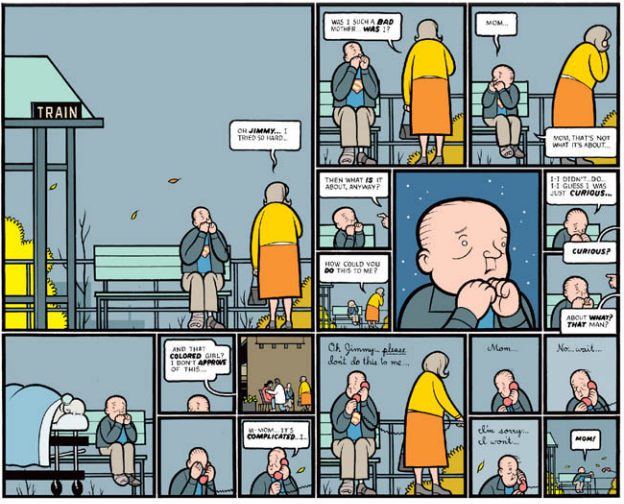

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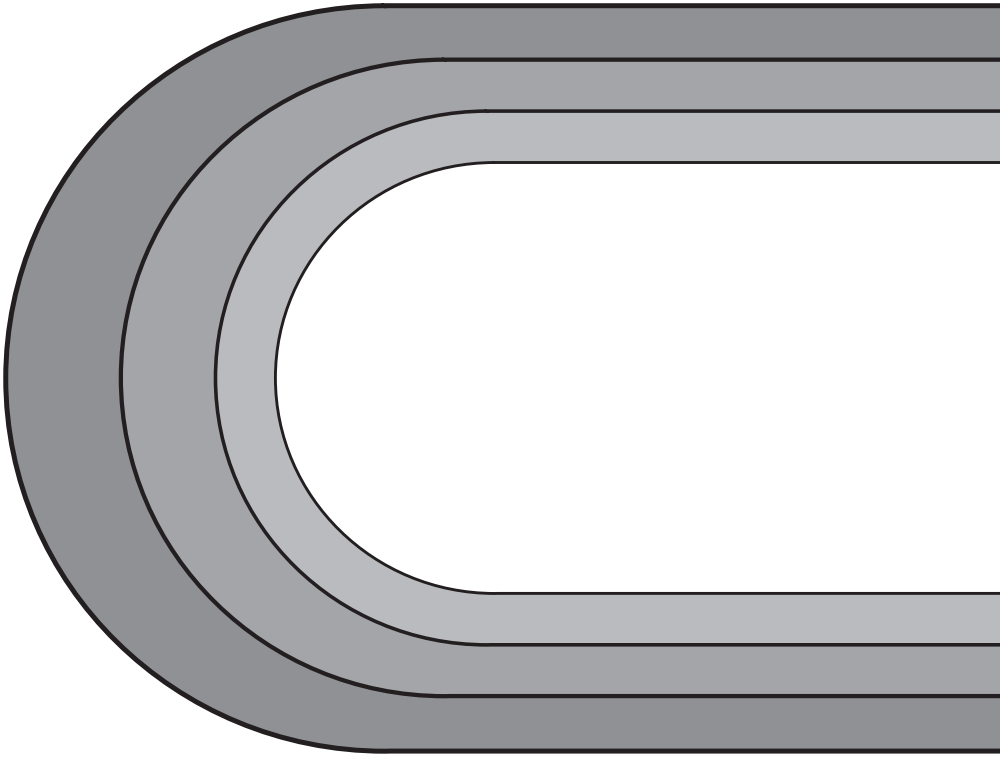

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TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

Bande dessinée et narration: Système de la bande dessinée 2,[1] published in the original French in 2011, is the long-awaited follow-up to Thierry Groensteen's seminal *Système de la bande dessinée*, written in 1999,[2] in which he embarked on the project of defining the fundamental resources deployed by comics for the production of meaning and aesthetic effects. By making underlying systems visible, Groensteen was able to shed light on the spatial operations of layout and articulation that conditioned the activity of the reader. He now builds on and expands that analysis, refining the concepts set out in *Système 1* by bringing them to bear on new material. He acknowledges the increasingly transnational nature of comics culture by moving beyond the mainly Franco-Belgian corpus on which he had drawn in the first volume and exploring innovative currents that blur and extend the boundaries of the medium, such as abstract comics, digital comics, and shōjo manga. In so doing, he shows how the comics apparatus is put to work by virtuoso practitioners across a spectrum from mainstream to experimental.

In addition, major chapters are devoted to two areas that were not covered in *Système 1*, the question of the narrator and the nature of rhythm in comics: here Groensteen maps out the theoretical terrain rigorously and comprehensively. The value of his approach becomes self-evident through the insights that it affords into the expressive power of artists as disparate as André Franquin, Robert Crumb, and Chris Ware, and, more generally, into evolutionary tendencies such as the recent move away from uniformity of graphic style in the work of exponents like David Mazzucchelli and Fabrice Neaud. In his final chapter, Groensteen poses the question of the relationship of comics to contemporary art: historically the latter has disdained the former, while plundering its resources, formal and thematic, but more recently certain comics artists have chosen to exhibit their work in galleries. The argument returns to the question of narration as Groensteen considers the most exciting work currently being produced by comics artists.

Groensteen also explores theoretical advances made over a decade during which more critical ink has flowed than ever before. He alludes to important work by many French-language researchers, most notably Thierry Smolderen and Harry Morgan, both of whom have offered re-readings of the history of the medium, critiquing approaches that discern only a straightforward evolution towards its present forms and functions, and Jean-Christophe Menu, whose concern, as both artist and theorist, is to investigate the potential of comics, including possibilities as yet unrealized. Groensteen is equally familiar with comics scholarship in English: he engages with the work of Scott McCloud and Douglas Wolk, among others. He also points to recently developing approaches such as the study of comics within media theory, adaptation theory, cultural studies, or cognitive science, all valid, he recognizes, even if it is the task of understanding how the medium works that is primary.

Groensteen himself has hardly been slacking in between the publication of *Système 1* and *Système 2*, having produced a series of books that examine comics from a variety of angles, encompassing analyses of formal features and mechanisms, historical studies of the medium as a whole and of particular genres, and reflections on cultural positioning, as well as a superb textbook. This prolific output (to which should be added a plethora of articles and exhibition catalogues) has been achieved in parallel to his other activities as lecturer, publisher, and curator, not to mention indefatigable traveler, promoter of dialogue and debate on every continent. However, it is with this volume of the *Système* that he completes his general theory of the medium.

Readers of *Système 1* will know that Groensteen's approach, semiotic in the broadest sense, is not to be equated with a dry exercise in taxonomy: on the contrary, it is the pleasures of comics that provide the starting point for his analysis, and, equipped with the rich conceptual framework that he offers, we return to comics as better, subtler, and more demanding readers. Groensteen's prose is elegant and highly readable, maintaining its lucidity however complex or detailed the point being made. The difference between French and English syntax patterns means that it is not easy for the translator to replicate the style of the original, and the text may seem a little clumsy in places as a result. Certain words pose particular problems: "bande dessinée" is an obvious example. I have used "comics" throughout, usually as a singular noun. I have not attempted to harmonize my translation with that of my *System 1* predecessors, Bart Beaty and David Nguyen, not wanting to risk any further stylistic clashes, but where the text refers back to *Système 1*, the endnote gives the page numbers of both the original

French text and its translated version. This will, I hope, facilitate the continuing debates that this book is bound to provoke and nourish among scholars in both linguistic communities.

Finally, I would like to thank two people: Laurence Grove, whose translation of an earlier version of Chapter 5 appeared in *European Comic Art* 3.1 (Spring 2010), and helped me to solve some tricky problems, and Malcolm Hope, who read through every chapter and made valuable suggestions.

COMICS AND NARRATION

INTRODUCTION

The System of Comics, published in the original French in 1999 and in English translation in 2007, set out to theorize the foundations of the language of comics. This theory was macrosemiotic in its scope: it was not concerned with the details of single images, but with the articulation of images within the space of the page and across that of the book as a whole. The principle of *iconic solidarity* was shown to be applicable to three major operations: breakdown, page layout, and braiding. The book had the further aim of describing the formal apparatus through which meaning is produced, emphasizing the extent to which aesthetic and semantic considerations were interwoven. The image was defined as utterable, describable, interpretable and, ultimately, appreciable—all adjectives that put the accent on the active participation of the reader in the construction of meaning and in the assessment of the work.

Over the twelve years that have elapsed since then, understanding of comics has moved forward. Advances in scholarship have been particularly noteworthy in relation to the history of the medium, largely due to the illuminating research of Thierry Smolderen into the history of the speech balloon,[1] and into competing conceptions of page layout in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[2] This research has been brought together by the author in the form of a thick and beautifully illustrated volume published in 2009 called *Naissances de la bande dessinée*.[3] Smolderen is the first historian to have shown how cartoons served as the "laboratory" wherein comic art was forged, and how comics have subsequently been constantly redefined through "contact with society, with its media, its images and its technologies," leading up to the production of "an (open) family of graphic dialects." He sheds light on the circumstances that led the medium to adopt, in turn, the model of progressive plot structure, tabular page layout, the "cute" aesthetic, decomposition of movement and facial expressions, and the speech balloon as "visual sound track."

As a result, Jean-Christophe Menu's rightful desire that a "*critical history* of the *language* of comics, rather than a history of its best-sellers"[4] should be written, seems, in fact, to have already been partially realized. There remains, however, the task of completing the undertaking in relation to the twentieth century. As things stand, Smolderen stopped after McCay just as, before him, David Kunzle, starting from 1450, had only pursued his investigations as far as the end of the nineteenth century.

Another line of research that has grown considerably is content analysis. Into this vast field there falls anything to do with Gender Studies, the relationship of comics to History and the representation of society, as well as issues raised by autobiography and autofiction.

Harry Morgan has placed his most recent research under the aegis of *Mythopoeia*, or the production of myths.[5] He aims to uncover the formal apparatus that regulates the interaction between the content of comics and the physical, material, technical, editorial, and social constraints that bear upon it. He maintains that it is the study of this "specific connection" that will enable the identification of the essential features of what he calls graphic literatures.[6]

New pathways continue to be opened up in contemporary research. Media theory offers perspectives from which to interrogate the relationships (consisting of filiation, overlap, reciprocal influences, borrowings, quotations, adaptations) between comics and literature, theatre, film, and photography. Within the field of comics itself, the development of another form of comparativism is to be welcomed: this consists of contrasting different traditions of comics production worldwide. Furthermore, disciplines based on cognitive science have cast some light, although still too faint, on the way in which images are perceived, processed by the human brain, understood, and recalled.

While all these types of investigation are flourishing, the same cannot be said of semiotic theory (in the widest definition of the word), which represents, as it were, the very foundations of comics research, and which, by analyzing the formal apparatus that constitutes it, offers the prospect of a more subtle understanding of the medium and its potential. Indeed, there has been relatively little progress in this area.

The intention of this volume is to deepen, extend, and complete the theoretical propositions put forward in *System 1*. It further clarifies the basic concepts of iconic solidarity, sequence, and modes of reading comics. It revisits more specific questions already discussed, such as regular page layout or the threshold of narrativity. It engages with new objects, like children's books, digital comics, or ab-

stract comics. It addresses fundamental questions that had been deferred, like the issue of rhythm and that of the narrator. It ends by situating comics in relation to the contemporary art scene.

To sum up, where the first volume described the foundations and the major articulations of the system, its particular architecture and dynamic, this volume is more concerned to analyze the uses to which it may be put.

It can be distinguished from the previous volume in two other ways.

In *System 1*, my thinking was based mainly on comics from the European, and most often, Franco-Belgian tradition. A choice that seemed normal to readers of the original edition may have been perceived as reductive or problematic in countries where the work was published in translation (particularly the U.S. and Japan). This second volume aspires to be much more open to other comics traditions. It devotes one section of its argument to manga and draws to a much greater extent on examples from virtuoso American comics artists like David Mazzucchelli, Art Spiegelman, and Chris Ware. I also enter into dialogue more often with English-language critics and researchers.

Finally, where *System 1* approached comics from an essentially ahistorical standpoint, attempting to draw out some universals from the language of the medium, *Comics and Narration* is much more closely involved with its recent developments. This is not only because it takes account of phenomena such as abstract comics or digital comics that have only become established in recent years, but also in the sense that it attempts to ensure that theory is always in phase with the aesthetic evolution of modern comics.

The historical studies by Smolderen referred to above have shown comics to be a medium that constantly renews itself. Modern comics have won over a new readership and invented new formats (two evolutions encapsulated by the concept of the "graphic novel," however hard it is to define). There has been a certain feminization of the comics profession. A current of auteurist comics has freed itself from the stranglehold of the series. It has gained ground on the terrain of the intimate, the confessional, and narratives of the self. The Ouvroir de bande dessinée potentielle [Workshop for Potential Comics] has turned experimentation and play on the codes of the medium into a manifesto, and, one might say, into a philosophy of creation.[7] And the very long-standing tradition of wordless comics has been revivified by the innovative work of François Ayroles, Peter Kuper, Shaun Tan, Lewis Trondheim, Jim Woodring, and many others.

Perhaps more interesting than the proliferation of comics lacking any text is the fact that "talking" comics seem to have discovered the virtues of momentary

silence, of the withheld utterance, the pause. In the past, comics were very talkative: the image was often submerged beneath the words and stifled by verbiage. Contemporary artists are not afraid to turn the sound off where necessary, to give the drawing some breathing space, to allow for thinking in images, and to engender a visual emotion. Comics have learned to hold their peace.[8]

Another seismic change in comics creation is the abandonment of the dogma of uniformity of style. I will discuss (see below, 5.3.3) the different stages, manifestations, and consequences of this development. An artist can now offer a wide range of different graphic styles within a single work, and, among them, afford a place to the draft, the inchoate, or to graphic lines that seriously disrespect the sacred imperative of optimum transparency and immediate legibility.

As a general rule, the comics industry perpetuates the imperialism of the series and the hero, along with outdated aesthetic standards corresponding to a long-gone classic period, even if, as a concession to modernity, it is prepared to disrupt layouts[9] or to deploy the whole arsenal of special effects allowed for by digital coloring processes (just as most films churned out by the cinema industry are technically well made but lacking in originality). Authentically modern comic art thrives more easily in the margins, either with literary publishing houses that, as latecomers to comics, are less encumbered by the weight of tradition, or with independent or alternative publishers.

Since the 1990s, the gap has become ever wider between the ambitions and the procedures of a formulaic, commercial comics output designed for a mass market, and those of an auteurist comics production more detached from the imperative of maximizing profit margins, more focused on creative individuality and more receptive to artistic influences from outside the "ninth art." (Unsurprisingly, children's comics are still mostly bound by the standards of mass-market series. On the one hand, this is because the output of literary or alternative publishers is essentially aimed at adults, and, on the other, it is because the ideal of legibility imposed on commercially produced comics guarantees their ready accessibility to less seasoned readers.)

Although this book is more theoretical than critical in its scope, it will be more attentive than the previous one to newly emerging formal features: the play between the figurative and the non-figurative, the poetic quality of stories, stylistic patchworks, the exploration of subjectivity, and a certain hybridity arising out of the encounter with the techniques of contemporary art. My longtime interest in forms regarded as marginal and in minoritarian uses of the medium—especially silent comics, minimalist comics, and self-reflexive comics—has convinced

me that theoretical elaboration can only be relevant and legitimate if it takes the risk of being responsive to contemporary developments in creative work, and of interrogating them.

Comics and the Test of Abstraction

It is in the nature of experimental works that they shift the boundaries or contest the usual definition of the medium to which they belong. This general rule is particularly applicable to comics, and I have already discussed the difficulties it poses for researchers (see *Système 1*, 17–21; *System 1*, 14–17).

In that first volume, I did in fact refuse to give a complete and analytical definition of comics, confining myself to the observation that a comic consists necessarily of a finite collection of separate and interdependent iconic elements. In more recent texts, I have taken to quoting the definition proposed by Ann Miller: "As a visual and narrative art, [comics] produce meaning out of images which are in a sequential relationship, and which co-exist with each other spatially, with or without text."[1] An eminently balanced and sensible definition, which, I have written, applies perfectly to the great majority of work produced up until now.[2]

To the great majority, but not to all. The list of experimental comics that give this definition something of a mauling includes works with no characters, no narration, and no drawing (Jean-Christophe Menu, with characteristic wit, suggests a few more possibilities: archaic, infranarrative, pictogrammatic, and extraterrestrial comics).[3]

1.1 A NEW CATEGORY

One part of this marginal comics production has been labeled and in some sense officially recognized as a category, if not a genre, by the appearance in 2009 of the anthology *Abstract Comics* published by Fantagraphics and edited by Andrei Molotiu. What exactly are *abstract comics*? Molotiu distinguishes two types: either sequences of abstract drawings, or sequences of drawings that contain figurative elements, the juxtaposition of which does not produce a coherent narrative. His anthology offers many more examples of the first case than of the second. I would

personally reserve the term *abstract comics* for the first type, and would call the second type *infranarrative comics*.

This anthology was not completely unprecedented: in its thirteenth volume, the journal *Bile noire* [Black Bile] (Spring 2003), published in Switzerland by Atrabile, launched a regular feature edited by Ibn al Rabin that was devoted to abstract comics, which had to conform to a rule prohibiting "the representation of any concrete 'object' (i.e., one with an unambiguous meaning) other than those belonging to the semantics of the medium itself, in other words speech balloons and panels." Along with Rabin himself, contributors included Alex Baladi, Guy Delisle, Andreas Kündig, David Vandermeulen, and Lewis Trondheim (only Rabin and Trondheim also appear in Molotiu's anthology).

Trondheim, as is well known, has since produced two small books for the Association in this same vein: the first, *Bleu* [Blue], is in color, ludic in tone, and visually similar to the work of Miró, and the second, *La Nouvelle Pornographie* [The New Pornography], is in black and white and is parodic in tone. This minuscule work (from the 'Patte de Mouche' [Squiggle (literally "Fly's Leg")] collection, 2006, had the particular virtue of proving that the play of abstract forms should not be taken automatically to imply an absence of meaning. In this instance, the artful combinations of black and white graphic forms straightforwardly evoked, even if in a disembodied or metaphorical way, the sexual scenarios promised by the title.

But that is an exceptional case. As a general rule, abstract comics demolish Ann Miller's definition quoted above: they jettison narrative art, sequential relationships, and the production of meaning (subject to some slight reservations that I will mention later).

The text introducing the new regular feature in *Bile noire*, which continued to appear until 2007, also specified that any recourse to a text was "strictly prohibited." This edict was somewhat surprising in that its author was apparently unaware that, if anyone so decides, words, just as much as images, can be put to incoherent use, become incomprehensible, and contribute to the destruction of meaning.

Abstract comics can be approached in a number of ways. We will encounter them later, firstly in relation to the question of rhythm (see below, p. 134–35), and secondly as part of the ongoing dialogue between comics and contemporary art (p. 162). For the moment, my discussion is concerned with them insofar as they re-problematize the very definition of comics.

1.2 THE FORMAL APPARATUS AND ITS PERCEPTION

Let us turn first to comics that are abstract in the strict sense of the word, that is to say composed of a series of drawings that are themselves non-figurative. What remains of the comics medium once it leaves the realm of *mimesis*? There remain, firstly, those elements "belonging to the semantics of the medium itself, in other words speech balloons and panels," to quote the formulation of *Bile noire* (even if the term "semantics" seems inappropriate here). Jean-Christophe Menu refers to the "formal apparatus of comics as a *crude skeleton*."[4] I had used the term "skeleton" myself to designate "the grid whose compartments are left empty" *(Système 1*, 35: *System 1*, 28). Another striking formula is the one used by Adam Gopnik in the catalogue of the MoMA exhibition *High & Low*, when he points out that painters like Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Öyvind Fahlström realized, at the beginning of the 1960s, that "the secondary machinery of the comics—the panels and balloons and onomatopoeia—began to have an iconic force greater than any image they might contain."[5]

It is interesting to note that no single element proclaimed to be constitutive of this "machinery" is in fact indispensable to comics. Many artists never use onomatopoeia, others never use speech balloons—either because their stories are wordless, or because the words are placed beneath the images or "float" inside them—and the drawings are not necessarily framed. It is nonetheless the combination of these elements (frames and balloons in particular) that, in the modern collective imaginary, seems to typify comics, to characterize the formal apparatus of the medium and its language (to the point where this "machinery" should be called *primary* rather than secondary).

Indeed, contemporary artists continue to take their inspiration from the machinery of comics. For example, in the first decade of this century, the Brazilian artist Rivane Neuenschwander has exhibited in a number of galleries[6] her large panels based on *Zé Carioca*, a popular Brazilian comic with a nationalist flavor. Neuenschwander turns it into an abstract comic: she keeps the shapes and proportions of panels and speech balloons, but empties both of their contents, refilling the outlines with blocks of a single color, each one different. Every panel is two meters high: the effect is to cast off the small format of the original printed version and to transmute it into the monumentality of art. Moreover, visitors are invited to draw or write on the surface with chalk, thereby re-creating a new

comic of their own. By hollowing the comic out, by reducing it to a skeleton, Neuenschwander has reinvented it as palimpsest.

It is nonetheless true that the majority of abstract comics do not include speech balloons. What exactly is it, then, that we see on a comics page made up of abstract images? Two things—that need to be distinguished from each other.

Firstly, visual content: colors, lines, forms organized into motifs. These abstract "images" interact with each other. They establish relationships of position, contiguity, intensity, repetition, variation, or contrast, as well as dynamic relationships of rhythm, interwovenness, etc. In principle, nothing in this list pertains to narration, which is why I alluded above to a *series*, rather than a *sequence*, of drawings. Unless, of course, it is feasible for a line, a shape, a color, or any kind of graphic entity, to have "adventures" in its own right, as Menu suggests is the case for Baladi's mini-album *Petit trait* [Little Line],[7] given that the "story" recounted is that of the transformations undergone by the line in question, through a kind of *physis*, whereby each new image is generated by the preceding one.

Secondly, what is shown by an abstract comics page is the spatio-topical apparatus of comics (henceforth referred to as *the apparatus*).[8] This is a space that is demarcated and compartmentalized, within which frames enter into spatial relationships and compose an organized totality. The images are con-figured, because this multiframe subjects them to a double movement of junction and disjunction—in other words designates them to the reader as being in solidarity, even as they are separated (by framing lines, gutters, or simply blank space).

In its *Traité du signe visuel* [Treatise on the Visual Sign], the Groupe Mu wrote:

> A work of visual art can be examined from the point of view of forms, from the point of view of colours, from the point of view of textures, and from that of the whole formed by all of these together. It should also be noted that these visual data are co-present, so that the image is, from the outset, always potentially tabular. A comparison may be made with temporal arts (poetry, music . . .), where tabularity can only be achieved by a process of construction.[9]

Comics is an art of space and an art of time: these dimensions are indissociable. To the intrinsic tabularity of the images it adds, by a process of construction, both a linearity and a more encompassing tabularity, that of the page.

But the question posed by abstract comics is precisely this: in the mind of someone looking at a comics page of this type with non-figurative content, does the division of the page into the pattern of a multiframe still immediately sum-

mon up the idea of a comic? This is not necessarily the case. The page can be read as a tabular surface, that is to say as a global image, crisscrossed by orthogonal lines (Mondrian-style). In this case, the relationships among the zones (we will avoid referring to "motifs") are merely spatial relationships organizing a visual field.

If, on the other hand, the apparatus is recognized as being typical of comics, then its conventional configuration, possessed of its own potency, will invite a linear decoding, that is to say a reading, even if it is immediately obvious that the images, in this instance, do not represent, and consequently do not recount, anything. The apparatus invites the reader to look at the images one after another; contiguous images are perceived as consecutive, and this ordering constitutes a discourse, the discourse that vectorizes the visual field of a comics page. Instead of being viewed together, the images are caught in an oscillation between a global apprehension and a fragmented, one-after-another apprehension. It is under this condition that, while still not defined as a narrative, the drawn or painted surface ceases to be simply a tabular surface and becomes a comics page.

It is evident that the context in which the abstract work is encountered greatly influences the way in which it is perceived, either as a "tableau" or as a "page." If it is encountered in an anthology entitled *Abstract Comics*, then the second hypothesis is likely to be adopted. However, Molotiu's introductory text is illustrated by the work of artists such as Kandinsky, de Kooning, or Alechinsky, produced in the 1930s, 1960s, and 1970s, in a field far removed from comics. Their reproduction in the context of the anthology allows these "tableaux" to be read today as abstract comics that anticipated the advent of the genre, despite the fact they were never conceived as such (in the same way that books of engravings by Ward or Masereel are now regarded as "graphic novels" *avant la lettre*). Molotiu has similarly "recuperated" pages by Syros Horemis taken from a scientific volume, *Optical and Geometrical Patterns and Designs* (1970) and arranged as a multiframe.

A range of attitudes can be envisaged, from that of Molotiu "reading" a modern painting like a comic, and that, easy to imagine, of the numerous lovers of traditional comics who would reject the idea of abstract comics as a contradiction in terms, even when it is taken up by authors already familiar to them, such as Trondheim, Baladi, or Delisle.

The difference between these standpoints resides precisely in the identification of the apparatus as the foundation of the comics medium, as the cardinal element of its "primary machinery." If the apparatus is spontaneously perceived

as necessarily pertaining to comics, then it becomes a symbolic structure, a discursive operator—something, in fact, of the order of the *concept*. But if the reference to comics does not automatically come to mind, then this same apparatus is understood as no more than a mechanism for organizing space, and its visual elements become mere *percepts*.

So, the pages collected by Molotiu can only be responded to as "abstract comics" on condition that the apparatus is identified as belonging to the realm of comics, which is far from self-evident; it is a question of context, personal culture, subjective perception.[10]

It is clear that responding to an abstract work as a comics page is equivalent to asserting that the spatio-topical mechanism of comics exists in its own right, independently of any condition concerning figurative representation or narration, and that this mechanism, this apparatus, is sufficient to establish that the work belongs to the field of comics. Logically, then, the apparatus should be recognized as constituting the central element of a definition of comics.

The problem of definition has been called into question by recent developments within the comics field. Statistically, abstract comics represent only a minute proportion of production as a whole, but they bear considerable symbolic weight because they suggest that comics can banish narration and figuration without ceasing to be comics; at the same time, digital comics, a rapid and more substantial growth area, have banished paper. In the face of these developments, what remains of traditional definitions of comics? Nothing more than the sharing of a space for inscription or display—in other words, the apparatus, the "plurality of images in solidarity."

Before moving on I would like to mention some brief considerations about the actual abstract images. Two types can be distinguished. In those of the first type, the abstraction is "indigenous"; in the others it has been achieved, the result of an operation of erasure, blurring, covering over, or distortion applied to an image that was originally figurative. An example of de-figuration is presented in *Abstract Comics*, "Flying Chief," by Derik Badman, based on *Tarzan and the Flying Chief*, a story by Jessie Marsh published in 1950 (fig. 1). Badman explains: "I redrew the story, ignoring text, balloons, captions, and characters, taking only the backgrounds and transforming them into abstracted shapes, marks and textures."

Between 2006 and 2008 Molotiu himself produced a comic called *24 x 24: A Vague Epic*, the pages of which incorporate elements, rendered unrecognizable, of artists such as Poussin, Fragonard, or Goya.[11] It is also worth mentioning the

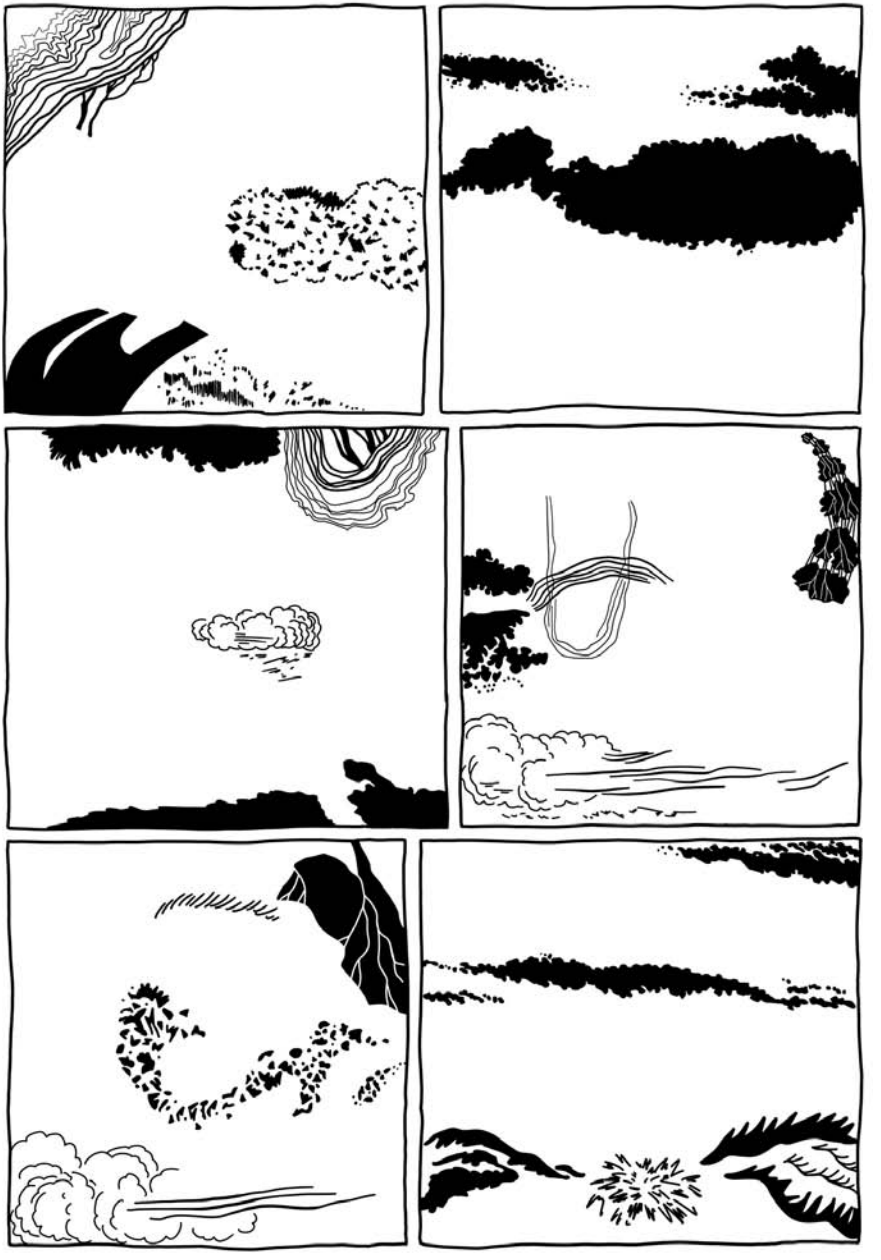

Fig. 1. Derik Badman, "Flying Chief," in *Abstract Comics* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2009).

work of Thomas Higashiyama, a graduate of the University of Decorative Arts in Strasbourg, who has researched abstract comics for several years, and who, before moving on to a simple play on forms and colors, went through a phase of reworking existing drawings taken from manga.[12]

In the October 2010 issue of the magazine *Étapes* [Stages], Higashiyama declared that he approached comics not as an artist but as a graphic designer. The practice piece presented for his final degree is a book, approximately one hundred pages long, untitled, and still unpublished. As I write these lines I have in front of me a copy that he kindly sent me. He explains that he wanted the reader to be "caught up in the movement of a story, without having to read a text or decode images." Out of a small number of elements—panels, empty speech balloons, circular or star-shaped forms, single or multicolored backgrounds—he assembles and reconfigures, page upon page, playing on repetition, superimposition, rhythm, changes in scale, and other visual surprises. One of the most original aspects of his work is the occasional reification of the apparatus into a grid whose frames seem to have been emptied (or whose contents have become transparent), with the result that colored shapes seem to have slid *under* the orthogonal network of gutters. Higoshiyama thereby introduces into abstract comics the notion of multilayer, which I will refer to later (4.2.2) in relation to manga.

1.3 FROM THE AMALGAM TO THE SEQUENCE

The practice of juxtaposing on the same page figurative drawings with no logical or semantic continuity has a long history. In the nineteenth century it was not unusual for a humorous artist to fill the page space with an array of drawings whose only relationship to each other was the fact that they had been produced by the same hand. These sheets were called "macédoines" [medleys].

Abstract comics belonging to the second type identified by Molotiu, those whose images are figurative but do not amount collectively to a coherent whole, are of a different order. This is because they are not the result of a collection or assemblage of random drawings, but of the intention to produce a comics page devoid of any narrative project. A string[13] of images in an abstract comic can be created through a process of improvisation, following the whim of the pencil, or it can, alternatively, be planned and its outcome premeditated.

In 1987 at the Cerisy conference on the theme of "Comics, Narrative and Modernity," I demonstrated that the juxtaposition of drawings within a multi-

frame does not automatically lead to a narrative; there are other principles according to which images may be related to each other. I had called these amalgam, inventory, variation, inflection, and decomposition.[14] These categories (initially referred to as "primary distributive functions") were alluded to again in *Système 1*.[15] It seems to me today that two supplementary cases could be added to this taxonomy: in the first, the same image would be repeated in every panel of the multiframe, producing a kind of "wallpaper effect," and in the second, the page would consist of a single large image occupying the whole surface artificially divided up by the superimposition of a grid. These two supplementary theoretical cases could be termed respectively *seriation* and *fragmentation*.

In his 2008 doctoral thesis, Harry Morgan judiciously noted a similarity between two of the infranarrative functions I had proposed in 1987, and two of the six types of transition—"closure"—identified by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics*.[16] The transition that he calls "aspect to aspect" does indeed correspond to what I had called "decomposition," and his "non-sequitur" to my "amalgam." But McCloud, who goes on to examine[17] the frequency of each of these categories in the work of thirty-three American, European, and Japanese artists, finds only a single occurrence of the "non-sequitur," that is to say the case where there is "no logical relationship between panels whatsoever."[18] This happens to be taken from a short comic by Art Spiegelman, *Ace Hole, Midget Detective*, which forms part of his experimental collection, *Breakdowns*.[19] A very narrow corpus, then, given that McCloud does not seem to take any account of abstract comics (moreover, Spiegelman's story cannot, in fact, be categorized either as abstract or as infranarrative).

And yet, the definition of comics offered by McCloud ("juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence," usually abbreviated to "sequential art") makes no specific reference to the idea of narration. Everything depends on what is meant by the concept of sequence. In this respect, McCloud's stance lacks precision; however, the fact that he includes the "non-sequitur" as one of the possible types of transition implies that he may have a wider conception of the notion of sequence. My own concept, *iconic solidarity*, intentionally stops short of considering whether comics have any "narrative purpose."

Between February and November 2009, Daniel Blancou produced an exciting series of strips in numbers 37 to 40 of the journal *Lapin* [Rabbit] under the title *Samuel Limpinski*. His declared objective was "to write, in three panels, strips whose meaning was not 'nailed down.'" We understand by this that the causal links between the three panels are sometimes stretched so far or are so ambiguous

Fig. 2. Daniel Blancou, "Papa," from *Samuel Limpinski*, in *Lapin* no. 37, February 2009. © Daniel Blancou.

that they demand much work of the reader, who is left to construct logical inferences and, ultimately, to produce meaning.

We can take the example of the strip called "Papa" [Dad] in *Lapin* no. 37. The first panel, which is silent, shows tadpoles swimming in a pond. The second is a medium close-up of a man gazing downwards (a tree, viewed from beneath, is visible in the background) saying: "You're not going to bring that home?!" The third and last panel, again silent, transports the reader to an exhibition of modern art. A somewhat perplexed man is contemplating an abstract canvas, while, to his right, a woman moves away, adjusting her shoe as she does so. It is not difficult to make a link between the first two panels, even if the child that "Dad" is addressing is not represented in either of them. In contrast, the situation represented in the third panel seems completely unrelated to the incipient story. Two interpretations seem possible. *Either*: whether or not s/he brought the tadpoles home, the child examined them sufficiently closely to enable him/her, many years later and having become an artist, to produce canvasses inspired by their form. It is not possible to base a judgment on the section that appears in the frame, but the black circular shape represented in the picture could be taken as a detail from the head of a tadpole, massively blown up. *Or*: the two situations bear no relationship to each other but the indecisive man has perhaps intimated that he is thinking about buying the picture, and his partner has replied: "You're not going to bring that home?!"

In order to make the first interpretation hold up, we have had to presuppose a leap in time (a temporal hiatus) and to extrapolate an entire image from an indeterminate detail.[20] To shore up the second interpretation we have had to duplicate a line of dialogue from panel 2 (situation A) and to assume that it applies equally well to panel 3 (situation B). In other words, it is only by carrying out in-

terpretative work that relies on making narrative hypotheses, and by taking much of the initiative that the reader can reduce the apparent incoherence of the strip.

The comics reader takes semantic and narrative coherence for granted. S/he presumes that "the positioning of any panel necessarily has some point"[21] When images set out consecutively fail to offer any immediate coherence, the reader is naturally inclined to minimize what seems like a "breach of contract" by formulating hypotheses intended to confer intelligibility on the string of panels—to convert an *amalgam* into a narrative sequence. It is only when these attempts fail that s/he makes the decision to assign these images to the always improbable category of infranarrative comics.