LIST OF TERMS FOR COMICS STUDIES

Andrei Molotiu

I put together the following list of terms, for the use of my students at Indiana University, Bloomington and at the University of Louisville, over the more than a decade that I have been teaching courses on comics. An earlier, shorter version of it was published in 2006 on the website of the National Association of Comic Art Educators (nacae.org; no longer extant) as part of the syllabus for my course at IU, Art History H 150, "The History of Comic-Book Art." The list is not intended to be exhaustive: I compiled it primarily to be used in connection to my courses, and its emphases (and possible exclusions) reflect my own pedagogical interests. There is a simple explanation for the bold lettering on some of the terms: it indicated to my students the notions for which they were responsible on their exams.

The list was put together mostly from notions in common use in the comics industry, terms in Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (which I used as a textbook), terms adapted from film and literary studies, and new terms I have introduced myself for notions that seemed particularly important in my teaching. In a couple of further instances, the sources of terms are credited in the body of the entry. To the best of my knowledge, the formulations of all definitions, as written, are my own. For this publication, I have also incorporated into some of the definitions more detailed discussions based on my lecture notes.

I teach in an art history department, and have also used in discussing the art of comics many art-historical terms such as "chiaroscuro," "baroque," "idealization," etc. As these are not specific to comics, I have not included them in the list.

Not in the list but probably worth noting is a more general term I find myself using, especially, in exam questions: "visual-narrative device." I tend to employ it to encompass most of the concepts below, referring to the artistic choices made by comics creators in transforming a bare-bones plot into a finished comic-strip or comic-book. (So an exam question might ask: "Analyze formally the storytelling in this comic strip. What are the most important visual-narrative devices used by the artist?" And the students might be expected to identify and discuss the usage of held-framing sequences, word/image irony, sequential dynamism, or what have you.)

I. BASIC TERMS

Writer, penciller, inker, colorist, letterer, editor

Panel, border, gutter, caption, speech balloon, thought balloon, balloon **tail**, **tier** of panels, **sound effects**

II. GRAPHIC STYLE, RENDERING, AND VISUAL SYMBOLISM

Cartooning. The simplification of shapes, for purposes of communication, humor, etc., in comic-strip and comic-book visual language. According to McCloud, cartooning tends toward generalization and helps identification. Can be contrasted with more **naturalist** rendering styles, the most extreme of which are often dubbed **photorealist** (not to be confused with Photorealism in the visual arts). Note: the level of simplification need not be homogenous within a cartoon. This can be seen in McCloud's notion of the **masking effect** (cartoony characters in more naturalist settings), but the degree of cartooning can also vary from character to character, and between different renderings of the same character, which might be placed at different points in

McCloud's triangle. More simplified, "cartoony" styles also allow for the easier inclusion of (non-diegetic) symbols, such as emanata, within the image. Doing so is more difficult when working in a photorealist style.

Caricature. In the graphic arts, the exaggeration of specific traits in the depiction of an individual, a social or ethnic type, etc., in order to facilitate recognition and to convey character or the artist's (often ideologically-influenced) perception of the depicted figure.

Inflected (brush or pen) line. Line that changes in thickness depending on how much pressure was applied to the drawing tool.

Ligne Claire. Rendering style associated with the Belgian school of comics, and more specifically with the work of Hergé and his followers, defined by the use of homogenous (uninflected) line weights for the outlines of all figures and objects depicted; other characteristics usually include the clarity and easy readability of the panel compositions, and a relatively homogenous degree of cartooning in the figures.

Feathering. A means of suggesting grey areas within a black-and-white drawing with the help of parallel inflected strokes, forming a comb-like or saw-tooth effect.

Types of visual signs (from Charles Sanders Peirce):

Icon. Visual sign that functions by resemblance. The rendering of most figures and objects visible within the diegesis is iconic. Icons can be said to have a "natural" connection to the things they stand for, and therefore are "motivated signs."

Symbol. Visual sign that functions by convention. Letters are symbols for the signs they stand for, just as most words (other than, say, onomatopoeia) are symbols for the objects and concepts they represent. The connection between symbolic signs and the things they denote is purely conventional, therefore arbitrary (not "motivated"). In comics, most elements rendered within the space of the panel that would not be visible in a snapshot of the diegesis tend to be symbolic: for example text and emanata.

Index. Visual sign that functions by physical connection or contiguity. Plural: **indices**. Examples of indices are fingerprints or shoeprints (traces), or arrows pointing in a direction or toward a destination (indicators). In comics, indices include: brushstrokes (i.e., traces of the artist's hand); arrows that guide the direction of reading; and even, arguably, word balloon tails indicating which character is speaking.

Icons, symbols and indices roughly correspond, respectively, to Scott McCloud's triangular schema of Reality, Meaning, and the Picture Plane (See Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, ch. 2.)

Emanata. Various graphic signs used in comics to convey information that goes beyond what could be perceived visually in the diegesis: e.g. sweat beads (for fear or anxiety), light bulb (for idea), etc. So named because they usually "emanate" from the head or body of a character. Emanata can suggest psychological or emotional states, sounds, smells, physical impact, etc. Emanata function primarily as symbolic signs added to the iconic signs that denote the visual diegesis. (Term first introduced, in a much more restricted sense, by cartoonist Mort Walker in his *Lexicon of Comicana*, 1980; the term has gained its wider meaning as it has been used in the comics industry and in academic comics studies.)

Motion lines. Graphic signs that can indicate an object's or figure's momentum of movement (**momentum lines**), or the path described (**trajectory lines**).

III. FRAMING AND WORD-IMAGE INTERACTION

Diegesis. The represented (whether fictional or real) world of the story, in narrative comics; adj. **diegetic**.

Extradiegetic. Adjective applied to elements of the comic that do not belong to the diegesis; for example, the narrator addressing the reader directly, the space of the gutters, etc.

Composition. The distribution of pictorial shapes across the surface of an image; as used here, primarily across the surface of a panel or a page. One can also speak of three-dimensional composition, the distribution of masses within a represented three-dimensional space.

Framing. The set of choices made by the artist in isolating a part of the diegesis to illustrate in one panel. Such choices include, but are not restricted to:

Distance of framing. The implied distance of the represented figures, objects or events from the viewer. Terms for specifying distance of framing include: **long shot, medium shot, close-up, extreme close-up, extreme long shot**, etc.

Angle of framing. The implied height of the viewing position in relationship to the represented scene. Terms for specifying angle of framing include: **straight-on angle (eye-level framing), high angle (bird's eye view), low angle (worm's eye view)**.

Canted framing. Framing in which the horizon (whether visible or not) of the represented diegesis is at an angle to the horizontal of the page.   Note: geometric perspective in non-canted framing often results in the tilting of the represented verticals away from the vertical of the page. Such instances do not necessarily constitute canted framing.

Depth of field. The span of distances of framing covered by figures or objects within one panel. Terms for specifying depth of field include: **shallow focus** (everything shown is at approximately the same distance from the implied viewer); **deep focus** (elements of the diegesis at varied distances from the implied viewer can all be seen clearly; for this reason, some panels with deep-focus framing may not be easily defined in terms of distance of framing).

Point-of-view framing. Framing that reproduces or approximates what one character sees.

Montage Panel. Panel that combines several iconographic elements that otherwise do not belong together in the same spatial relationship; can represent psychological state or conceptual (extradiegetic) space.

Figures of Substitution. Sometimes, characters in a panel are not represented in full, or their presence is indicated only by objects associated with them. Substitution can usually be judged by comparing the stated (in the caption or balloon text) or implied narrative import of the panel with its visual content. Categories of substitution include: **Metonymy** (substitution by association; for example, "batarangs" standing in for Batman); **Synecdoche** (part for whole; for example, only the

hand or foot of a character is shown); and **Metaphor** (by simile; for example, in *Lone Wolf and Cub* an actual wolf and cub may stand in for the human characters).

Types of word-image juxtaposition (adapted and simplified from McCloud) include: **word-dominant** (the narrative content of the panel is fully contained in the caption and balloon text; the visuals represent only a part of it); **image-dominant** (the narrative content of the panel is fully contained in the visuals; the text represents only a part of it); **redundant** (the text and the visuals contain the same narrative content, which is presented, as it were, twice over); **inter-dependent** (the text and the visuals contain different pieces of narrative information which add up to the representation of a unified event); **disjunctive** (the text and the visuals contain different pieces of narrative information referring to two or more parallel events; related to the notion of "polyphony"); and **ironic** (see below).

Word/image irony. Visual-narrative device whereby the text and the visuals in a panel or sequence of panels contain clearly contradictory information about the same event.

IV. BETWEEN PANELS

McCloud's different **types of panel-to-panel transition**:

Moment-to-moment. This category, as named by McCloud, is problematic, inasmuch as it is hard to distinguish, based on name alone, between it and action-to-action transitions in cases where the actions happen to be very close together in time. Based on the examples McCloud gives, it is better to think of this as **transition on continuing action**. To put it otherwise: panel 1, subject x performs action A; panel 2, subject x continues to perform action A (albeit in panel 2, subject x is usually shown at a later point in the performance of the action, at least if there is to be a difference between panel 1 and panel 2). For example: panel 1: character opens door; door is ajar; panel 2: character keeps opening door; door is more widely open now. Such transitions on continuing action often are associated with **held-framing sequences**.

Action-to-action. Panel 1: character x performs action A; panel 2: character x performs action B.

Subject-to-subject. Panel 1: character x performs action A; panel 2: character y performs action B. (Note: action B here may be identical to action A.)

Scene-to-scene. Transitions indicating significant changes of location or gaps in time.

Aspect-to-aspect. Transitions between panels that show various views of the same scene, when no actions performed by characters are clearly depicted.

Note: the above categories apply only to narrative, representational comics; using terms such as "moment," "aspect," or "scene" automatically implies diegetic time and space. "Action" and "subject" imply characters acting within that space. Many transitions in non-diegetic comics (not just experimental comics, but even educational, expository comics such as McCloud's *Understanding Comics* itself) are not covered by these five categories.

The five categories are also insufficient for the accurate description of many transitions in narrative comics. For example, in sequences that feature more than one character, some characters may continue to perform the same action from panel 1 to panel 2, while others perform

different actions. Similarly, a transition from a panel featuring two characters to a panel featuring only one of the characters often falls somewhere between "action-to-action" and "subject-to-subject."

Many sequences in comics show characters delivering monologues that continue across several panels. In such cases, would the transitions qualify as "moment-to-moment" (because the character continues to talk), or as "action-to-action" (because the character, presumably, says something different in panel 2 than in panel 1)? A new category of **transition within speech** is probably necessary.

Staying within narrative comics, we also encounter transitions from panels representing diegetic space to montage panels (q.v.) representing psychological or conceptual space, as well as transitions in the opposite direction. Such transitions are not covered by the above five categories. Again, a new category, of **transition to/from a montage panel**, seems necessary.

Non-sequitur. This sixth category proposed by McCloud is defined by him only negatively, and may even seem paradoxical as a category of panel transitions in sequential art, given that "non sequitur" translates from the Latin as "does not follow." At times it seems to be nothing but a catch-all for any transitions that do not fit the previous five categories. As such, I would counsel against its use as a label. Transitions that, based on McCloud's examples, might fit this category can be found in experimental and abstract comics. In all those cases, however, it is better to analyze closely the panels and their larger artistic context to understand how the transition actually does function.

Sequence. A series of consecutive panels united by a common narrative thread.

Shot/Reverse-Shot Sequence. In a two-character scene, the alternation of panels focusing first on one character, then on the other.

Crosscutting. The alternation within one sequence of scenes taking place in different locales. These scenes are usually, though not always, simultaneous. "Installments" of each scene may be as short as one panel.

Held-Framing Sequence. A sequence of panels characterized by the same or closely similar framings of the background, in which only the characters change from panel to panel.

Pan Sequence (a.k.a. Panoramic Breakdown). A sequence of panels that divides an otherwise unified diegetic space, which continues from panel to panel and can be seen "behind" the gutters, as it were; usually occupies one tier of panels.

Following Pan Sequence. Pan sequence in which the same character recurs in every panel, as if traversing the represented diegetic space.

Tilt Sequence, Following Tilt Sequence. Like "pan sequence" and "following pan sequence," but vertical rather than horizontal.

Montage Sequence. Sequence of panels meant to be read quickly, almost simultaneously, to suggest a unified action or a unified idea or concept. Not to be confused with "montage panel."

Polyphony. As applied to comics, the inherent ability of the medium to juxtapose two or more simultaneous narrative threads (be they visual, verbal, or both) in one panel or from panel to panel; the artistic exploitation of this potential.

V. LARGER STRUCTURES

Breakdown. The division of the plotline into separate incidents, "moments," or narrative beats, each of which is to be illustrated in one panel.

Compressed storytelling. Occurs when the plotline is broken down into fewer narrative beats/panels; consequently each panel contains a larger fraction of the narrative.

Decompressed storytelling. Reverse of the above. The plot is broken down into more narrative beats/panels; often shows a higher incidence of moment-to-moment and aspect-to-aspect transitions.

Layout. The formal arrangement of panels within the space of the page. Varieties include **Simple Story Layout** (grid-shaped, panels arranged in tiers); **Complex Story Layout** (panels are no longer simply rectangular, some may have irregular shapes; places more emphasis on the formal unity of page, iconostasis); and **Poster Layout** (layout that moves toward the breakdown of panel borders, presenting the entire page as single image).
     Note: the term "layouts" is also used in the industry to indicate rough sketches of a comic's pages, preliminary to the penciling stage.

Encrustation. Effect obtained when panels appear to be layered over each other (from Groensteen, *The System of Comics*).

Splash Page. A single-panel page. Often the title page (for which, indeed, the terms was originally reserved), in which case it may be used for the depiction of a crucial story moment out of narrative continuity, for a montage panel symbolic of the story's themes, etc.

Iconic solidarity. Term introduced by Thierry Groensteen (in *The System of Comics*) to indicate that comic panels are never read purely by themselves, but in the context of all other contiguous panels in the layout.

Iconostasis. The perception of the layout of a comics page as a unified composition. Prompts us not so much to scan the comics from panel to panel in a linear direction of reading, but to take it in at a glance, the way we might take in an abstract painting. The tendency of a comic to suggest to its readers an iconostatic rather than simply sequential reading can be dubbed **iconostatization**.

Sequential Dynamism. The formal visual energy, created by compositional and other elements internal to each panel and by the layout, that in a comic propels the reader's eye from panel to panel and from page to page, and that imparts a sense of sustained or varied visual rhythms, sometimes along the predetermined left-to-right, top-to-bottom path of reading, other ties by creating alternate paths.

Note: breakdown and layout choices, including sequential dynamism and emphasis upon iconic solidarity and iconostatization, influence the panel-to-panel and page-to-page **timing** of comics reading.

VI. TRADITIONAL SYSTEMS OF COMIC-BOOK PRODUCTION

Note: the following are stereotypical instances of such "systems." In practice there were numerous small variations upon the basic structure of each. Practices have changed greatly since much of the art production has gone digital, but the traditional systems are still useful to consider as conceptualizations of the creative process in comics.

Early studio system:

Entire finished stories were contracted by the publishing company from one creator or from a writer/artist team. One artist was nominally responsible for everything in the art (other than the color separations, which were done by the publisher in-house or at the printing company). Hired assistants could help, but their tasks were not usually clearly differentiated or defined (and they received no credit for their work).

DC system:

1) editorial committee (editor, writer, etc.) produces plot
2) based on plot, writer creates detailed, panel-by-panel script (*breakdowns and much of the layout are created at this stage—by the writer*)
3) based on script, penciller pencils comic
4) pencilled pages go to letterer, who renders in ink the panel frames, word and thought balloons, caption boxes, all text and sound effects
5) pages now go to inker, who inks rest of the images
6) inked pages are photographed. On photostat of pages, colorist roughs out the colors. Based on that, color separations are created
7) comic is printed in four colors, CMYK. K stands for "key color," which is usually black, and is based on inked pages. C, M and Y stand for the cyan, magenta and yellow separations.

Marvel system:

1) editorial committee produces plot (note: editor and writer on most 'sixties Marvel titles was Stan Lee, who invented this system. After a while, artists like Jack Kirby or Steve Ditko would come up with plots without consulting Lee.)
2) based on plot, penciller pencils entire issue. (*breakdowns and layouts are created at this stage—by the artist*)
3) pencilled pages go back to writer, who dialogues issue.
4), etc. pages then go to letter, inker, etc. as at D.C.

EC system (Al Feldstein-edited titles):

1) editor/writer creates detailed, panel-by-panel script (*breakdowns created at this stage*)
2) script goes to letterer, who puts in panel frames, balloons, etc., and letters text mechanically (*page layouts created at this stage, based on writer's indications*)
3) pages go to artist (who usually both pencils and inks), who places art within predetermined panel frames
4), etc. on to coloring, etc., as above

EC system (Harvey Kurtzman-edited titles):

1) editor/writer writes script, creates detailed penciled layouts that incorporate full script
2) artist creates comic based on editor's layouts
3), etc. on to coloring, etc., as above

AFTERWORD: A FEW NOTES ON INDIVIDUAL TERMS

I discussed the terms "sequential dynamism" and "iconostasis" in several scholarly lectures over the years, and published them in the chapter I contributed to Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan's *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theory and Methods* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012).

I will further explore my take on "cartooning" in my contribution to the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Comics*.

My definition of "polyphony" as it applies to the comics medium, probably borrowed from the 2006 version of this list on nacae.org, was used verbatim, without attribution, in a 2010 monograph. I have since discussed this issue with that monograph's author and have been assured that, were a second edition of it to be published, the passage in question would be put in quotation marks and attributed to me. (I only mention this to avoid the erroneous perception that it was I who borrowed it from that author without giving due credit.)

As far as I know, the distinction between "momentum motion lines" and "trajectory motion lines" originates with me, as do the following terms and notions proposed here: the additional categories of panel-to-panel transitions; the adaptation and simplification of McCloud's types of word/image interaction; terms such as "pan sequence" and "following pan sequence" (my adaptations of the notion of "pan" and "following pan" from cinema studies); and the idea of a "held-framing sequence." More generally, I arrived at the idea to conceptualize such notions in terms of "framing" rather than "camera" after struggling for several years with the difficulty of phrasing comics-specifics parameters in cinema-studies terms. I don't know if this phrasing was used before I suggested it, but I welcome any references to such earlier usage.

The discussion of the various systems of comic-book production has been put together from numerous pieces of evidence, including but not limited to comics-industry lore, statements by comics creators, letter columns, and the analysis of production materials, including scripts, original art, coloring guides, and color separations.