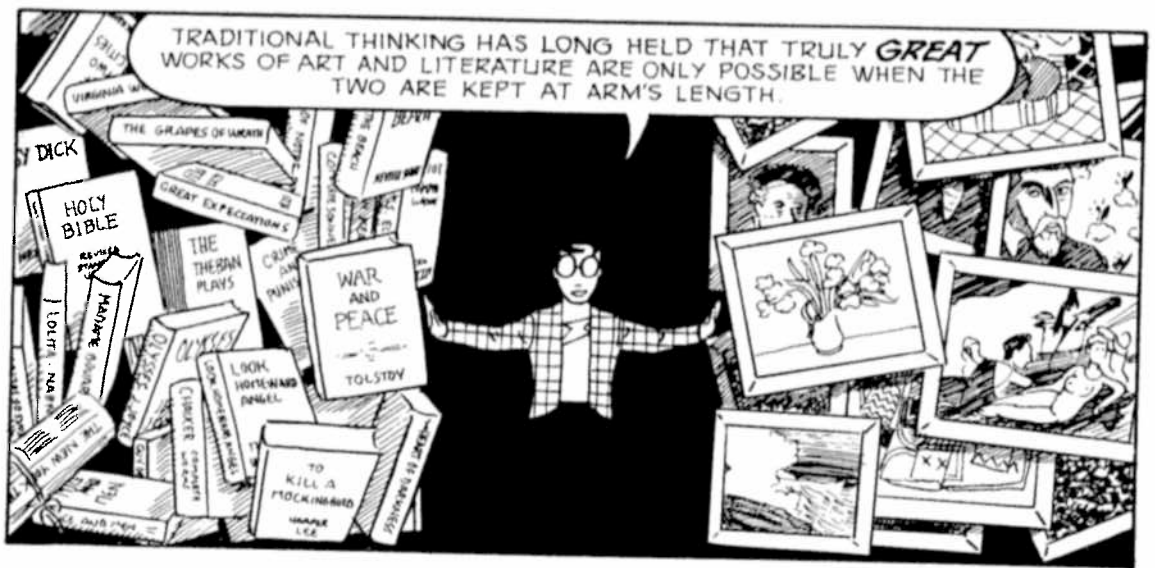


IT'S
GOT ONE OF
THESE
THINGS.



WHAT IS
THAT,
TOMMY?







MEANWHILE, WORDS AND *MOVING* PICTURES HAVE HALF THE WORLD IN THRALL TO THEIR CHARMS, BUT MUST STRUGGLE TO MAKE *THEIR* POTENTIAL UNDERSTOOD.



WORDS AND PICTURES ARE AS POPULAR AS EVER, BUT THIS WIDESPREAD FEELING THAT THE COMBINATION IS SOMEHOW *BASE* OR *SIMPLISTIC* HAS BECOME A *SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY*.



THE ROOTS OF THIS ATTITUDE RUN PRETTY *DEEP*.



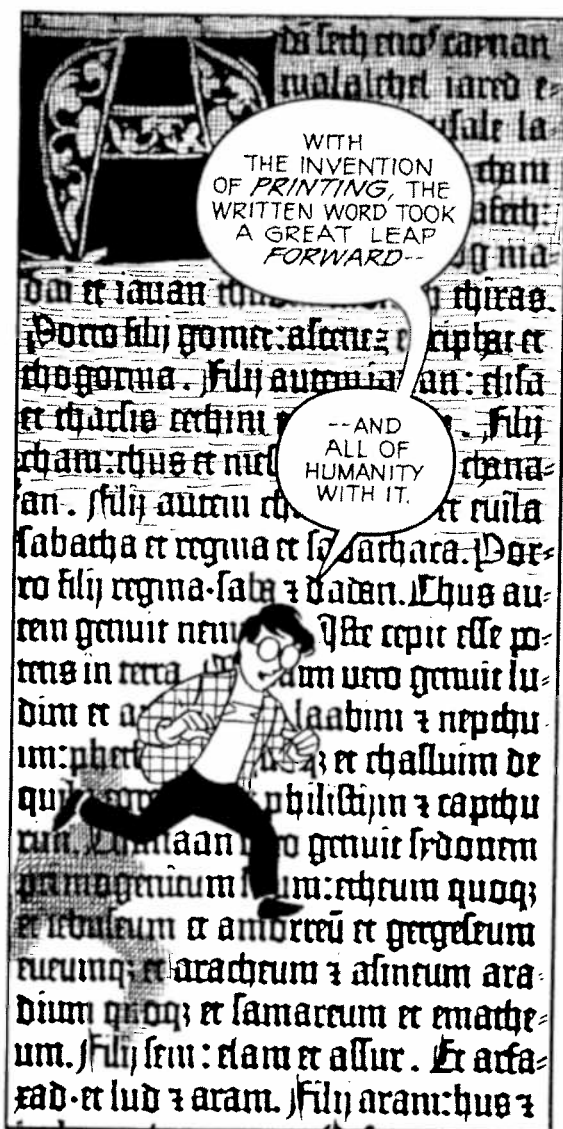
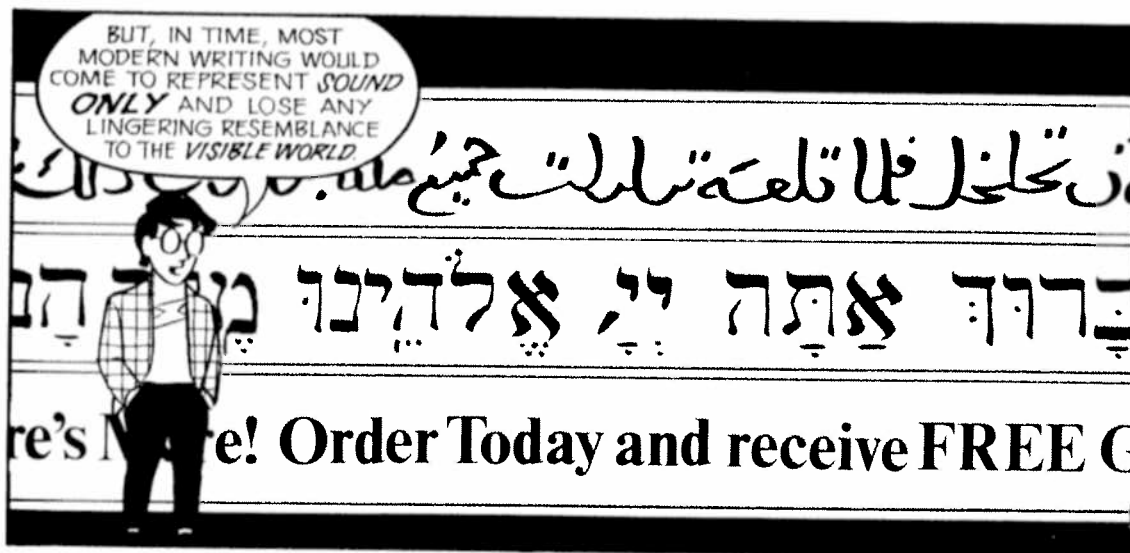
AS NEAR AS WE CAN TELL, PICTURES *PREDATE* THE WRITTEN WORD BY A *LARGE MARGIN*. HERE ARE SOME BIG HITS FROM THE GOLDEN AGE OF CAVE PAINTING, ABOUT 15,000 YEARS AGO.



SOME OF THIS ART SHOWS CONSIDERABLE ATTENTION TO *DETAIL*, VERY MUCH CONCERNED WITH *PICTORIAL REPRESENTATION*.



BUT OTHERS WERE VERY *ICONIC*, ACTING AS *SYMBOLS* RATHER THAN *PICTURES*-- MORE LIKE A *PRIMITIVE LANGUAGE*!





PICTURES, MEANWHILE, BEGAN TO GROW IN THE **OPPOSITE** DIRECTION: LESS **ABSTRACT** OR **SYMBOLIC**, MORE **REPRESENTATIONAL** AND **SPECIFIC**.



FACSIMILE DETAILS OF PORTRAITS BY DURER (1519) REMBRANDT (1660) DAVID (1788) AND INGRES (1810-15).



John Keats

1819

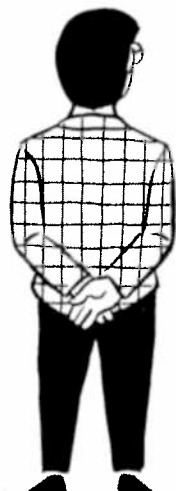
Ode on a Grecian Urn

1

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
 Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
 Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
 What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
 What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

BY THE
 EARLY 1800's,
 WESTERN ART
 AND WRITING HAD
 DRIFTED ABOUT AS
 FAR APART AS
 WAS **POSSIBLE**.

ONE WAS
 OBSESSED WITH
RESEMBLANCE,
 LIGHT AND COLOR,
 ALL THINGS
VISIBLE...



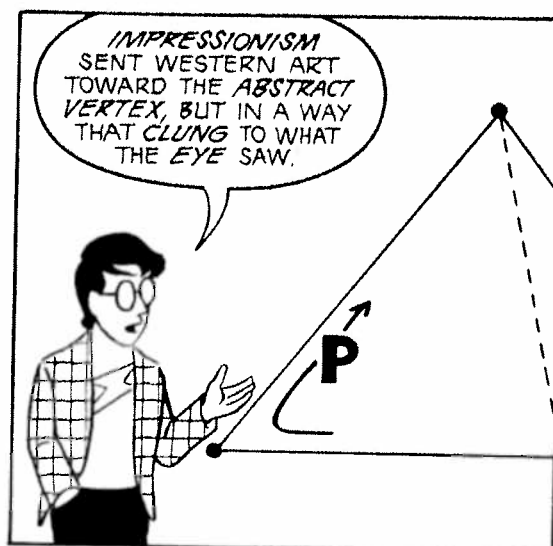
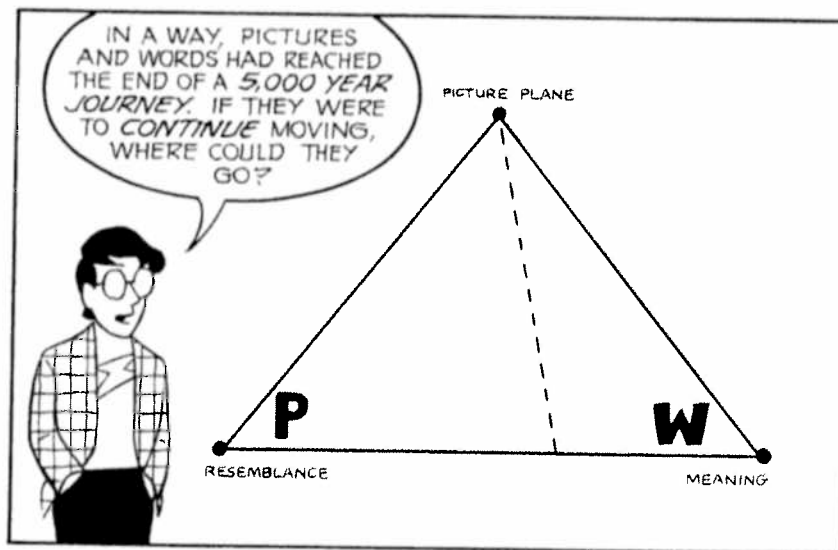
...THE
 OTHER RICH IN
INVISIBLE
 TREASURES,
 SENSES, EMOTIONS,
 SPIRITUALITY,
 PHILOSOPHY...

FIRST STANZA OF KEATS' POEM

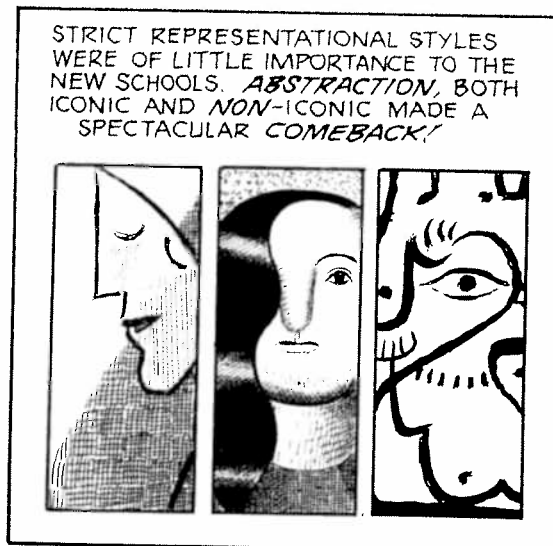
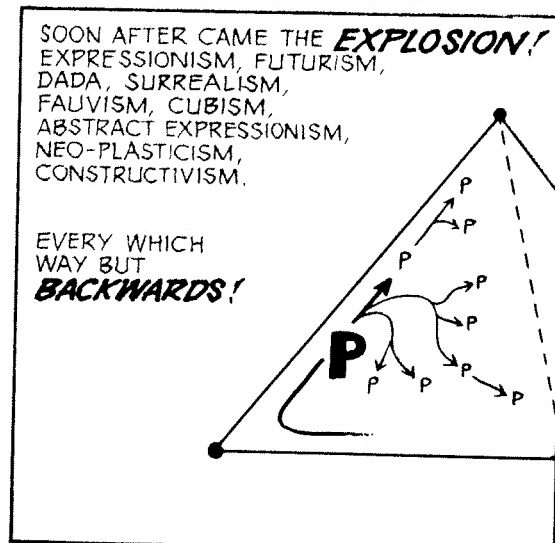
PICTURES
 AND WORDS,
 ONCE **TOGETHER**
 IN THE CENTER OF
 OUR ICONIC
 ABSTRACTION
 CHART, HAVE AT
THIS POINT
 DRIFTED TO
 OPPOSITE
 CORNERS.



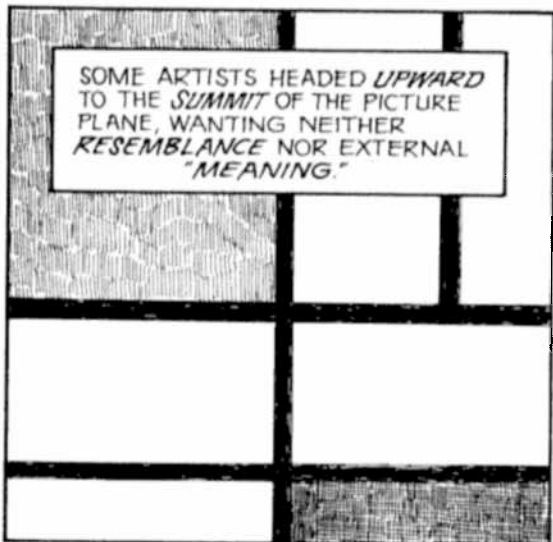
THE **INVISIBLE**
 TREASURES,
 SENSES, EMOTIONS,
 SPIRITUALITY,
 PHILOSOPHY...



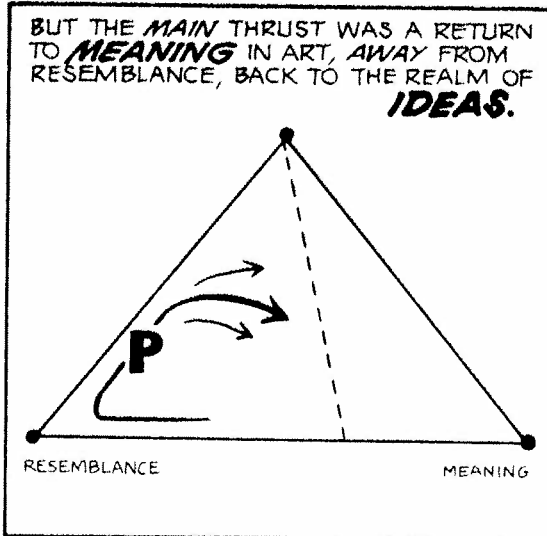
FACSIMILE DETAIL OF "A SUNDAY AFTERNOON ON THE ISLAND OF LA GRANDE JATTE" BY GEORGES SEURAT.



FACSIMILE DETAILS OF PORTRAITS BY PICASSO, LEGER AND KLEE.



SOME ARTISTS HEADED *UPWARD* TO THE *SUMMIT* OF THE PICTURE PLANE, WANTING NEITHER *RESEMBLANCE* NOR EXTERNAL *"MEANING."*



MEANWHILE, THE WRITTEN WORD WAS ALSO CHANGING. POETRY BEGAN *TURNING AWAY* FROM THE ELUSIVE, *TWICE-ABSTRACTED* LANGUAGE OF OLD TOWARD A MORE *DIRECT*, EVEN *COLLOQUIAL*, STYLE.

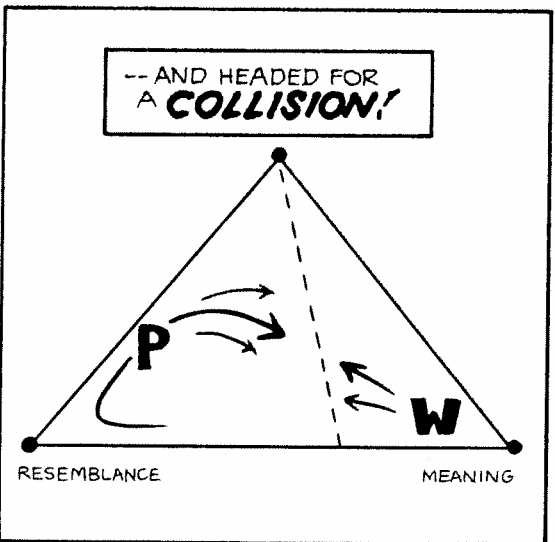
John Keats 1819
Ode on a Grecian Urn

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dale of Arcady?
What men or gods or beasts thy shape is fond to seek?

Walt Whitman 1890
Facing West from California's Shores

Facing west, from California's shores,
Inquiring, tireless, seeking
what is yet unfound,
I, a child, very old, over waves, towards the
house of maternity, the
land of migrations, look afar
Look off the shores of my Western sea, the
circle almost circled:
For starting westward from Hindustan,
from the vales of Kashmere, From Asia,
from the north, from the God, the sage,
and the hero, From the south, from the
flowery peninsulas and the spice islands,
Long having wandered since, round the
earth having wandered,
Now I face home again,
very pleased and joyous;
(But where is what I started for,
so long ago?
And why is it yet unfound?)

IN PROSE, LANGUAGE WAS BECOMING EVEN MORE DIRECT, CONVEYING MEANING *SIMPLY* AND *QUICKLY*, MORE LIKE *PICTURES*.



H'atre MICHEL 40 rue des Mathurins

SOIRÉE

DU CŒUR

une semaine
prolongée
au 7 juillet

ORGANISÉE PAR TCHÉREZ

Location :

Barbès Jean, 25, Bd de la Madeleine
Durand, 4, Place de la Madeleine
Pavlovsky, 15, Rue Soufflot
Au Sans Pareil, 27, Avenue Kléber
Rin, 5, Avenue Lovendal
Paul Godefrume, 65, Rue de Bédou
Librairie Morvan, 27, Bd Montparnasse
Paul Soumberg, 21, Rue de Bédou
et au Théâtre Michel, Tél. : Oct. 65-20

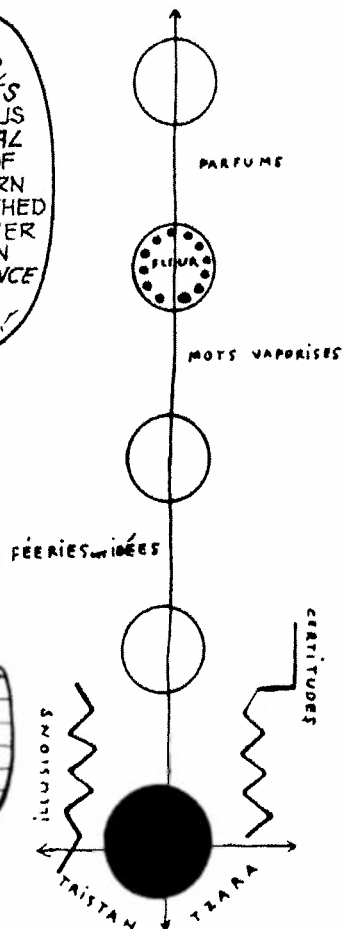
no place de legs 50 fr.
samedi d'orchestre 25 fr.
samedi de balon 15 fr.
1^{er} rang 15 fr.
samedi de balon 15 fr.

DADA POSTER FOR THE PLAY
"THE BEARDED HEART"

Portrait de TRISTAN TZARA

par
FRANCIS PICABIA

THE
WORK OF
DADAISTS,
FUTURISTS
AND VARIOUS
INDIVIDUAL
ARTISTS OF
THE MODERN
ERA BREACHED
THE FRONTIER
BETWEEN
APPEARANCE
AND
MEANING!

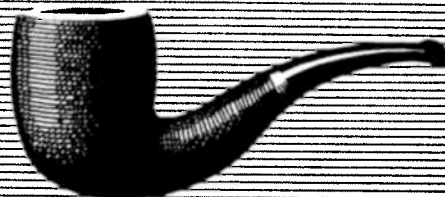


FACSIMILE OF "ORIENTAL SWEETNESS" (1928), BY PAUL KLEE.

PAINTINGS INCREASINGLY TOOK ON
SYMBOLIC, EVEN CALLIGRAPHIC,
MEANINGS...



WHILE SOME ARTISTS ADDRESSED THE
IRONIES OF WORDS AND PICTURES
HEAD-ON!



Ceci n'est pas une pipe.



UP TO THAT POINT, *EUROPEAN BROADSHEETS* HAD OFFERED REMINDERS OF WHAT WORDS AND PICTURES COULD DO WHEN COMBINED.

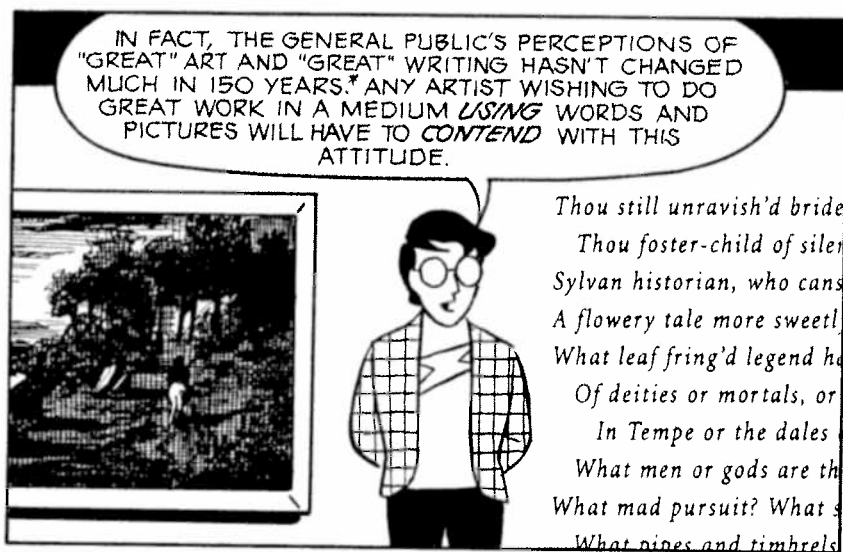
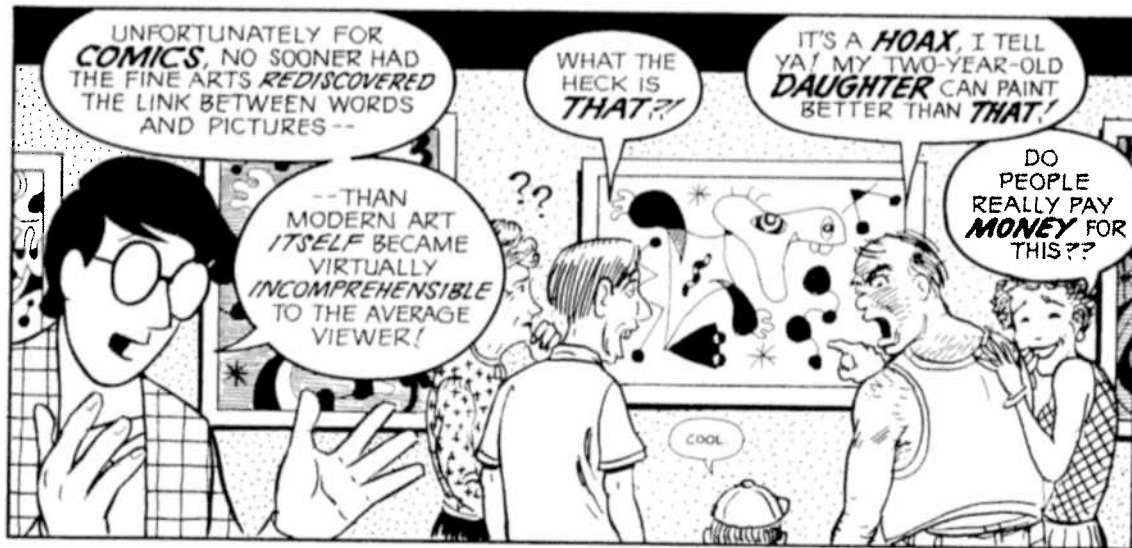
BUT AGAIN IT WAS *RODOLPHE TÖPFFER* WHO FORESAW THEIR *INTERDEPENDENCY* AND BROUGHT THE FAMILY *BACK TOGETHER* AT LAST.



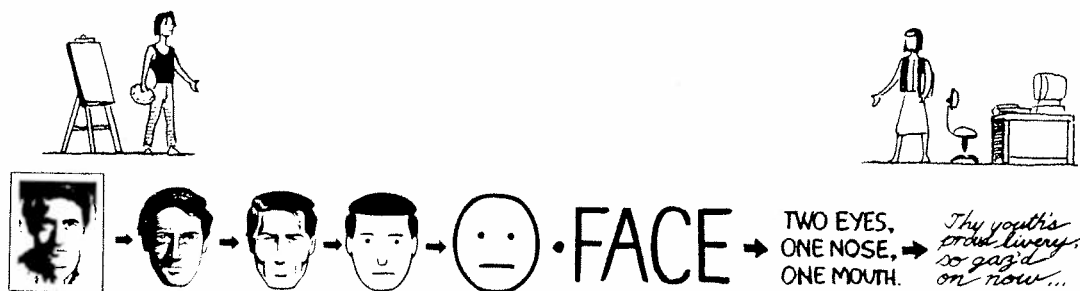
M. CRÉPIN ADVERTISES FOR A TUTOR, AND MANY APPLY FOR THE JOB.

TRANSLATION BY E. WIESE.

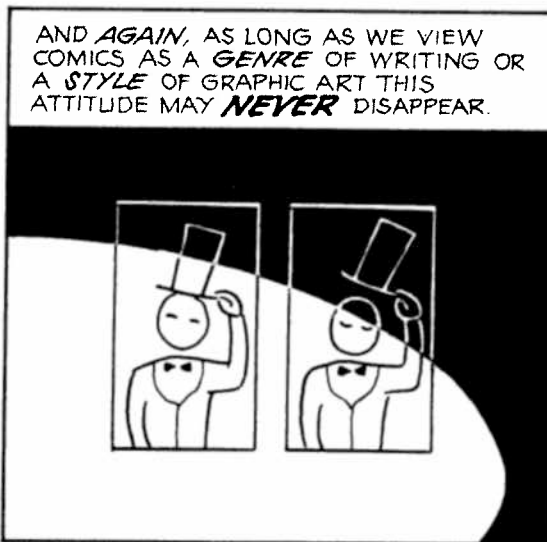
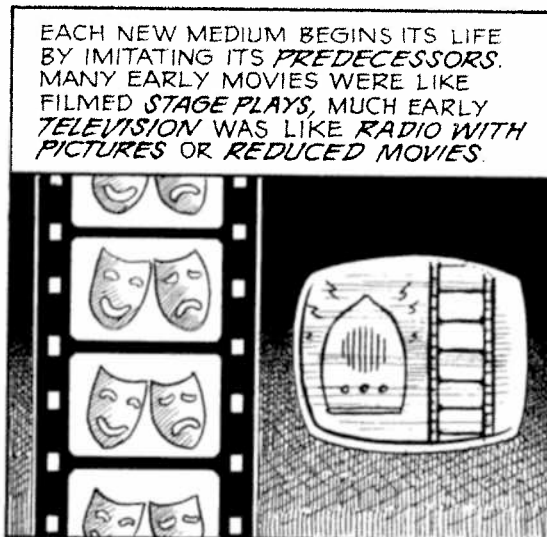
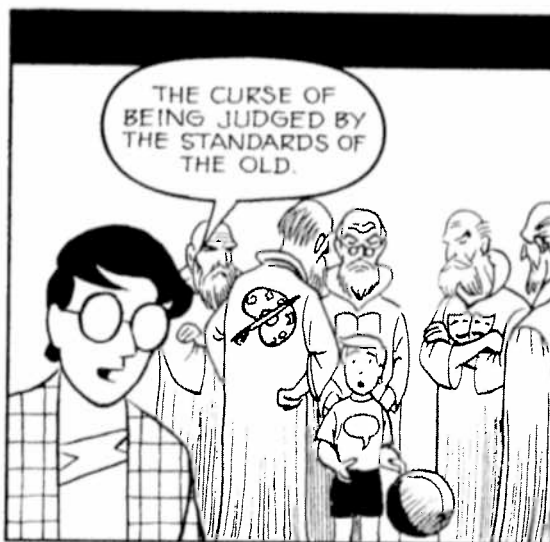
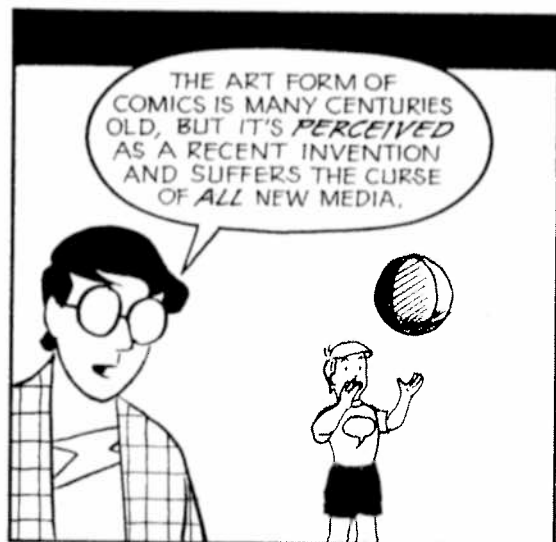




...BECAUSE, DEEP DOWN INSIDE, MANY COMICS CREATORS STILL MEASURE ART AND WRITING BY *DIFFERENT STANDARDS* AND ACT ON THE FAITH THAT "GREAT" ART AND "GREAT" WRITING WILL COMBINE HARMONIOUSLY BY VIRTUE OF *QUALITY ALONE*.



* NOT AS MUCH AS WE LIKE TO THINK IT HAS, ANYWAY.



WORDS AND PICTURES IN COMBINATION MAY NOT BE MY DEFINITION OF COMICS, BUT THE COMBINATION HAS HAD TREMENDOUS INFLUENCE ON ITS GROWTH.

com-ics (kom'iks) *n.* pl. a form, used with a singular, of a series of juxtaposed pictorial images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey an idea and/or to produce a response in the reader. **2.** Superheroes in costumes, fighting villains who want to take over the world, in violent scenes.

A HUGE RANGE OF HUMAN EXPERIENCES CAN BE *PORTRAYED* IN COMICS THROUGH EITHER WORDS OR PICTURES.

AS A RESULT--AND DESPITE ITS MANY *OTHER* POTENTIAL USES -- COMICS HAVE BECOME *FIRMLY IDENTIFIED* WITH THE ART OF *STORYTELLING*.

AND *INDEED*, WORDS AND PICTURES HAVE *GREAT* POWERS TO TELL STORIES WHEN CREATORS FULLY EXPLOIT THEM *BOTH*.

ROMANCE
DADA
HORROR
SURREALISM
HISTORICAL FICTION
FOLK TALES
EROTICA
MYSTERY
RELIGIOUS TOPICS
SATIRE
STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS
ADAPTATIONS
ALLEGORY
SOCIAL
POETRY
EPIC
VERSE
BLANK
SEQUENTIAL ART
BIOGRAPHY

AND SO FAR, WE'VE ONLY SEEN THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG!

AS CHILDREN, WE "SHOW AND TELL" *INTERCHANGEABLY*, WORDS AND IMAGES COMBINING TO TRANSMIT A *CONNECTED SERIES OF IDEAS*.



THE DIFFERENT WAYS IN WHICH WORDS AND PICTURES CAN *COMBINE* IN COMICS IS VIRTUALLY *UNLIMITED*.

BUT LET'S TRY TO BREAK IT DOWN INTO SOME DISTINCT *CATEGORIES*.

FIRST,
WE HAVE THE
WORD SPECIFIC
COMBINATIONS,
WHERE PICTURES
ILLUSTRATE, BUT
DON'T SIGNIFICANTLY
ADD TO A LARGELY
COMPLETE
TEXT.



WE STUMBLED BACK TO THE
APARTMENT SHORTLY BEFORE
DAWN, **VOMITING** EVERY 20
YARDS.



JUDY GAVE ME HER
KEYS AND SMILED.



THE **UNITED STATES**
CONSTITUTION WAS
ADOPTED BY THE
SECOND CONTINENTAL
CONGRESS IN 1787
AND PUT INTO EFFECT
IN 1789.



THEN
THERE ARE
PICTURE SPECIFIC
COMBINATIONS
WHERE WORDS DO
LITTLE MORE THAN
ADD A **SOUNDTRACK**
TO A VISUALLY
TOLD SEQUENCE.



HE
DID
IT!



MMM... MMM...

AND,
OF COURSE,
DUO-SPECIFIC
PANELS IN WHICH
BOTH WORDS AND
PICTURES SEND
ESSENTIALLY
THE **SAME**
MESSAGE.



GRIM-FACED,
GEORGE LIFTED
HIS LOLLYPOP.



BUT THE CAPTAIN'S MIGHTY
BLOW **MISSSES** ITS INTENDED
TARGET!

BLAST! HE
DODGED MY PUNCH AND
I STRUCK THIS **BRICK**
WALL!



HA! I
DODGED
YOU

I FEEL SO SAD!



...THOUGHT AMY.

ANOTHER TYPE IS THE **ADDITIVE** COMBINATION WHERE WORDS **AMPLIFY** OR **ELABORATE** ON AN IMAGE OR **VICE VERSA**.



MY HEAD FEELS LIKE A **SMASHED PUMPKIN!**



HOW D'YA LIKE MY **NEW THREADS, BABE?**



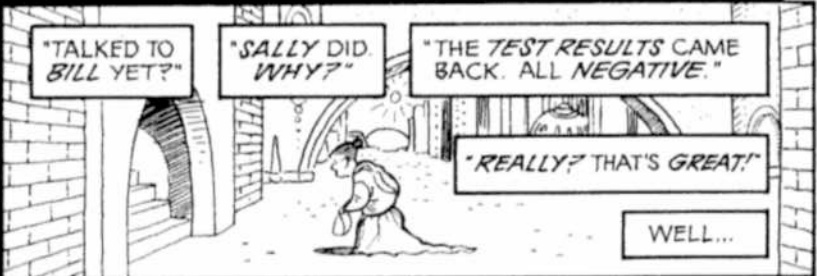
IS THIS THE SAME **JUPITER** OF MY YOUTH?



IN **PARALLEL** COMBINATIONS, WORDS AND PICTURES SEEM TO FOLLOW VERY DIFFERENT COURSES--WITHOUT **INTERSECTING**.



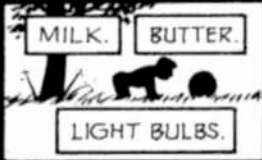
"TALKED TO **BILL** YET?" "SALLY DID. **WHY?**" "THE **TEST RESULTS** CAME BACK. ALL **NEGATIVE**." "REALLY? THAT'S **GREAT!**" WELL...



PEPPER. CEREAL.



MILK. BUTTER. LIGHT BULBS.



STILL ANOTHER OPTION IS THE **MONTAGE** WHERE WORDS ARE TREATED AS INTEGRAL **PARTS** OF THE PICTURE.



CASH FLOW BOTTOM LINE ANNUAL REPORT



HAPPY!



ent the business: her offic... object... any with... stems and... med to be... kept the... superse... appeari... ad bind... ed by... after... not l... by v...

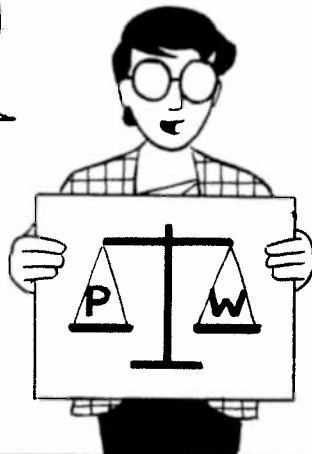


PERHAPS THE MOST COMMON TYPE OF WORD/PICTURE COMBINATION IS THE **INTER-DEPENDENT**, WHERE WORDS AND PICTURES GO **HAND IN HAND** TO CONVEY AN IDEA THAT NEITHER COULD CONVEY ALONE.



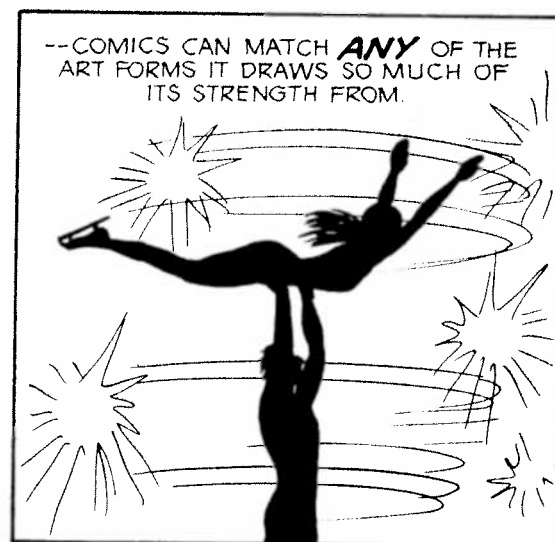
INTERDEPENDENT COMBINATIONS AREN'T ALWAYS AN **EQUAL BALANCE** THOUGH AND MAY FALL **ANYWHERE** ON A SCALE BETWEEN TYPES ONE AND TWO.

P
—
W

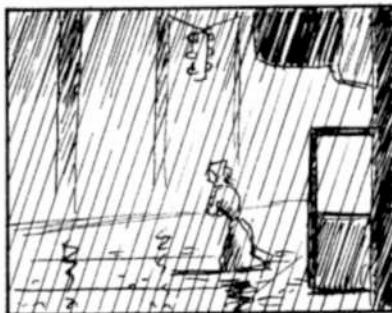
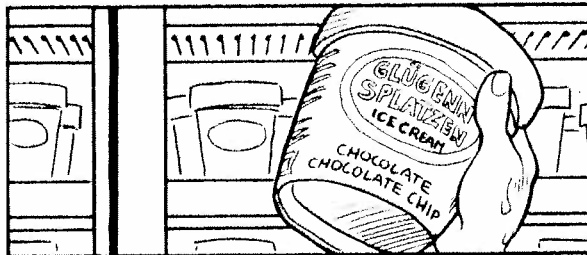
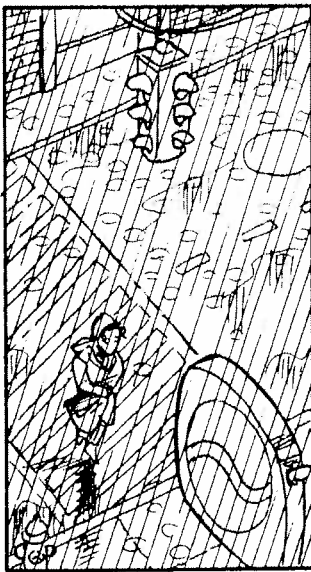
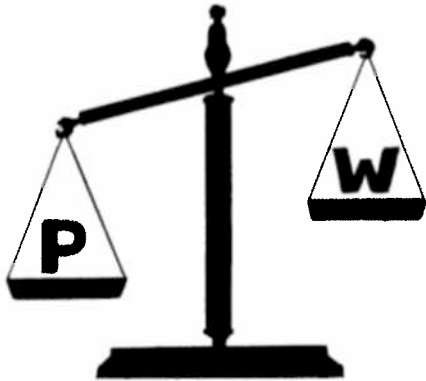


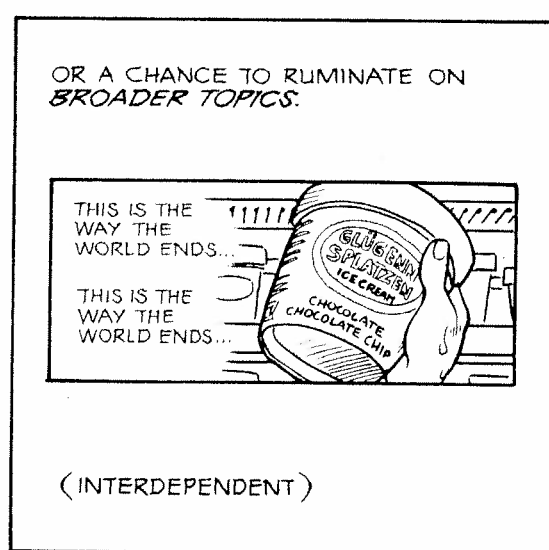
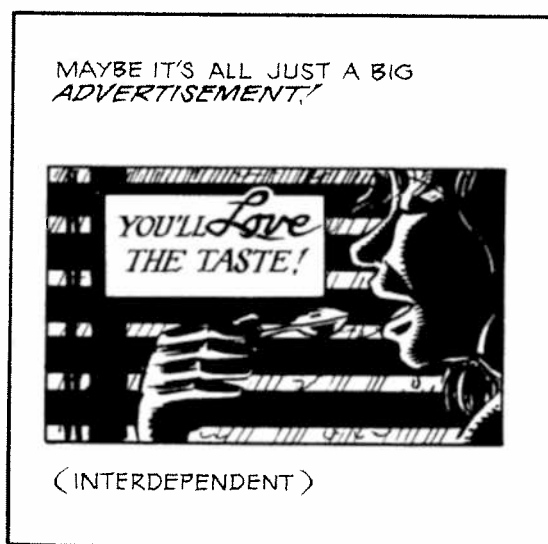
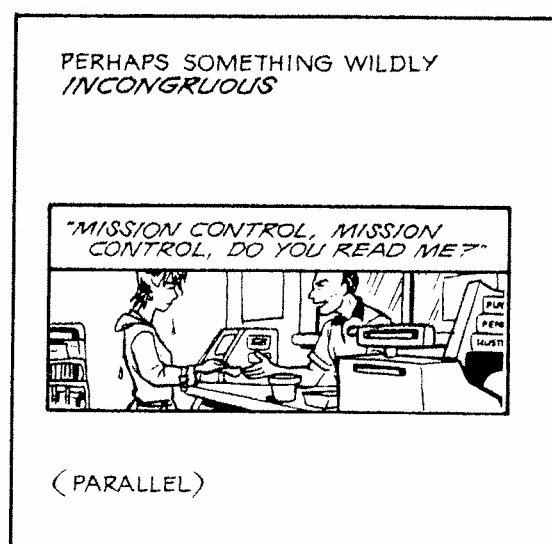
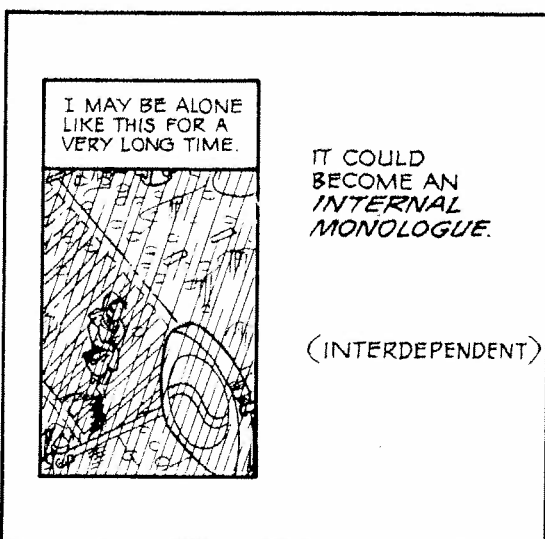
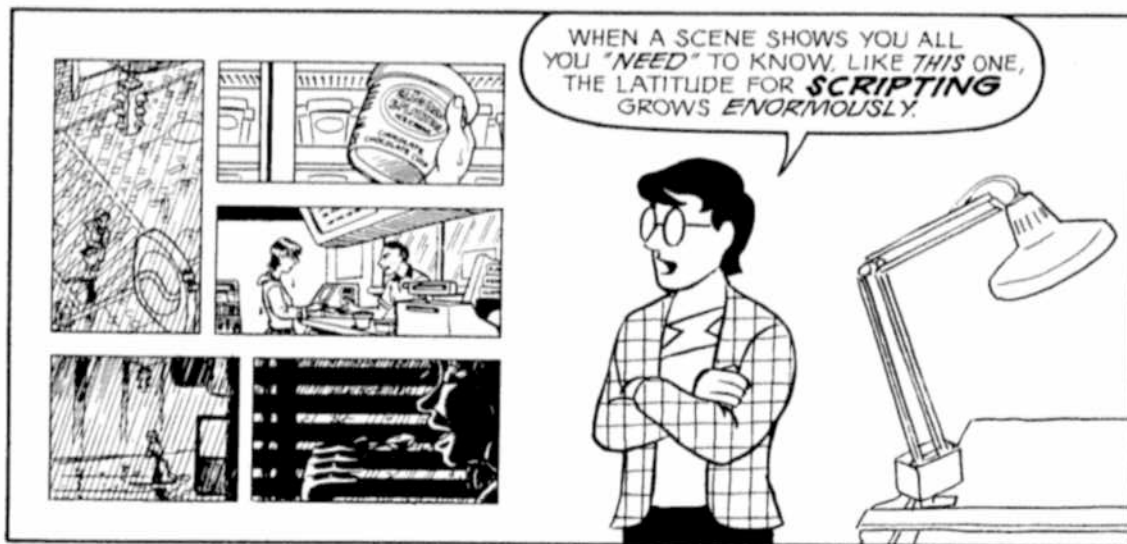
GENERALLY SPEAKING, THE MORE IS SAID WITH **WORDS**, THE MORE THE PICTURES CAN BE FREED TO GO **EXPLORING** AND **VICE VERSA**.

W
—
P

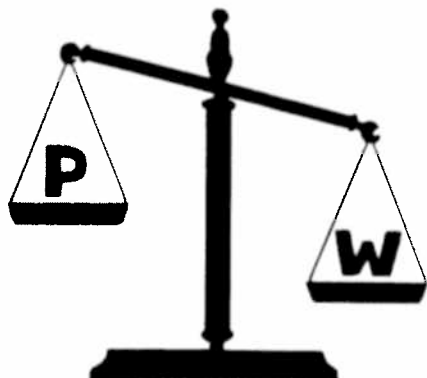


WHEN **PICTURES** CARRY THE WEIGHT OF CLARITY IN A SCENE, THEY FREE WORDS TO EXPLORE A WIDER AREA.





ON THE *OTHER* HAND, IF THE **WORDS** LOCK IN THE "*MEANING*" OF A SEQUENCE, THEN THE *PICTURES* CAN REALLY TAKE OFF.



I CROSSED THE STREET TO THE CONVENIENCE STORE. THE RAIN SOAKED INTO MY BOOTS.

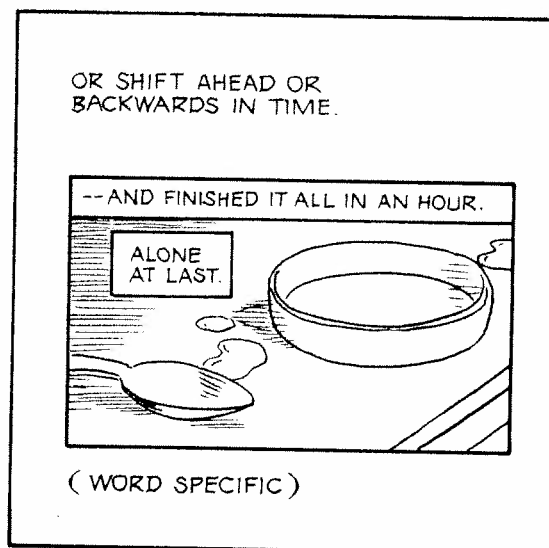
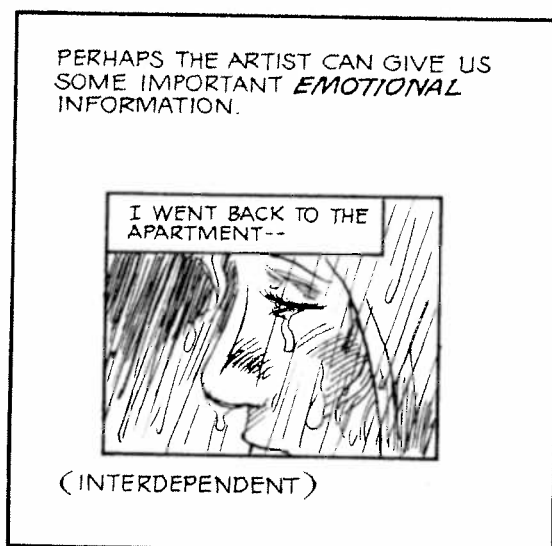
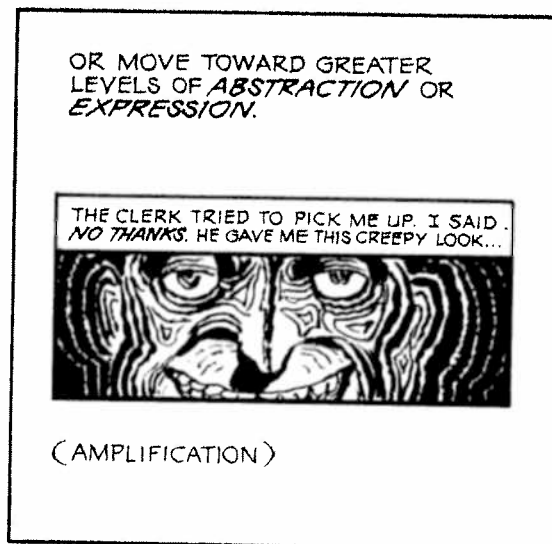
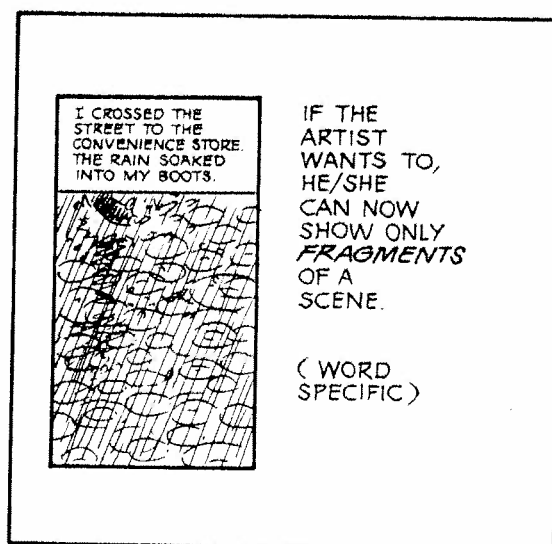
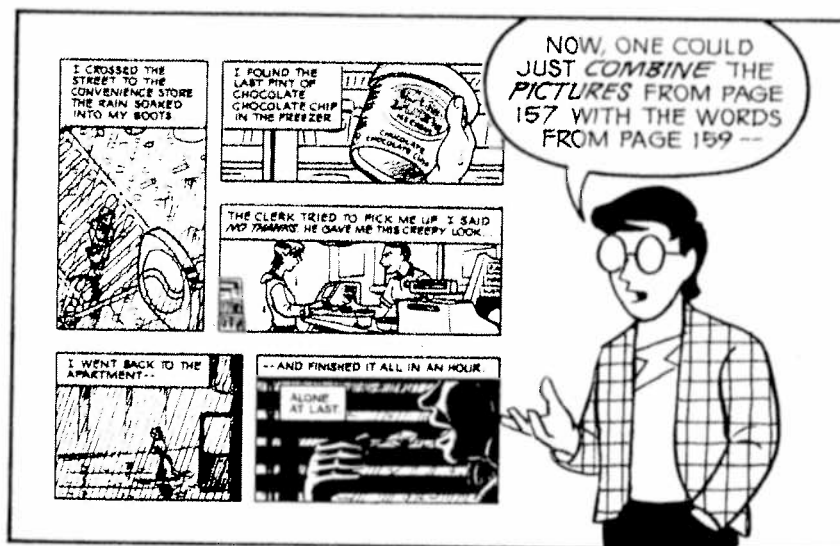
I FOUND THE LAST PINT OF CHOCOLATE CHOCOLATE CHIP IN THE FREEZER.

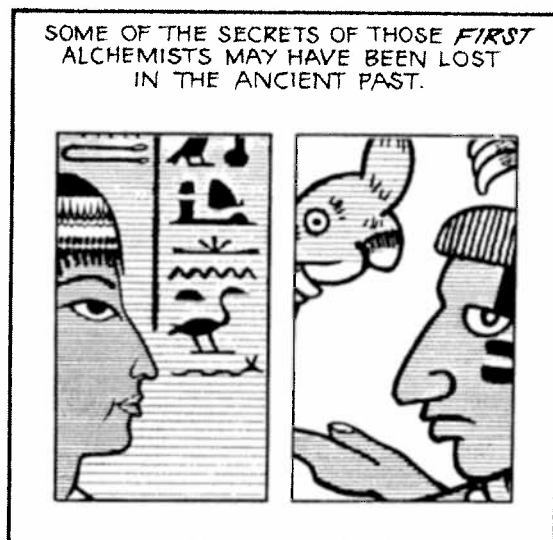
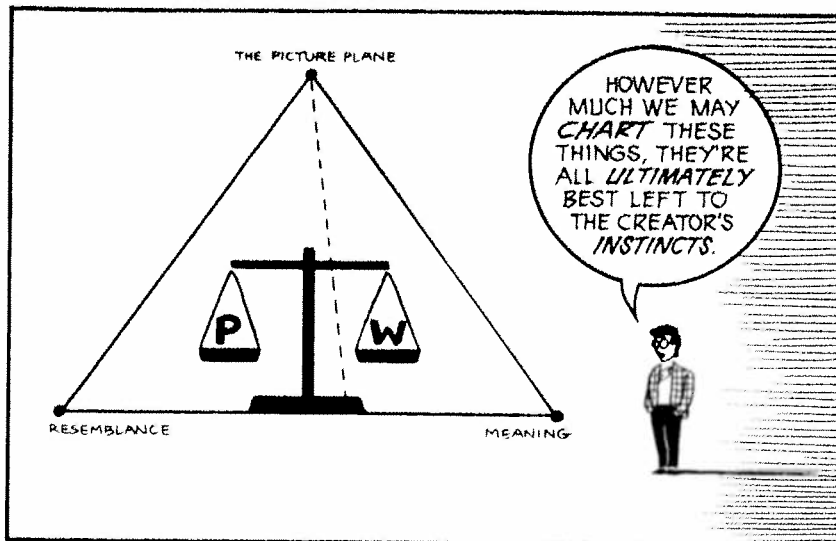
THE CLERK TRIED TO PICK ME UP. I SAID *NO THANKS*. HE GAVE ME THIS CREEPY LOOK...

I WENT BACK TO THE APARTMENT--

--AND FINISHED IT ALL IN AN HOUR.

ALONE AT LAST.





-- WHEN TO TELL WAS TO *SHOW*--



-- AND TO SHOW WAS TO *TELL*.