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Viewing the Whale: Space, Time, and the Imagination in "Moby-Dick" and Comics

Garrett Sterling Bond
Bard College

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Viewing the Whale:
Space, Time, and the Imagination in Comics and *Moby-Dick*

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
Of Bard College

By

Garrett Bond

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2016

For Torin, who gave me comics and the world.

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Finally, none of this would be possible without the unconditional love and support of my parents and sister. Thank you for teaching me to pursue geeky obsessions with sincerity and tenacity, and for continually inspiring me with your intelligence and strength.

“But here is an artist. He desires to paint you the dreamiest, shadiest, quietest, most enchanting bit of romantic landscape in all the valley of the Saco. What is the chief element he employs? There stand his trees, each with a hollow trunk, as if a hermit and a crucifix were within...and though his pine-tree shakes down its sighs like leaves upon this shepherd's head, yet all were vain, unless the shepherd's eye were fixed upon the magic stream before him.”

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*.

HARRY NAYBORS, COMIC BOOK CRITIC

HAVE YOU EVER MET ANYONE LIKE ME? DON'T BE SO QUICK TO SAY "NO" BECAUSE, BELIEVE IT OR NOT, THERE ARE MILLIONS OF US OUT THERE, OR AT LEAST THOUSANDS. WHO KNOWS, YOUR MAILMAN MIGHT BE ONE OF US. OR YOUR BARBER. OR PERHAPS EVEN THE GIBBERING, URINE-SOAKED WAR VETERAN DOWN ON THE CORNER.



AND WHO ARE "WE"? WE ARE THOSE WHO ALLOCATE A SIGNIFICANT PORTION OF OUR GIVEN BRAINPOWER TO THE SERIOUS CONSIDERATION OF THAT POPULAR PICTOGRAPHIC LANGUAGE KNOWN TO YOU, THE LAYMAN, AS "COMICS."



WHAT EXACTLY ARE "COMICS"? THE WORD ITSELF DEMANDS A MEASURE OF IRONY FROM ITS USER (THOUGH I PERSONALLY FIND IT SUPERIOR TO THE VULGAR MARKETING SOBRIQUET "GRAPHIC NOVEL"). INSIDERS HAVE DEBATED THE TERMINOLOGY FOR YEARS (I HAVE MY OWN PREFERRED NOMENCLATURE) BUT HAVE YET TO ACHIEVE ANY REAL CONSENSUS (THANKS TO THE EFFORTS OF A FEW THICK-HEADED TROGLODYTES).



ARE COMICS A VALID FORM OF EXPRESSION? THE JURY'S STILL OUT, I'M AFRAID. THERE EXISTS FOR SOME AN UNCOMFORTABLE IMPURITY IN THE COMBINATION OF TWO FORMS OF PICTURE-WRITING (I.E., PICTOGRAPHIC CARTOON SYMBOLS VS. THE LETTER SHAPES THAT FORM "WORDS") WHILE TO OTHERS IT'S NOT THAT BIG A DEAL.



ALLEGED AWKWARDNESS ASIDE, PERHAPS IN THAT SCHISM LIES THE UNDERPINNING OF WHAT GIVES "COMICS" ITS ENDURANCE AS A VITAL FORM: WHILE PROSE TENDS TOWARD PURE "INTERIORITY," COMING TO LIFE IN THE READER'S MIND, AND CINEMA GRAVITATES TOWARD THE "EXTERIORITY" OF EXPERIENTIAL SPECTACLE, PERHAPS "COMICS," IN ITS EMBRACE OF BOTH THE INTERIORITY OF THE WRITTEN WORD AND THE PHYSICALITY OF IMAGE, MORE CLOSELY REPLICATES THE TRUE NATURE OF HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN PRIVATE SELF-DEFINITION AND CORPOREAL "REALITY."



—Daniel Clowes, *Ice Haven*.

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Introduction

On August 6th, 2009, a librarian in Ohio publishes the first post on the blog “Every Page of Moby-Dick”¹. Matt Kish posts a scan of an abstract drawing, done on what looks to be a diagram of an electrical circuit². In a accompanying text, Kish promises that the drawing is only the first of a series:

Because I honestly consider *Moby-Dick* to be the greatest novel ever written, I am now going to create one illustration for every single one of the 552 pages in the Signet Classic paperback edition. I'll [sic] try to do one a day, but we'll see.

“Every Page of Moby-Dick” was born from Kish’s personal relationship to the novel he considers the greatest ever written. In the forward to the collection of his drawings published three years after the launch of his blog³, Matt Kish justifies his choice of *Moby-Dick* by tracing his relationship with “the white whale” since his childhood; watching the 1956 Gregory Peck film “at my grandmother’s...in the mid-1970s;” being gifted a “heavily abridged...cheap newsprint” version in which he “probably spent more hours looking at the pictures than...reading the words;” reading the unabridged version for the first time in 1984 as a freshman in high school; and the “eight or nine” subsequent readings “as an undergraduate...as a high

¹ “MOBY-DICK, Page 001”. *Every Page of Moby-Dick*. August 6, 2009.
<http://everypageofmobydick.blogspot.com/2009/08/moby-dick-page-001.html#links>.

² The image will be shown and explored in a later reading.

³ *Moby-Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page* (Tin House Books, 2011).

school English teacher and as an assistant manager in a bookstore...in graduate school, and most recently while making these drawings”⁴.

Armed with a “frantic appetite for images” inspired by science fiction and video games, and after discovering Zak Smith’s *Pictures Showing What Happens on Each Page of Thomas Pynchon’s Novel Gravity’s Rainbow* published in 2006, Kish set out not to adapt Melville’s novel, but to manifest his personal experience with it. Instead of adapting a singular perspective on the novel’s content, the drawings in each page and blog post manifest Kish’s cumulative interpretation of multiple forms of the story; in the forward, Kish admits to basing many illustrations off of those found in the abridged newsprint version, not the Signet Classics edition. Additionally, the images incorporate Kish’s memories surrounding his experiences with *Moby-Dick*, such as the time spent with his grandmother. As a collection, the pages of *Moby-Dick in Pictures* reflect the subjective experiences of the artist as much as the portrayed reality of the original text. In these ways, Kish’s project manifests the experience of reading any literary narrative. From each page of Melville’s text, Kish constructs an image not of that which the text describes, but a reflection of the artist’s personal navigation of various physical manifestations of the story.

Considering the process behind *Moby-Dick in Pictures* in this way requires developing a logic of narrative attentive to the physical form of a given work, and the reader’s subjective experience navigating it. In using ‘narrative,’ this project refers to the coherent sequence perceived from a series of portrayed images; essentially, the ‘story’ of a given work, regardless

⁴ Kish, vi.

of form. One can here create a distinction between a ‘narrative’ in terms of a work’s content, and the form that content occupies, that which is subsequently perceived and navigated by the reader or viewer. Kish’s interpretation embodies this distinction succinctly, by creating a sequence of images divorced almost entirely from the objective truth of the world Ishmael describes. By abstracting *Moby-Dick*’s characters and objects into ‘constructs’ based on certain traits or memories, *In Pictures* recasts the very concept of described images relative to the reader’s experience.

Reading Kish’s work in this way requires a narratology that considers the words and pictures on the page as a unified visual language, creating an imaginative exchange between form and reader distinct from that in film or text alone. To better understand the implications of such a visual reading experience, one can turn to the structural narratology of comics, which considers the movement of the eye across and within arranged text and image. Understanding how a sense of narrative sequence is perceived from such works requires refocusing a theory of reading onto the freedoms and subjectivities inherent in the act itself, in order to relate described objects to each other in space and time.

This model of reading is necessary in order to define ‘comics’ as a genre distinct from other narrative forms. Like Kish, however, this logic works against a traditional model of reading more generally, dismantling the idea of narrative sequence cast within the complete control of the narrator. By manifesting the imaginative process involved in piecing together a narrative like Ishmael’s, *In Pictures* rejects that perspective as the sole source of its imagery, in

the process enabling a theory of reading in which the reader controls how, and in what chronology, objects appear.

Kish's layering of words and pictures mirrors that used by comics, and therefore allows this reader-centric model of reading to be derived from works like Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, and experimental graphic novels by Chris Ware and Richard McGuire. Framing Kish's interpretation of *Moby-Dick* in the context of graphic narratology enables a formal understanding of Ishmael's command and direction of his reader's perspective. Simultaneously, and as in comics, one observes the reader of *Moby-Dick* constructing personal senses of space and time to understand the image as a reflection of both the described reality and the narrator's thoughts and feelings.

Like Kish first creating a Blogspot account, this project is motivated as much by its author's own experiences with both *Moby Dick* and comics as it is by theoretical and critical concerns. Melville's novel stands out as a work hinged on its own physicality; like the whale it describes, the book is almost too large to comprehend, causing many first-time readers (like myself) to become bored or frustrated. Viewing *Moby-Dick* in the context of reader experience allows for readings of any such work to consider the physical burden that they undertake, the hours spent staring at the words on the page.

Comics, on the other hand, seem to have evaded significant critical attention in part because of a perceived 'easy' readability, which places them in magazine racks and cinematic universes⁵ rather than the annals of literary historians. This is hardly the fault of the literary

⁵ Consider this Stan Lee's requisite cameo.

community; arguing that comics should be considered literature risks ignoring countless wordless comics⁶. Rather, one might construct a new theory of reading around this perceived, and often experienced, difference, faced also with a failure of traditional reading theory that results when the one form is read as another. Refocusing a model of narrative around the visual and sequential perceptions of the reader allows one to compare the navigation of different forms in terms of a new, formalist theory of reading.

The purpose of this project is to explore the construction of narrative sequence in *Moby-Dick* and comics through a new theory of reading founded on conceptualizing the reader or viewer's personal knowledge and imagination of relative models of space and time. More generally, this analysis offers formal distinctions between modes of communication and storytelling, bringing together comics and literature and implicating experiences of film, oral communication, and memory. Analyzing the various modes of communication seen in comics and *Moby-Dick* through this prism allows one to better develop a concept of reader imagination as implicit in the formation of narrative imagery, and to open the theoretical space between describer and described in which such images operate.

⁶ And wordless pages of the comics discussed in this project.

Chapter 1: Narrative in Pictures

As a self-contained sequence of described images, novels and comics serve, in contemporary scholarship, as an intermediary between a narrator and the objects and events they describe. In literature, words and the images they produce are perceived as reflecting both the limitations of the narrator's perspective, and to some extent the 'objective' truth they are observing. The job that this logic produces for scholars, then, is to diagnose in their readings the narrative perspective that produces the image, as a means of locating the image in the representative space between subject and object.

As means of divorcing literary analysis from questions of author and reader intention, this describer/described binary is useful in that it allows for the imagination of the narrative and narrator as existing apart from the contexts of reality and objectivity. But to understand where exactly images in narratives fall between their originator and the objects they reflect is, I will argue, a question that demands a refocusing of the critical lens towards the chosen form of that narrative, and the experience of reading that it produces.

This project uses a distinction between narrative and narrator in order to frame the representative power of language through the lens of subjective narration, i.e. storytelling. Narrative, in many ways, refers to both the content of a story and the vehicle of its telling, while the narrator (at least of a literary narrative) serves as the intermediary between these two ideas. Building this logic allows us to explore both the narrator's and reader's subjectivities as filling the space between the form of the narrative and the story or world it is describing.

Locating this theoretical space between describer and described primarily involves a focused attention on the unconscious exchanges that take place during an act of reading. Essentially, this project is concerned with decoding the processes by which a block of text is understood as representing both a described objective event and the thoughts and feelings of its teller. Shaping reading as a visual experience in this way allows for the use of formalist language and logics in imagining the reader navigating the physical object of a narrative (that is, its form) and the spaces and times it described (its content) simultaneously.

I argue that a structural look at the experience of reading helps to better locate narrative images in the theoretical space between narrator and object, in the process constructing a model of reading as a physical and visual experience. The structural analysis that this employs resembles that used in contemporary analyses of comics because of its focus on the reader's interaction with the *structure* of narrative first and the content of the images second. In developing a language around the form of comics, these scholars construct perceptions of reader engagement that, when turned back on literature, similarly help locate written images and their narrative sources in similar representational spaces.

This separation from content is critical to my overlap of literature and comics, in contrast to many of those which have come before. Many critical conceptions of comics and literature together focus on the former primarily in its adaptive capacities. In focusing this way, these scholars explore how the visual form of comics is adapted to transfer the original text onto the comics' reader. But I wish to move in a different direction, suggesting that the *formal* differences between comics and literature result in an inherently distinct narrative framework, as seen only

through the different experiences of reader and narrator. However, in discussing these two forms together under the same structural narratology, one forms a general idea of the reader's role in the formation of narrative images, and their navigation through narrative space and time.

In order to further solidify my bridge between comics and literature, it is necessary to cite examples of literature in which the narrative perspective moves towards and away from its reference object in order to show how the reader navigates and keeps up with this changing structure. To further hone in on this experience of the reader as mirroring that of the narrator, one turns to a literary narrative in which the reader's perspective is shifted relative to its narrator's navigation of personal memory and imagination. To this end, *Moby-Dick* provides the literary foundation for a structuralist jump to comics by framing its narrator, Ishmael, as particularly conscious of the reader's role in interpreting his story.

To justify a reading of *Moby-Dick* with specific attention to reader involvement, one has to look no further than the novel's opening⁷ sentence; "Call me Ishmael"⁸. From the start, Ishmael appears conscious of the role of his reader's perspective in piecing together his images, and subsequently his own power to direct and command that perspective. Rather than a simple declaration ("I am Ishmael," for example), the narrator brings the reader into the act of labeling,

⁷ Many readers of *Moby-Dick* will here observe that Melville's novel technically begins with the "Extracts," a collection of quotes from historical and literary sources that all mention whales to some degree. For another project, there is a structuralist reading to be done of Melville asking one to wade through this collection of context before reaching the story proper. But as this reading is primarily interested in comparing the experiences between Ishmael and reader during specific descriptive moments, it is necessary to refocus on *Moby-Dick*'s story proper beginning only once the former is introduced to the latter.

⁸ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*. Edited by Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 18.

thereby granting them some of the descriptive power otherwise reserved for the narrator. In this way, the narrator of *Moby-Dick*'s self-identification brings the reader's consent into its mode of descriptive agency; upon reading the first words, a reader could hypothetically answer "no" and put the book down, thereby negating the representative power of the words on the page. In order for the narrative to unfold, and for the sequence of images contained therein to be understood in sequence to one another, narrator and reader both acknowledge their combined power in bringing the images together.

This logic of reader involvement will play instrumentally into readings of *Moby-Dick* which employ the structural narratology of comics. But to first extract that structural narratology to apply to narrative in general (as opposed to the singular form of graphic narrative), one can return to Kish's work to see how the adaptation of comics' visual language creates a new narrative perspective, and a new logic of reader involvement and image production as a result.

Each illustration in *Moby-Dick in Pictures* occupies its own page, accompanied only by the corresponding page number in Melville's novel, a short quotation from that page, and the dimensions and materials used to create the image. In these ways, the pages of Kish's work mirror those of the original text, with the illustrations themselves taking place of Melville's words. However, despite this structural mirroring of Melville's novel, Kish's work differs narratologically from its source text because of its distinct visual language. In its transition from Melville's prose to an illustration, *Moby-Dick In Pictures* manifests the experience of reading, imagining an image from each individual page and description. Kish's images serve as a visual mediation between Ishmael's perspective and the objects he is describing; adapting Ishmael's

description to text finds Kish emphasising the role of his and any other reader's imagination in making sense of the text. Essentially, *Moby-Dick in Pictures* demands the construction of a narratology mindful of the interacting perspectives of narrator in reader. Furthermore, this reading begins to construct a language around the different experiences of the act of narrating of reading, to be expanded using the structuralist models of space and time found in comics.

From the first page of Melville's novel, Kish quotes only "Call me Ishmael" to accompany his illustration (figure 1). His drawing, done in colored pencil and ink over a found electrical diagram, finds Ishmael reduced to an abstracted blue and grey oval. The name "Ishmael" is drawn coming from a colorful cloud, as if the product of divine intervention. A brief reading of this image shows *In Pictures* employing a logic of reader imagination working alongside the narrator's descriptive power.

In his forward to *Moby-Dick in Pictures*, Kish highlights one primary motivation behind illustrating his interpretations:

It was deeply important to me to reconnect these *Moby-Dick* illustrations to the older and more physical world of books and printing...I wanted the art to show the signs of human hands...and the marks of hard use⁹.

Here, Kish focuses his project on the physicality of Ishmael's text and the experience of reading as such. The artist's motivation here informs a reading of *Moby-Dick* and literary narratives more generally, focused on the reader's interaction with and interpretation of the images laid out before them. Showing how Kish's graphic narratology transforms the perspective over the

⁹ Kish, x.

original image allows one to see how a reader's imagination in reading interacts with the form of text as a physical object.

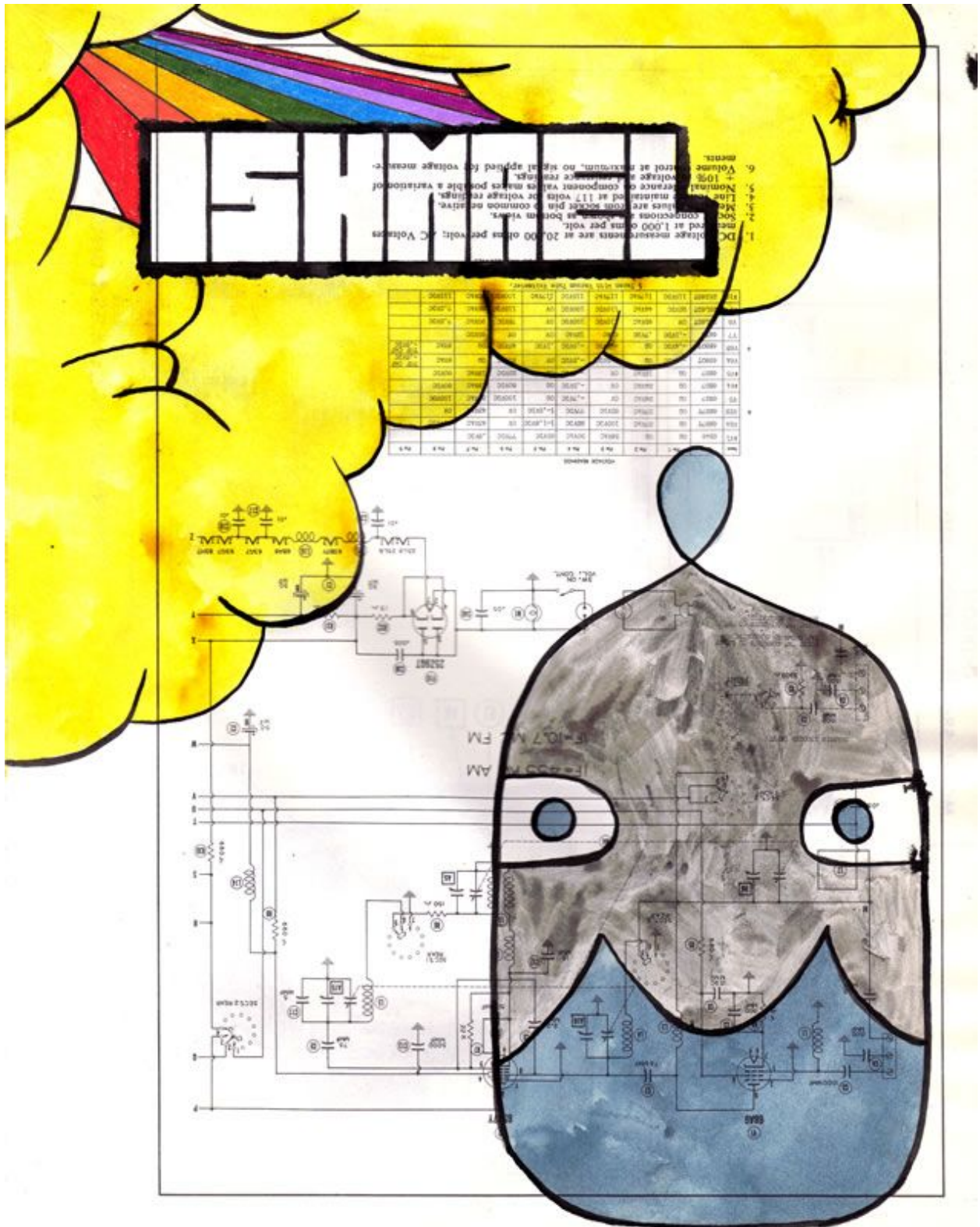
On the surface, Kish's illustration for "Call me Ishmael" shows a very different image of the narrator than that provided in the novel. The "me" in the drawing is the grey and blue oval, that looks almost like the front of a metal boat in water. The choice of visual style here is discussed briefly later in the forward:

That kind of courage and strength seemed to me almost inhuman, so...I was unable to see [whalers] as anything other than a thing of iron, almost resembling a ship. All of the whalers and sailors became abstract, metal, shiplike constructs¹⁰

In drawing Ishmael as a grey and blue shape, Kish creates a link between his interpretive act and an 'abstraction' to an embodiment of "courage and strength". Furthermore, Kish's "construct" of Ishmael's figure is divorced from the narrative voice doing the "calling," manifested in the image as the yellow cloud. Kish's drawing opens visual space between the 'construct' Ishmael as manifested on the page and the mind that imagines him, and which bestows Ishmael's name from above. There is no visual link between the "shiplike" figure and the yellow cloud¹¹. Instead, the distance between the two reveals the underlying diagram, the found paper on which the drawing is done. This invokes the physicality of reading into the construction of Ishmael's described figure and narrative voice. The voice behind the yellow cloud is not that of Ishmael's

¹⁰ Kish, xi.

¹¹ This argument would not hold, for example, if the word "Ishmael" in the drawing were contained in a speech bubble guiding the reader's eye to the figure's blue 'mouth'.

Figure 1: Matt Kish, *Moby-Dick in Pictures*, 1.

character alone, but rather that of his retrospective lens working alongside Kish's own interpretive experience. As suggested by Kish's forward, this freedom of experience allows Kish to bring into his interpretation knowledge from outside of the novel itself, in this case his conception of whaling itself as a courageous act. In these ways, Kish's illustration manifests the act of interpretation that takes place when one agrees to 'Call' Ishmael anything. That 'Call' is the combined product of the reader's imagination and the image's reflection of its narrator and the world being described; consequently, the resulting image exists in a descriptive space between object and interpretation.

This project seeks to consider the formation of narrative 'story' as the result of an unconscious interaction between reader and narrator, motivated more by the subjectivities of both than by the truth being described. By employing narratology derived from critical theory surrounding graphic novels and comics, one is able to cement this logic of reader interpretation decisively to a formal discussion of iconic representation on the page. Applying this structuralist narratology to Kish's work and other graphic novels, allows one to visualize the formation of narrative sequence as the result of reader choice, particularly in constructing a sense of space and time distinct from the 'objective' truth being described. Only after understanding reading as a visual and physical experience in this way, can one return to narrative comprised of text alone. Turning the structuralist logic of comics back onto *Moby-Dick*'s textual narrative comparatively shows cohesion and sequence constructed from interacting subjectivities of reader and narrator.

Critical theory surrounding comics is helpful here for its conception of narrative as dependent on both form and the unconscious imagination of the reader to form a story from its

fragmented images. Furthermore, to this structuralist ideology of narrative time in space is instrumental to conceiving *Moby-Dick in Pictures* as a self-contained narrative with a distinctively non-Ishmael narrator. One concern, which pervades much of comics scholarship, is an insecurity in defining ‘comics’ due to a lack of firm, structural boundaries. In the early pages of *Understanding Comics*¹² Scott McCloud identifies a lack of cohesive definition as to what comics are and are not, which he goes on to attribute to comics’ relative absence from critical fields of thought. Before examining comics both as such and in comparison to other forms of narrative, McCloud argues that ‘comics’ itself must be defined more clearly, a process ground in exclusions and delineations which make it inherently difficult. McCloud begins by taking to task one of the most common and accessible definitions - used by early pioneers such as Will Eisner - of comics as “sequential art”. Of this label, McCloud writes:

No genres are listed in our definition, no types of subject matter, no styles of prose or poetry. Nothing is said about paper and ink. No printing process...Printing *itself* isn’t even specified...No materials are ruled out...no tools are prohibited...No calls for exaggerated anatomy or for representational art of any kind. No schools of art are banished...no movements, no ways of seeing are out of bounds¹³.

What is clear in McCloud’s diagnosis of the process of defining ‘comics’ is a difficulty resulting from a lack of *structural* and *theological* delineations within the word itself. For *Understanding Comics*, this difficulty manifests itself primarily in two ways. First, McCloud argues that the lack

¹² (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993).

¹³ McCloud, 22.

of clear definition has led to a body of work that is both incomprehensibly massive and developmentally dependent on the “new generation [rejecting] whatever this one decides [and trying] once more to reinvent comics”¹⁴. Secondly, this means that any attempts to define comics *further* are necessarily exclusionary. For example, McCloud argues that comics as “Sequential art”¹⁵ excludes single-panel works such as *Family Circus* and *The Far Side*, in which the lack of images placed next to each other prohibits the sense of time passing inherent to works contained within the definition.

McCloud’s analysis suggests that the lack of a clear definition of ‘comics’ results in the vastness and confusion responsible for much of its exclusion from critical narrative theory. Additionally, *Understanding Comics* posits that any narratives in comics - like those of *any other form* - must be defined structurally. Rather than define comics based on sub-genres or thematic elements (science fiction, fantasy, etc.), the form must be understood as just that, a physical vehicle that adapts itself in conveying a given narrative to an audience. McCloud frames most of his book’s analysis in this distinctly physical narratology, exploring aspects of comics such as the variance of space both occupied by panels and left empty between them, the variety of artistic styles in varying degrees of realism, and the diversity of handwritten fonts which blur the line between word and image.

¹⁴ McCloud, 23.

¹⁵ And the definition he eventually settles on.

After a refinement process involving holding comics against other forms of visual narrative such as film, animation, and even the written word¹⁶ *Understanding Comics* (and the present analysis) eventually adopts the following definition for comics:

com-ics (kom'iks)n. plural in form, used with a singular verb. 1. Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.¹⁷

The motivation behind developing such a definition is to clarify the distinction between comics and other narrative forms. However, the complications that arise in doing so allow McCloud and this project to chart the visual language of comics and the textual narrative of literature on the same representative plane, filtered through a focus on this exchange between reader and narrator. This allows for a reading of literary narratives like *Moby-Dick* that views the construction of the image as a product of both the spatial and chronological structure of the narrative and the role of the reader in locating the image, like Kish, somewhere between object and narrator. When separated from comics specifically, McCloud's definition presents two curious facets of his more general structural narratology.

First, *Understanding Comics*' definition suggests that the construction of a cohesive narrative out of a series of described images relies on those images being placed in "deliberate sequence" to one another by an active reader. Of note here is the use of "sequence" as a

¹⁶ *Understanding Comics* portrays this refinement process through a sequence of illustrations showing the narrator holding various 'drafts' of his definition in front of a stand-in contrarian audience. In one such panel, the narrator holds a sign defining comics as "juxtaposed static images in deliberate sequence;" an audience member is seen protesting that "Letters are static images, right? When they're arranged in a deliberate sequence placed next to each other, we call them words"(8).

¹⁷ McCloud, 9.

conception of both the physical *space* of occupied by narratives and the *time* described within them. In referring simultaneously to the sequence of “pictorial and other images” within the page and to the temporal cohesion that links them within the narrative, McCloud implies an analytical overlap of narrative space and time blanketed under a strictly structuralist narratology. In doing this, *Understanding Comics* frames the images of a narrative as existing in a perceived overlap of space and time in order to locate those images in comics between the narrator and their described object.

The second aspect of McCloud’s narratology to note in his definition of ‘comics’ is the suggestion that this perception of space and time, this imagining and sequencing of described events, is not solely the task of the narrator. Although the definition requires the images within a graphic narrative to be placed in “deliberate sequence” to one another, it never specifies who exactly is doing that deliberating. While McCloud certainly notes here an author or narrator imagining described events relative to each other in space and time, he also includes in that relationship the imagination of the reader as an independent force influencing the formation of the narrative. By phrasing his definition as he does, *Understanding Comics* makes the “response [in] the viewer” the final criteria for a given work to be considered one of comics. If McCloud is to be believed and his definition extended, then the viewer technically holds the power to nullify a work’s status as comics by simply never opening it.

However, despite blanketing the definition under reader interpretation, McCloud does not view the reader's imagination as such a trump card over the imagination of the narrator. Instead, his book develops a narratology of comics that considers the reader and narrator’s imaginations

constantly and inherently reflecting off of each other to produce that narrative's final image in space and time. Just as his use of "sequence" requires the consideration of both space and time as portrayed in narrative description, the "information and/or...response in the viewer" that underpins the definition similarly considers both the narrator "intend[ing] to convey" that information or response in the first place, and the reader's willingness to imagine the events and images in relation to one another. By observing how works such as *Moby-Dick in Pictures* employ McCloud's ideas to form their images, one finds the latter author framing the reader's experience relative to the narrator's subjective experience with that being described. Then, by turning to comics that experiment with McCloud's conceptions of narrative sequence, one can divorce this narratology from pictorial narratives specifically to read *Moby-Dick* as a similarly visual and formalist experience.

The structural narratology that McCloud applies to defining 'comics,' when used in a close reading of *Moby Dick in Pictures*, can help understand the work as a self-contained narrative, constructing its sense of sequence alongside the reader's understanding of space and time. Observing the differences between Kish's and Melville's narrators, by way of McCloud's structural logic of reading, allows one to see Kish's visual language mediating between the objects of Melville's description and Kish's interpretation of them, framed within reader-centric narratology. Groundwork for the underlying idea, that the narrative perspective of the graphic adaptation differs from that of the adapted text, can be found in Kish's own reflections on the project. His forward, cited earlier, begins, "Really, I just wanted to make a version of *Moby-Dick*

that looks like how I see it,”¹⁸ and he later describes how he “would take each image as it came and do what I wanted with it”¹⁹. Echoing these sentiments in a 2011 PBS interview, Kish says, “It is certainly not an attempt to create the definitive *Moby-Dick*...the whole illustration project is an intensely personal exploration of the book and what the story is to me”²⁰.

By framing the illustrations as personal reflections, Kish establishes the body of his work as the product of himself *as a reader*, thereby creating a narrator more tied to his experiences than the original narrative of *Moby-Dick*. But this distinct narrative framework can be seen too in the structure of the book itself, and the layout of the images within the pages themselves. The form of graphic narrative allows Kish to blend his narrator’s imagination with that of Ishmael in the original text. In placing its illustrations next to decontextualized quotes from Melville’s narrative on individual, mostly-blank pages, *Moby-Dick in Pictures* creates a narrative perspective separate and abstracted from Ishmael’s while invoking the reader to navigate the space between word and image.

Much of this analysis of Kish’s work will employ elements of graphic narratology highlighted in the works of Scott McCloud and other comics scholarship. But the work’s creation of a narrator distinct from Ishmael, as suggested in Kish’s own reflections on the project earlier, can be seen in close readings of individual pages of *Moby-Dick in Pictures*, and the different

¹⁸ Kish, v.

¹⁹ Kish, ix

²⁰ Matt Kish, "In Pursuit of the Great White Whale, via Paintbrush." interview by Lauren Knapp. *PBS Newshour*. October 10, 2011.

relationships they establish between the original (Ishmael's) narrative and the new one created by the accompanying illustrations and the text selected to accompany them. By tracing *Pictures's* formation of a narrative perspective abstracted even from that which it adapts, one sees how the images in Kish's work, through evoking reader imagination, are abstracted from the realm of 'object' as a reflection of the narrator's perception of those original images.

Before the structural narratology behind Kish's work and other comics can be used to see literary reading in terms of representational navigation, one must first construct a theory of reading by observing *In Pictures's* formation of a narrative perspective that abstracts and objectifies that of its source text. In pairing original illustrations with quoted text from *Moby-Dick* within the shared space of the page, the perspective of Kish's narrator is detached from Ishmael's in the space between subject and object, *containing* the latter within its images rather than using the illustrations to inhabit Ishmael's lens. Instead of simply translating Ishmael's images into the visual language of illustration, the form of *Moby-Dick in Pictures* frames a narrator who switches between occupying the perspectives of Ishmael and other characters, and perceiving the events themselves as a completely abstracted observer. The structuralist logic that this understanding employs in order to consider Kish's work *as a narrative*, similar in many ways to understandings of comics as a form, will, when applied to other comics, divorce itself from the content of *Moby-Dick* in order to be turned back upon the literary narrative as it forms its images within the mind of the reader.

One of the clearest examples of Kish's narrative abstracting and objectifying Ishmael's original object, is the illustration for one page of "The Hyena," in which Ishmael considers "the

particular disaster to our own particular boat...imputed to Starbuck's driving on to his whale almost in the teeth of a squall" and describes the "diversion" among "all men sailors" of "tinkering at their last wills and testaments"²¹. Out of this page, *In Pictures* extracts the passage:

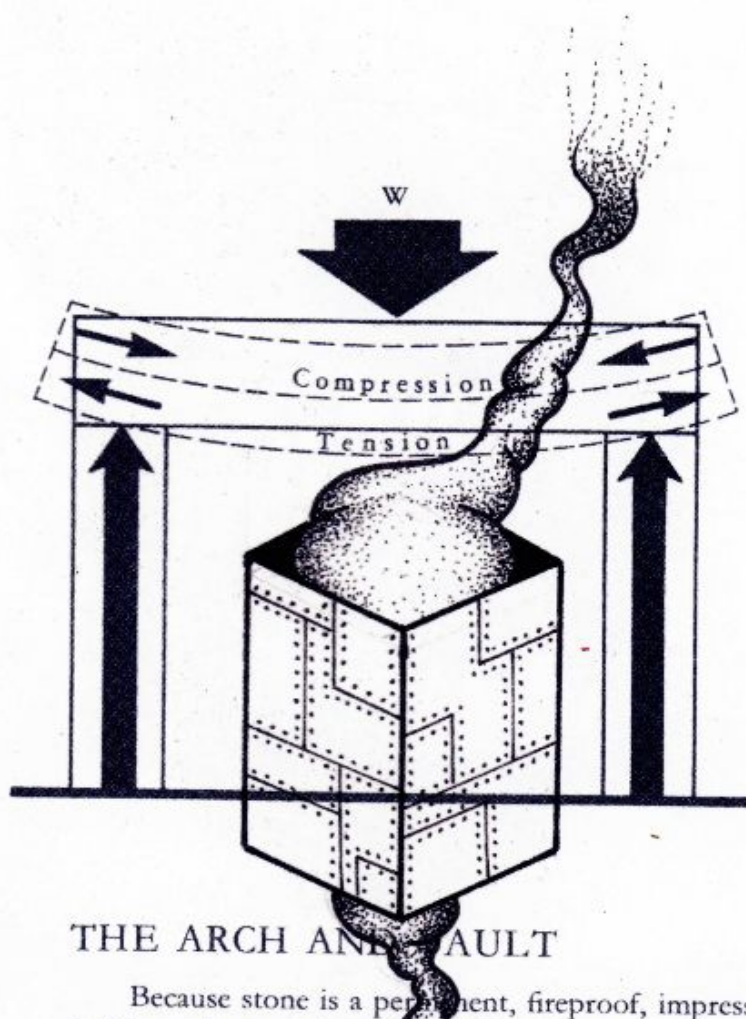
I looked round me tranquilly and contentedly, like a quiet ghost with a clean conscience sitting inside the bars of a snug family vault [figure 2]²².

Rather than illustrate the other characters in the scene, the illustration that accompanies this quote imagines Ishmael as the "quiet ghost...inside the bars of a snug family vault". In doing this, Kish's narrative perspective is abstracted from Ishmael's original object of description, describing instead that narrator's poetic imagination. Furthermore, rather than illustrate from the perspective of Ishmael inside the "snug family vault," Kish's narrator imagines the vault from the outside. In this way, *In Pictures*'s narrator makes the object of its description what is, for Ishmael, the vehicle of his image. Instead of watching the scene unfold alongside Ishmael, the narrator of *In Pictures* abstracts himself further from that initial object, instead containing the entirety of *Moby-Dick*'s narrative within its descriptive lens.

It is crucial to remember here that *Moby-Dick in Pictures* itself contains no reference to the events that Ishmael is observing in the moment explored above. Instead, the reader of Kish's work can only imagine what it is Ishmael is looking at from his ghostlike state. While looking at the illustration on the page, the reader forms in their own mind a conception of the space as it

²¹ Melville, 189.

²² The image is presented without a border, to give the effect of dimensional obscurity that one gets when viewing it in the context of Kish's original work. The borders of this drawing, unlike those of many others in the book, blend into the margins of the surrounding page.



THE ARCH AND VAULT

Because stone is a permanent, fireproof, impressive material, it was used by builders wherever it was available. The earliest attempts at building with this material were probably no more than piles of rocks heaped one upon the other, with a small space left open within the pile. The open space was created by piling the stones about it so that the upper stones projected slightly beyond the lower ones, gradually converging from all sides until they joined at the top of the structure. This is corbelled construction (Fig. 219). Examples of this method of construction

Figure 2: Matt Kish, *Moby-Dick in Pictures*, 221.

appears to Ishmael and the time that elapses throughout the described moment. In doing this, Kish's visual language literalizes that which is inherent as well to a reading of *Moby-Dick's* literary narrative; the role of the reader in imagining the image relative to their own experience and imagination. The visual language of *Moby-Dick in Pictures* isolates the role of conceiving space and time relative to the image nearly exclusively to the reader. However, although certain illustrations such as that cited previously allow for a more direct observation of this phenomenon, analyzing the role of the reader in forming Kish's images is not a question of content but rather one of form. The abstraction of space and time hinted at here is not due solely to the image itself, but rather the more general question of the reader's imagined sequence of words and images on the page.

In isolating certain images from Melville's novel and distilling them into the static, subjective illustration contained within the page, Kish's narrator exerts a control of space and time over the original text that inherently extends to the reader. One of the best ways to see this phenomenon in action is to look to illustrations in Kish's work which, in being drawn, are 'observed' in ways that Ishmael cannot by suspending them in space and time. One example of this is the illustration accompanied by the description, "the whales had irregularly settled bodily down into the blue, thus giving no distantly discernible token of their movement"(figure 3)²³.

In placing Ishmael's description next to a stylized portrayal of irregular shapes beneath the ocean, Kish's narrator gives shape to that which is 'indiscernible' to Ishmael within the described moment. By giving form to the formless, the lens of the description is detached from

²³ Melville, 183-184.

Ishmael's original narration and plunged, as it were, beneath the waves, This last phrase is employed literally; as the majority of the illustration is filled by blue 'water,' the narrator and reader are given access to a mode of observing the event other than Ishmael's original experience of it. While Ishmael recalls his position perched above the water, unable to perceive what lies below, *Moby-Dick in Pictures*, as a reflection rather than adaptation of that lens, is abstracted away from the original descriptive experience.

Though Melville's language of the "no[t] distantly discernible" provides a clear contrast to the illustration's 'discerning,' this logic of image and perspective is inherent to Kish's chosen form. In order to trace the narratology behind this visual language to conceptions of narrative sequence as a whole, images in comics must be read (to again borrow Melville's phrase) as inherent "token[s] of the movement," suspending the described object in both space and time within the visual perspective of the reader. Consider here the viewing Kish illustration of the whales in contrast to Ishmael's described experience. Ishmael is aboard the Pequod, attempting to recall the shapes of the constantly-moving whales through impenetrable water.

Kish's illustration literally suspends the movement of the whales in space and, therefore, the flow of Ishmael's original narrative. While the action, for Ishmael, is instantaneous, Kish's drawing — like words — suspends the represented image on the physical page, subsequently creation of distinct models of space and time, relative to the reader and narrator. In addition to providing the reader with a "token" to "discern," the projection of the image bends the flow of time to the reader looking at the page.



Figure 3: Matt Kish, *Moby-Dick in Pictures*, 213.

To better show how Kish's work manifests the split between two distinct models of time, one turns to a moment in *Pictures* when Ishmael and Kish's temporal perception of a moment differs greatly. From Melville's "The First Lowering" chapter, Kish cites the line, "...the brief suspended agony of the boat, as it would tip for an instant on the knife-like edge of the sharper waves, that almost seemed threatening to cut it in two"(figure 4). Upon first glance, the image that accompanies this passage seems a fairly straightforward adaptation of Ishmael's original narration. Rather than portraying the image from Ishmael's position aboard the boat, the illustration's perspective abstracted from its object enough to contain the entire boat and the waves that surround it. This mirrors Ishmael's retrospective description of the event in the original text, which contains the "vast swells of the omnipotent sea" within a "sight full of *quick* wonder and awe"(emphasis mine)²⁴. Kish's perspective over the scene resembles Ishmael's abstraction from the described, instantaneous moment in the act of personal retrospective. However, through a structural reading of *In Pictures*' visual language, one constructs a sense of space and time relative to the reader, irreconcilable from that of the narrator, in order to understand how the image is placed in sequence to the greater story.

It is here worth returning briefly Ishmael's narrative as retrospective, and the events and images as happening in Ishmael's past. Ishmael establishes his narrative as his recollection of past events, therefore allowing for the distinction to be made here between his perspective in telling the story and his perspective during the described events; though during the described

²⁴ Melville, 186.

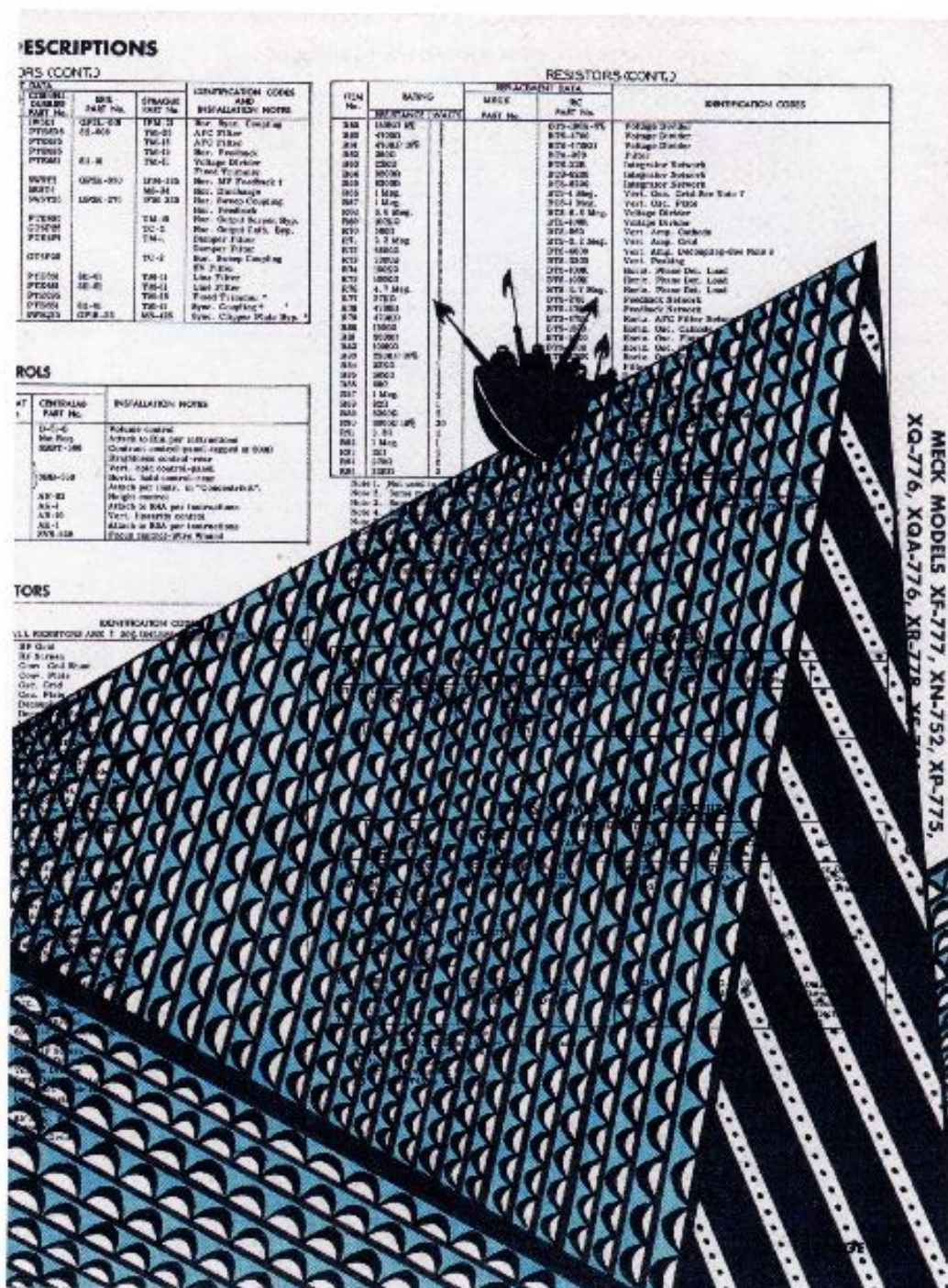


Figure 4: Matt Kish, *Moby-Dick in Pictures*, 216.

events he is contained to one boat, for example, he later uses this retrospective abstraction to contain in his narrative image “all the boats” at once²⁵. How exactly this separation in time allows for this abstraction will be explored further in later close readings of *Moby-Dick* as a standalone textual narrative, but it is here crucial to consider *In Pictures*’s narrative as abstracted from Ishmael’s *narrative* perspective in addition and distinction to the experiences he is recalling.

The “brief...instant” that Kish’s illustration suspends on the page is, in Ishmael’s narrative, only one of a sequence of “critical moments,” positioned alongside “the cries of the headsmen and harpooneers, and the shuddering gasps of the oarsmen, with the wondrous sight of the ivory Pequod bearing down upon her boats with outstretched sails”²⁶. All of these sights and sounds are, in the structure of Ishmael’s description, contained within a single moment; perhaps a second, or even less. In time, these images are simultaneous and overlapping, and give no indication as to how long the events actually lasted. Ishmael’s suspension of space time requires the reader to construct new models of both, relative to how they perceive the sequence of words laid out on the page before them. In the chronology of Kish’s entire sequence of images (that is, the book itself), the single “instant” contained in one page lasts as long as the reader spends within it.

In abstracting its narrator’s perspective even further away from Ishmael’s original ‘object’, *Moby-Dick in Pictures* expands this logic of ‘reader time’ within its adoption of the

²⁵ Melville, 186.

²⁶ Melville, 186.

visual illustration as a form. By being contained within the single illustration on the page, captioned only by the short selection quoted earlier, the image of the hunt persists only as long as the reader imagines it does in looking at the illustration itself, free as it is of any intertextual indication of how much time has passed. Because the image is here contained within the single panel, the described moment is abstracted in time just as its narrator is abstracted from Ishmael's original narrative source. As such, the illustration provides a sense of timelessness within the action akin to that contained in the source description; just as Ishmael removes time from his image by describing simultaneous events and sounds in sequence, Kish's illustration suspends one of those moments indefinitely. Both of these formal attributes serve to isolate time and sequence within the image to the control of the reader's experience, though Kish's narrator remains all the while abstracted from the original object. And though I will later explore further how the reader constructs time in literary narrative similar to that within the visual language of Kish's work, groundwork for a structuralist understanding of this idea can be seen in a return to McCloud's narratology of comics.

In attempting to understand panels in comics as dividing both space and time, McCloud argues that these divisions are inherently vague in order to better understand the reader's navigation of both the contents within the panels and their relation to each other within and between the page:

The panel acts as a sort of general indicator that time or space is being divided. The durations of that time and dimensions of that space are defined more by the contents of the panel than by the panel itself...which brings us to the strange

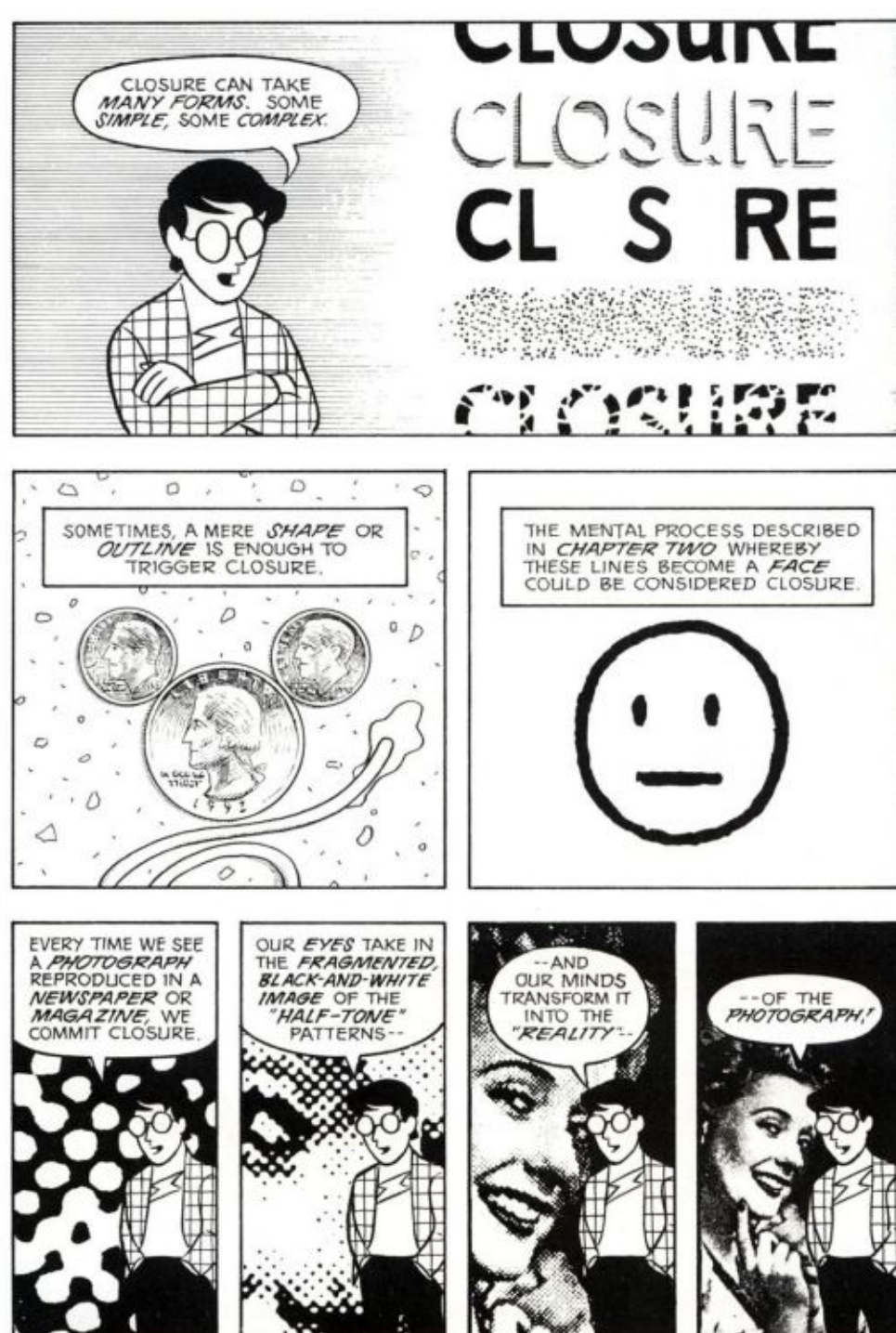
relationship between time as depicted in comics and time as perceived by the reader.²⁷

What is most noteworthy in McCloud's argument here is his simultaneous, overlapping consideration of the reader's navigation and construction of both "durations of that time and dimensions of that space" under the same structuralist narratology. McCloud argues that the image in narrative, specifically in comics, acts as an intersection of these two ideas manifested in the imagination of the reader. McCloud then extends this overlap of space and time, in the end of the passage, to include the subjectivity of the narrator as a distinct but inherent force operating on the construction of the image. In creating and exploring the distinction between "time as depicted" and "time as perceived," *Understanding Comics* employs a narratology that considers the images of narrative as reflections of both narrator subjectivity and reader's imagination, while simultaneously considering the differences inherent between the two.

McCloud's analysis separates portrayed time and perceived time by connecting the question of space and time within an image with that of a reader's imagination. In doing so, McCloud reframes his consideration of "time" under the same structural narratology that he uses to define comics as a medium, simultaneously extending his conception of time to consider the space of description and narrative as well.

In order to involve the role of the reader in his analysis of space and time within descriptive imagery, *Understanding Comics* introduces the concept which McCloud calls "Closure" to his structural narratology. McCloud defines 'closure' as "[the] phenomenon

²⁷ McCloud, 99.

Figure 5: Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 64.

of observing the parts but perceiving the whole,” and provides as practical examples of closure everything from seeing an arrangement of objects that resembles a known cartoon character, to perceiving a series of black and white dots as a photograph (figure 5). His employment of this concept argues that a reader of comics commits continuous, inherent acts of closure while navigating the space of the page, forming the “whole” image from the words and pictures arranged on the page.

In a continuation of the logic used earlier by McCloud to define “comics” as a “deliberate sequence” of pictures, this concept of closure similarly understands described images as containing various, often-overlapping sections of space and time simultaneously. Furthermore, McCloud’s use of ‘closure’ develops this model of narrative sequence relative to the reader’s relationship to the described world as much as it is to the narrator’s.

To understand better the role of closure in piecing together a narrative whole out of a sequence of images, it is helpful here to hold McCloud’s argument alongside the suspension of space and time seen previously in *Moby-Dick in Pictures*’s narrative abstraction from its source object. Alongside the examples of more everyday closure that McCloud uses to define it as a concept, he includes the “mental process” by which the minimal lines of a cartoon face are *perceived* as a face by the reader²⁸. Here and throughout *Understanding Comics*, McCloud suggests that the more visually abstracted from reality (i.e., ‘cartooney’) an image is, the more reading it as part of a narrative is an act of closure.

²⁸ McCloud, 64.

Here, McCloud's analytical lens seems to shift more towards visual art and away from parallels to literary narrative. However, as mentioned when exploring his definition of 'comics' early, McCloud places the written word on the same spectrum of visual 'cartoon-ness' and abstraction, positing that if a cartoon reflects reality less to convey meaning more, than written words "are the ultimate abstraction," with "meaning retained. resemblance gone"²⁹. This project will later explore these questions of visual abstraction from reality as they relate to textual imagery in a later structuralist reading of *Moby-Dick* more directly. But for now, one gleans from *Understanding Comics* a concern with the closure that results from imagined connections between words and images on a page and the space and time that those images portray.

Within the comics' panel, closure for McCloud is manifested in the need for the reader to imagined the contained illustration as part of a larger world. In many comics, and especially *Moby-Dick in Pictures*, the abstracted style chosen for the illustrations themselves often means that this closure is aided significantly by the text chosen to accompany that image. Return here to Kish's illustration of the "irregularly settled" whales explored earlier (figure 3).³⁰ In order to understand word and picture as part of the same descriptive image, the reader must acknowledge the drawn, heavily-stylized shapes as some representation of "whales". In this way, the closure of looking at comics' panels relies on imagining the space contained therein in relation to the rest of the narrative's described space. Alongside this, however, is the act of closure committed when

²⁹ McCloud, 47.

³⁰ Kish, 213.

the reader imagines the image on the page as existing in time in addition to space. As seen in another aforementioned Kish illustration, the reader must determine, for example, the length of a “brief...instant” based on their perception of the image and just how long they spend looking at it, creating in the process perceived time and portrayed time as two distinct entities (Figure 3).³¹

In exploring closure in comics, McCloud places much emphasis on this latter idea of perceived time relative to perceived space. Just as *Understanding Comics* constructs two distinct notions of time, so too does suggest a relationship between the space of the described world and the physical narrative space of the page itself. It is here, in this intermingling of narrative space with perceived time, that McCloud exhibits again his reliance on structural narratology to understand the reader’s role in creating the final image.

Moby-Dick in Picture’s manifestation of the interpretive reading act, read alongside McCloud’s structural comics narratology, begins to gesture towards a reading of Ishmael’s original text as a similarly visual experience. But before one can fully commit to the jump from comics to literature, one must better define space and time under this new reading. To do this, one can turn to examples of comics in which traditional methods of imagining images in sequence break down, forcing the reader to contend the with an irreconcilable perspective difference between themselves and the narrator — in the process, building senses of both relative to their own experience within and outside of the page. Reading these works allows one to observe these senses interacting in various ways with those of the narrator, in order to produce a

³¹ Kish 216.

coherent sequence of represented images that reflects both the reality of the described object and the thoughts and feelings of its orator.

Chapter 2: Paths Through Time

Reflecting on the influence of Richard McGuire’s 6-page 1989 comic “Here” — the predecessor to the expanded 2014 version which will be read more closely later in this chapter — graphic novelist Chris Ware praises McGuire’s “experimentation into the narrative tense of comics...which is, really, the concern for where exactly it is that the reader’s consciousness ‘is’ in the strip”³². In highlighting the role of “narrative tense” in reading a comic, Ware creates a system of time that functions between form and reader is, or McCloud as well, distinct from time as portrayed *by* the narrative itself:

One of the more infrequently considered aspects of comic strip storytelling is the transparent present tense in which everything seems to happen; i.e., things literally seem to move before the reader’s eyes³³.

For Ware, time as experienced by the reader is the result of a direct interaction between the reader’s imagination and the visual form and arrangement of a given comic strip. It is this sense of time, separate from that portrayed within the images themselves, that allows Ware to blanket all of comics storytelling under a singular, “transparent present tense”. Ware’s conception and definition of comics relies on examining the interacting functions of time and form, filtered through the experience of the reader viewing the work as a whole. While the perspective of the narrator certainly influences the interpretation of the final image (Ware gives a nod to those who “shake a little third person narration over choice panels, casting everything back into a

³² Chris Ware, “Richard McGuire and ‘Here’: A Grateful Appreciation,” *Comic Art* 8 (2006), 5-7.

³³ Ware, 5.

simulation of past tense, or memory”), time is ultimately restricted to its ‘presence’ in front of the reader, who understands and arranges the images on the page in relative sequence to one another³⁴.

As will be seen later when this project turns to the form of *Moby-Dick*’s descriptive representation, it is possible to view the reading of literature similarly in terms of a “transparent present tense” in which the icons on the page move “before the reader’s eyes,” and the freedom that this affords in how they construct a sense of narrative chronology. But before text alone can be brought into this conversation of representation in space and time, one must better understand the differences between the two forms, in order to trace the different influences that word and picture bear on the reader’s experience. In deciphering what it is about comics’ ‘narrative tense’ that separates that form from text alone, one finds in Ware and McGuire a focus on comics’ representation of a more “objective” described space than a literary narrative. Essentially, by combining words and images, graphic narratives can visually represent the objects of their description, while still filtering those images through the subjectivities of their narrator (by, for example, ‘shaking’ third person narration over them). However, for Ware and other comics scholars, the creation of a cohesive narrative out of those filtered words and images requires a focus on the direction of the reader’s attention, and their own senses of space and time that tie the icons on the page together.

In the reflection on McGuire’s work cited above, Ware brings space into his discussion of time in comics when he describes “things literally seem[ing] to move before the reader’s

³⁴ Ware, 6.

eyes". In defining comics' "transparent present tense," Ware distinguishes comics from literature through the former's 'literal' representation of the "things" it describes. For Ware, comics' visual representation of space transfers the experience of navigating that space into the imagination of the reader, creating a sense of space relative to the arrangement of word and image within and across the pages of the work itself. Visually, one can imagine the reader of a comic faced simultaneously with whatever is shown within its panels, as well as their arrangement on the page. The narrator's movement through the space and time they describe is activated by the reader's eye moving from one panel to the next, and forming spatial and temporal connections between the words and pictures within them. This logic in many ways mirrors that of Ware's conception of time in comics as well, wherein "tense" is only mildly influenced by how much

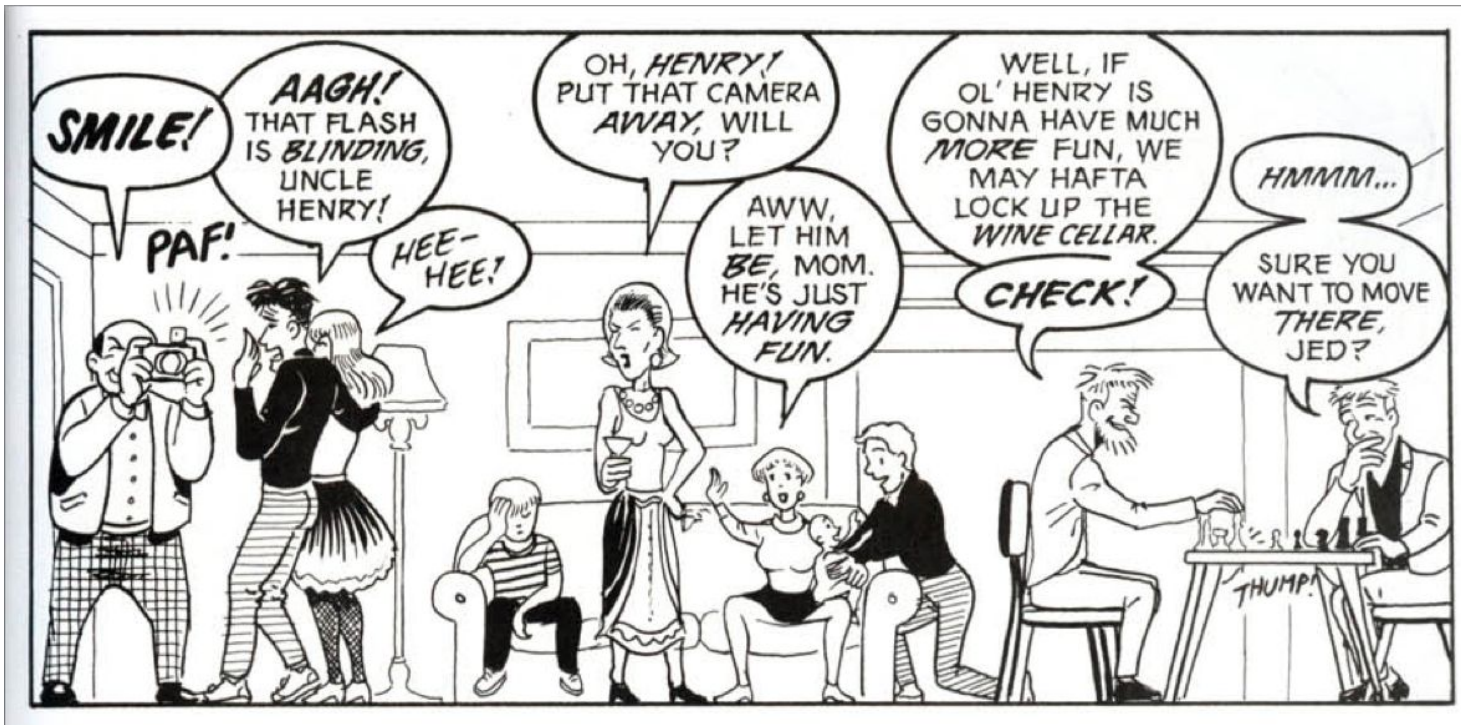


Figure 6: Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 94.

time is being described, and more so by how and when the reader chooses to imagine described moments in a relative chronology.

In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud uses this focus on reader perspective to produce a formal conception of space and time in graphic narrative, while upholding the stylistic and structural experimentation that takes place across various works. For example, McCloud's logic of time relative to space resists the idea that a single panel of comic necessarily contains one single moment, instead suggesting a model of time relative to the reader's eye moving across the page (figure 6). McCloud draws this panel to show how comics blend word and image, often within single panels, to transfer the sense of time passing onto the reader's navigation of the physical page. This is uniquely accomplished through the reader imagining the relationship not only between the images relative to each other in space, but also the time associated with each appearance of text:

Even the brief sound of a flash-bulb has a certain duration, short to be sure, but not instantaneous...Uncle Henry alone burns up a good second in this panel, especially since 'smile' undoubtedly preceded the flash ["paf!"]...Just as pictures and the intervals between them create the illusion of time through closure, words introduce time by representing that which can only exist in time — sound³⁵.

Here, McCloud acutely describes the intermingling of space and time through comics' unique language of word and image. As a graphic storyteller himself (the author's credits besides this book primarily include *Superman* comics and the space opera serial *Zot!*), McCloud shows a particular interest in transferring the sense of time as contained *within* the narrative onto the

³⁵ McCloud, 95.

reader's navigation of it. Of the panel above, McCloud writes that it "could last a good half minute or so" when one combines the implied durations of the various sounds in sequence³⁶. In this example, McCloud wants the reader's and the narrator's conceptions of described time to overlap, so that the former spends as much time 'in the moment' as any of the characters do. But this logic of overlap, like Ware's conceptions of space and time, still relies on an implicit, irreconcilable distinction between the experiences of reader and narrator. Because the reader's conception of a narrative is so tied to form, the artist is tasked with preconceiving their reader's perspective while arranging their words and pictures.

While McCloud uses this notion to simulate simultaneity between these two navigations of space, other artists, as suggested by Ware, create narrative sequence specifically through expanding the divide between these two chronological models. Richard McGuire, in the expanded, full-color *Here*³⁷, takes a near-opposite approach to space and time as McCloud does in the above panel. Instead of mirroring the sense of time experienced by the narrator onto the narrative form, *Here* draws its sequence from *spatial* continuity, in turn forcing the reader to construct a personalized sense of time distinct from that of the narrator.

Each two-page spread of *Here* portrays the same area of space. On most pages, that space is the corner of a living room, decorated and populated differently according a corresponding label showing the year in which that panel takes place. Over the course of the work, McGuire portrays the same space in the years between 3,000,000,000 BCE and 2314. The work's narrative

³⁶ McCloud, 95.

³⁷ Richard McGuire; *Here* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2014)

also describes the time before and after the house's construction and destruction, featuring some panels in which the walls of the house are not visible, but spatial continuity with previous pages is otherwise implied. In order to understand *Here*'s rejection of traditional methods of reading in the greater context of narrative sequence, one must employ a narratology focused on the reader's movement through and across the work's language and form.

The clash inherent to the structure of *Here*, between described spatial continuity and an extremely fractured chronology, overturns the relationship between space and time that allows many traditional narratives to be understood by a viewer. In many (indeed most) comics, and almost any film, time provides the basis of chronological understanding for the viewer while space changes in accordance with it. As an example, consider any film in which a sudden, radical change in space is understood because of how much time is said to have passed ('two hours later...'). In the absence of such linguistic cues, often more implicit visual hints are employed; in the cut between a shot of characters in their apartment packing for a vacation and a wide shot of an airplane over a distant land, for example, the change in space is justified by the viewer's inferral that the time taken to travel to the airport, board the plane, and fly to where the plane is has passed in between.

This logic also provides the basis for scenes of cinematic montage such as the 'Odessa Steps' sequence in Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 *Battleship Potemkin*. The scene shows a crowd of civilians fleeing the advance of armed soldiers, an event that realistically could take a couple of minutes at most. However, wider shots of the crowd running down the steps are cut with the close-up reactions of various crowd-members, sustaining the sequence for a runtime of about

seven minutes. Understanding the sequence in the context of the film's greater chronology (i.e., that it didn't *really* take seven minutes), results from visual cues that the reactions are happening somewhat simultaneously; that is, that they are all members of that same crowd.

Inherent to this aspect of visual narrative is the extent to which the reader's experience of time in reading or viewing a work exists entirely separate from how much time is described *by* that work. Far from exclusive to comics and film, this is true of almost any media describing a sequence of events; a two-hour movie may portray events taking place over the course of multiple centuries, as may a graphic novel or work of literature. In many narratives, like in the film examples above, one's sense of experienced time allows them to comprehend changes in described



Figure 7: Richard McGuire, *Here*.

space relative to each other in sequence.³⁸

In *Here*, however, the notion of time providing narrative context to changes in space is turned on its head. Layered over most spread-sized panels are smaller panels, labeled with years sometimes radically different than those of their containing pages. In every case, these panels are positioned relative to each other in order to reflect their position relative to the portrayed space.

An example of this is the corner's window, which overlaps visually into panels portraying time decades apart. In the half-spread show previously (figure 7), one can see this spatial continuity — indicated by folds of the window curtain— between the panels labeled 1960, 1957, and 1972. This visual progression of space allows the viewer to understand, in context, the panel labeled 1870, in which the walls of the house are not present. Because of the logic of portrayed space suggested by the other three panels on the page — as well as the structure of every spread leading up to it — the reader is called upon to fill the gaps in space and time between the 'earliest' panel and those that surround it. In imagining the time elapsed between 1870 and 1972, and aided by the structural logic of the work as a whole, the reader intuits that the wall was not constructed in 1870, rather than assuming that that one panel portrays a completely different place.

³⁸ There is much to be said — and *Understanding Comics* says a lot of it — about the differences between time as experienced when reading a book or comic versus that when one watches a film. The biggest difference, for the sake of this reading, is the extent to which that experience of time is controlled by the author and reader. In film, the viewer has much less control over how much time it takes to experience the narrative in full; even if one pauses and takes breaks, it still takes a relatively set amount of time to watch the film in its entirety. In comics and literature, however, this experienced time is far more in control of the reader, who can literally choose to 'spend more time' on and within certain passages or images.

Deciphering the narrative continuity of *Here*'s 300-odd pages is matter of observing how the work's form creates a visual continuity that exists only for the reader interacting with the narrative as a visual object. In the panel above, a viewer notes a postural similarity between the two women shown, each walking in the same direction with arms at their sides. This provides a sense of sequence to the images across the page that is free of time as portrayed by the narrative; understanding the two women as thematically related to each other is a matter of suspending, for a moment, the eighty-seven year gap between them, and viewing them instead as objects and symbols relative to each other on the page. This also serves to provide some guidance as to how a reader's eye might navigate the page and, subsequently, the illustrated spaces contained within it. McGuire himself suggests a notion similar to this in a 2014 interview with NPR. Discussing another spread in *Here*, McGuire says:

You see a woman helping a child tie her shoe. And the way she's pulling on the laces, I thought that's where I would group things thematically...on the other side of the room, you see someone with a cat's cradle. And they're pulling the string in their hands. And then in the lower right-hand corner, there's these two guys dragging away this mysterious bundle...And there is a story behind that³⁹.

In discussing the arrangement of his panels, and the visual and thematic continuity between images of hands, McGuire notes an element of reading and viewing that is perhaps less obvious in *Here* than other, more traditional narratives. This is the extent to which the viewer is tasked with creating "a story" from the sequence of images in both time and space. Though the artist's choice of visual arrangement is of course the lens through which the described world is

³⁹ Richard McGuire, "Billions Of Years Go By, All In The Same 'Room.'" interview by Rachel Martin. *NPR*, December 7, 2014

seen, fundamentally accepting the work itself as a narrative means molding space and time in a manner that makes sense to the reader. In this way (and others, as will be explored), *Here*'s continuity of space — both portrayed and experienced — provides the logic for radical, constant, and otherwise simultaneous changes in time. In forming a cohesive narrative out of *Here*'s arrangement of chronologically fragmented images, one better understands the role of time as they experience it while navigating a physical narrative space.

In order for the earlier film examples to 'work,' the viewer *must* be able to rationalize radical changes in described space, aided frequently by a relatively intuitive flow of time. However, as in McCloud's definition of comics, the viewer must still ultimately map the physical space contained within the narrative - and between radical, visual changes in time - themselves. *Here* essentially adopts this relationship between a viewer and the narrative's interplay of space and time, but reverses the more traditional notion of changes in space relying on cohesive time to form a narrative. *Here*'s strict spatial continuity enables and requires the viewer to fill the space between discontinuous time, creating a *personal* sense of time's passing guided by intuitive and continuous physical space. In the same way that *Here*'s characters mold and adopt the room corner for themselves, a viewer of *Here* relies on and customizes the physical structure of the narrative in order to imagine its timeline. In the half-spread shown explored earlier, this can be understood through the various questions of space and time left open to the viewer; how quickly are the two women walking? How long have they been where they started, and is anyone watching television in 1972? By enforcing a failure of traditional models of narrative chronology, *Here* forces the reader to fill in the blanks with their own experience

looking at the image itself. The method of reading that is required to theorize *Here* in this way must therefore consider the reader's navigation of the comic's visual language as providing sequence to the arrangement of images, in order to even approach *Here* as a 'story' in the first place. Because the time portrayed by *Here* is so vast and overlapping, the reader is unable to imagine a story from the events in portrayed chronological sequence; instead, the constant image of the corner of the room, and the visual cues provided by the constraints of the panels themselves, allow for the tracing of a consistent narrative perspective, and the construction of a story as a result.

Approaching *Here* as a self-contained narrative requires drawing a strict connection between the dimensions of its panels and the dimensions of the space being described. In order to accomplish this, *Here* eschews some traditional aspects of comics storytelling, in the process divorcing this panel structure from the reader's experience of time. As seen in earlier readings of McCloud's work, graphic novelists can employ various formal tactics to imply a certain duration of time, such as the size of the panel itself, and the implied durations of the words and sounds within it. In comics such as these, the arrangement of panels on the page aligns the reader's perception of time with that of the narrator's perspective.

However, neither of these tools serve this function in *Here*. Without fail, each two-page spread of the book contains one panel of the same size. The panels layered over those spreads vary drastically in size, drawn more to contain certain *things* than to contain a certain duration of time. This is heightened by the fact that, no matter the size, every single panel in the work is labeled with the same amount of time; one year. Labeling each panel this way further pushes the

sense of narrative cohesion into the imagination of the reader, rendering the structure and arrangement of the panels themselves useless as an indicator of how much time is elapsing within them.

This logic also holds true when one compares McCloud's view of text and sound as indicators of time with McGuire's construction of *Here's* pages. Because of the labeling system he employs, the words and sounds throughout *Here* are relevant to one's conception of time only in how long it takes one to read them. Within time as portrayed by the images, moments of dialogue, no matter how long, all remain vaguely suspended in whatever year is assigned to them. Instead of relying on the time within each panel — again, noted as one whole year — reading *Here* becomes a matter of viewing these images in relation to each other spatially within the confines of the two-page spread. As such, the sequence of events that forms the story of *Here* conforms to how the reader's eye moves about the page. Just as panel size, in many comics, can serve as an indication of time passed within an illustrated moment, so too can it serve to attract the viewer's eye to a certain part of the page. This is an aspect of comic's visual language that separates it from the language of (most) literature; the ability to alter the size (or color, shape, or any other visual facet) of icons on the page in order to direct the reader's attention. To consider this process in action, one can turn to a spread of *Here* in which the arrangement of panels resists traditional notions of narrative time while also toying with how a reader might traditionally navigate the page of a comic (figure 8). In this image, the arrangement of images relative to each other rejects a traditional method of reading, further forcing the reader to construct narrative sequence from their perceptions of space and time.



Figure 8: Richard McGuire, *Here*.

Generally, most (English) comics are built around a standard top-down, left-to-right structure.⁴⁰ Though the visual language of comics necessarily distinguishes these works from, say, a literary narrative, this spatial arrangement on the page suggests an interest in replicating an intuitive model of reading, in order to make the combination of words and pictures less jarring for the reader.

In order to understand the role of reader subjectivity in navigating a spread in *Here* like that above, it is useful to offer a number of ways in which a hypothetical viewer may be drawn to the page. If one sticks to a traditional method of reading informed by their experience with textual narrative (it is helpful here to remember that the image stretches across two pages, with the “1938” panel just slightly overlapping the median between them), they may be drawn first to the top-left corner of the spread, to the “1976” label and then down to the ‘first’ appearance of dialogue (2014; “We do as we do”). From here, the reader has a number of options, all of which eventually dismantle this traditional method of reading. If one’s eye travels right from the 2014 panel, into that containing the chair and sleeping infant, they find themselves crossed over into the second page before observing either the second occurrence of dialogue (“Doo be doo be doo...”) or the panel showing pre-construction footsteps. The overlapping placement of the ‘1938’ panel can force the reader to backtrack, in the process overturning their expectations of narrative sequence.

Otherwise, from ‘2014,’ a reader may choose to follow the visual and thematic continuity of dialogue, moving directly from “We do as we do” to the phonetically similar “Doo be doo be

⁴⁰ Anyone seeking proof of this need only reach for the nearest ‘Sunday Funnies’ page.

doo". If they then continue on to '1869,' they will eventually need to work their way back up the page, to '1938.' Like that panel's overlapping into the second page of the spread, this navigation also forces the reader to work against their traditional notions of reading, and to construct a new sequence of described events from that confusion. This idea also holds true if one's eye is first drawn to the largest sub-panel of the spread, that of the woman standing in water ('1352'). In looking at this image first, the reader must either — as in the other examples — work “backwards” or skip over the first page entirely.

Despite only being able to see objects and moments that the narrator chooses to show, reading *Here* as a story ultimately relies on the reader's personal navigation and construction of both space and time as they interact with the work as a physical object. Hypothetically, one could form a story out of *Here* by reading the pages and panels in whatever order they wished⁴¹. The connections drawn between *Here*'s words and images take place within the imagination of the reader, based on how long they look at each panel, and in what order. This logic begins to gesture towards how one can also consider reading a block of text as a similarly visual experience. The theory of reading that allows one to imagine a cohesive sense of space and time amongst *Here*'s rejection of traditional methods allows one to subsequently locate the reader's experience at play in any act of reading.

Reading *Here* in this way allows one to frame the role of the reader's imagination during the act of reading. This framing allows one to better navigate comics' employment of a visual

⁴¹ In the previously cited *NPR* Interview, McGuire states that he “did toy with the idea of having...the pages of each book shuffled so that each book was a unique experience”.

language to bridge the spatial and temporal gaps between the narrator's perspective and the objects they describe. In reading McGuire's work, one observes an overlap between the spatial confines of the described space (the corner of the living room), and those of form itself (the dimensions of the page). The same amount of space is always contained within each page, and the largest panels of each spread are all the same size. By joining together reader and narrator's conceptions of space in this way, *Here* allows the former to piece together 'a story' from its temporally fragmented descriptions. Specifically, this story comes about specifically because the reader is able to work around time as the work portrays it, opting instead for that which they personally spend invested in the images.

In order to understand this role of reader imagination as it relates to the form and language of comics more generally, one can turn to another work, in which the formation of a story relies inherently on the reader's freedom to choose where to look. While *Here* finds continuity in its reader's exploration of a consistent, confined space, Chris Ware's *Building Stories*⁴² takes advantage of a feature unique to the act of reading (as opposed to, say, watching a film); the choice of where, and for how long, to look on each page. As in all comics (and, I will argue, in textual narratives such as *Moby-Dick*) readers of both *Here* and *Building Stories* construct a sense of time and space relative more to the arrangement of icons on the page than to the content they represent.

A reader of *Here* is offered numerous ways to view each page, but this freedom of choice is contained strictly into the consistent, often walled-off space being portrayed, as well as the

⁴² Chris Ware, *Building Stories* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

consistence of the work's form itself — that is, the dimensions of the pages themselves. If McGuire's work expands and relies upon the reader's construction of time relative to their experience, *Building Stories* expands this idea to the difference between the space being described and space as the reader experiences it. In *Here*, these two conceptions of space align in order to allow the navigation of extremely fragmented time. In offering a viewer a near-infinite number of ways in which to view its physical form, *Building Stories* shows similarly how a reader of comics' visual language constructs a personal, subjective sense of space.

The freedom of spatial navigation offered by *Building Stories* is clear, quite literally, as soon as one opens Ware's comic. The sole edition of the work comes packaged in a cardboard box, closer in size to a board game or large coffee-table book than a traditional work of literature (or most comics, for that matter). The box contains fourteen different comics, ranging in size and presentation and including traditional comic strips, a cloth-bound book, a broadsheet newspaper, and a cardboard quarter-fold four times the length and width of the box itself, to name only a few. Thematically, each work focuses on some way on a Chicago apartment building, and the lives of its (human or otherwise) occupants. Nowhere on the box — nor within any of the individual works — does Ware offer any guidance as to what order the works should be read in. Instead, a reader is invited to read the works in whichever order they wish.⁴³ The freedom of navigation presented here shows how the perspectives of reader and narrator create two different senses of space.

⁴³ Or, in my case, to become quickly overwhelmed by the sheer amount of material, read a few panels of each, and then abandon the work for months.

Opening a copy of *Building Stories* for the first time can be overwhelming, itself an overturning of many expectations of reading a book or comic. But the freedom that *Building Stories* offers is not unique to its experimental approach, but rather an expansion of a facet of reading inherent to any visual language. Unlike watching a film, the reader of a book or comic has, at all times during the reading, the ability to ‘look ahead,’ in both the physical space of the narrative and the time that it is describing. While this is a more visual sensation in comics — as McCloud notes, to view the page of a comic is to have “both past and future...real and visible all around us” — the format of literature as well grants this freedom⁴⁴. By skipping ahead in the pages of a book, for example, one continues to construct a sense of subjective time divorced from that described within it.

Like the dual function of time explored earlier, this formal freedom of reading operates under a clear distinction between the space that the reader navigates and that described and observed by the narrator. The purpose of creating this distinction is not to suggest that one dominates the other, but rather to explore the unconscious exchanges that take place between them. *Building Stories* is an example of a work in which the freedom of the reader to navigate that space is heightened to its near-maximum; but that freedom grapples with the limitations put forward by the act of reading. Though one is able, in *Building Stories*, to navigate the pages in many different ways, they will never see the actual building being described. Instead, their images of that space are restricted to that which the narrator chooses to show them, as well as the personal style used to do so. Though individual artists arrange panels — and the objects within

⁴⁴ McCloud, 104.

them — in different ways relative to the reader's perspective, the reader of *Building Stories* and most other comics is still often informed by a traditional model of reading; though one can read the individual works in whatever order they want, one would be hard pressed to make sense out of reading one of them backwards. The reader's freedom in navigating the space of the work is therefore constantly at play with the restrictions of the narrator's chosen form, and the expectations that they have as a result. The very act of reading inherently necessitates defining a sense of space distinct from that being described, in order to understand the reader's role in making sense of it all.

Close reading individual pages of *Building Stories* shows how the reader's freedom to perceive space and time influence the resulting images' representation of their object. One such page comes in the aforementioned quarter-fold (figure 9)⁴⁵. Here, what path the viewer chooses through the page fundamentally alters their experiences with space and time, both in the act of reading and the story contained within. Like in earlier analyses of *Here*, much of this has to do with a play on the reader's expectations of reading itself. One of these expectations is the tendency to 'start' at the top-left of the page. Doing so finds one looking at a scribbled note with many words crossed out or revised. From here, one is offered two directions in which to travel, indicated by arrows the same color as the paper the note is scribbled on.

⁴⁵ This panel is the furthest left of four panels, each of the same size and illustrating the Chicago building from the same perspective and distance. It is very difficult to open to just one page; while looking at this panel, one also has three others very similar to it within view at all times.

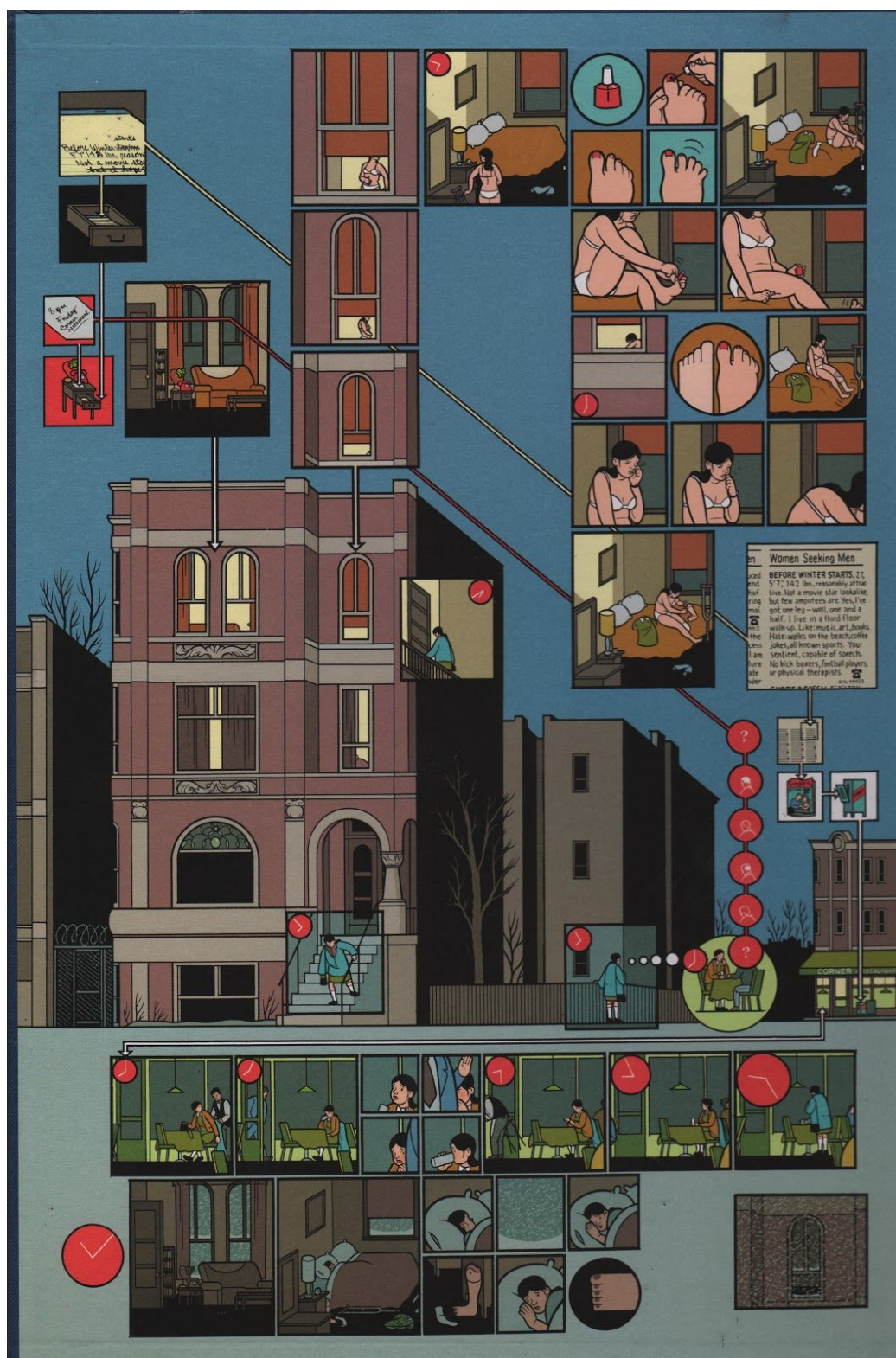


Figure 9: Chris Ware, *Building Stories*.

The first option⁴⁶ moves one's eye in a downward diagonal to a close-up of a newspaper clipping. Unlike the other path, the viewer is here provided immediate context for the note in the top-left. Following the path, we see that it was the first draft of a "Women seeking Men" ad, then that ad's placement relative to the larger column, then the magazine it is printed in ("Singles") and then the roadside box where it is offered ("Free"). If this is the first of the fourteen works that this viewer removes from the box, the second panel along this path is also the first time they learn that the main character of *Building Stories* is an amputee ("Not a movie star lookalike, but few amputees are"). Of all of the paths that will be followed here, this one also offers the shortest and most direct route from the top-left to the sub-strip that takes up the bottom of the page, in a transition mediated by the visual continuity of the restaurant building.

The second path from the top-left-most panel leads one downwards, to the notepad's placement in a side table. Like the first path, this one also offers a relatively straightforward downward diagonal across the page. However, one cannot get to this section of the path without first willingly working against the 'path' system established by the guiding arrows in the first place. Traversing from the side table panel to that containing 'date' plans ("8pm Friday Corner restaurant") requires the eye moving 'up' an arrow pointing down. This begins to hint at the reader's freedom to navigate narrative space in ways other than those offered directly by the narrator, an idea critical to observing other methods of navigating a work like *Building Stories*.

From the panel listing dinner plans, the guiding arrow adopts a red color. This signifies a transition into the main character's mind as the eye travels down the page, eventually traversing

⁴⁶ Perhaps following one's 'top-down, left-to-right' habits..

a sequence of imagined faces for her blind date. The path then abandons arrows completely, adopting a green circular panel and a backwards white cloud to transition the image back into the ‘reality’ of the protagonist waiting to enter the restaurant. In keeping with *Building Stories*’ experimentation with structures of narrative space and time, this shift backwards on the page mirrors one in time, indicated by the clocks present in these latter two ‘real’ panels. These clocks, and the others scattered across the page, embody time as it is portrayed by the story itself. Following the clocks is the most reliable method if one wants to imagine the events shown on the page in *described* sequence to one another.

However, in the sense of time *perceived* by the reader, the path offered by the clocks is certainly not the simplest; indeed, the complications that arise when one attempts to do so very nearly encourages one to willingly ignore the clocks in the first place. Following the clocks in chronological order requires jumping across multiple groups of panels, each containing their own implied sequence of images; simply starting at the earliest clock (seen in the top-middle of the page) requires jumping into the middle of the pictorial sequence beginning at the building’s leftmost third story window. These complications require more time to be invested by the reader in order to understand described time at its most straightforward. By radically divorcing these two models of time from each other, one better understands their relation to the visual sequence implied by the page, and the reader’s freedom to work against it.

To return briefly to the notion of a ‘quickest’ method of navigation, the two arrows leading from that first scribbled notepad offer, both visually and in experienced time, the two paths of least resistance. In addition to providing straight diagonal arrows leading one to the

bottom-right, these paths also contain the fewest and smallest panels of any sequence⁴⁷ on the page.

However, taking either of these paths blocks the viewer from ever viewing the apartment's interior. The closest one gets is the panel showing the side table decontextualized in a flat field of red, the same shade as the arrow that guides the eye into the protagonist's imagination. Perhaps the easiest way for the reader to enter the building is through the first panel intersected by the red arrow, seen next to the dinner plans, which consequently places the side table firmly in the living room of one apartment. However, moving one's eye from the red path to that panel requires abandoning the logic of narrative sequence suggested by the arrows; this is easiest to imagine as the reader 'jumping off' of the red arrow, and falling 'into' the page and onto the panel showing the couch. In order to access the interior of the building, and images only seen as a result, the viewer makes use of the formal inseparability between their experience of the narrative structure and the space and time contained within it.

It is possible to read one's entrance into the protagonist's apartment in this way as beginning the sub-strip that shows her painting her toes. Compared to the two exterior paths, following this strip requires the reader to spend more time within the page, extending their sense of time across what is *portrayed* to be just over ten minutes (indicated by clocks). Curiously, getting from this opening panel (once one makes the plunge) to the arrow that leads out of the other third-story window requires skirting around the outside of the building. Even once the

⁴⁷ Excluding smaller 'free-hanging' panels — such as that of the protagonist walking down her front steps — and any panel part of a larger 'sub-strip,' such as those spent painting her toenails and sitting in the restaurant.

reader is shown the inside for the first time, they are forced to reenter through the panels showing the window shade rising, and the protagonist entering the frame.

These two aspects of this sub-section highlight the constant interaction between the reader's navigational freedom and the restrictions of the narrative perspective and form, as well as their influence on our models of both time and space. Even while offering a nearly objective view of the apartment building, navigating this page of *Building Stories* requires tacitly agreeing to the narrator's ability to direct the reader's attention, perhaps even when that reader is willingly working against that direction.

By rejecting and circumventing various traditional models of reading, both *Building Stories* and *Here* force one to construct new models of time and space in narrative as perceived by both reader and narrator. In addition to allowing one to better see how the images in both comics reflect their narrators and objects simultaneously, this narratology also affords a new reading of *Moby-Dick*'s narrative as a similarly visual experience, conscious of many of the same freedoms afforded to the reader of comics' blend of word and image.

Chapter 3: This Whale of a Book

Armed with the models of reader space and time shown in readings of comics' employment and direction of them, it is possible to turn back to *Moby-Dick* to apply the implications of reading as a visual experience to literature's textual narrative. The turn from comics to Melville's work is motivated not by a need to offer a new reading of it alone, but rather the novel's position as the most convenient example of these forces at work within text as a visual language. It is useful to recall here the illustrations of Matt Kish's *Moby-Dick in Pictures*, which serves as a tangible example of a reader's ability — or perhaps need — to 'visualize' the images within Melville's work. While this alone justifies somewhat the turn to *Moby-Dick* specifically, the logic behind Kish's project is not unique to Ishmael's narrative. Hypothetically, one could replicate the "...*In Pictures*" formula with any work of text, illustrating their perceptions of each image or page.⁴⁸ Returning to Kish here establishes a theoretical bridge between literature and comics as visual experiences, and brings the previously explored logics of space and sequence along with it.

While this reading of *Moby-Dick* follows those of *Building Stories* and *Here*, and is framed within the context of Kish's interpretive project, this is not to suggest that the reader possesses the same freedoms navigating a work of text as a visual narrative like comics. Rather, turning these ideas onto literature requires a greater focus on the framing powers of a narrator's subjectivities, operating within and against traditional notions of reading processes. Much of the

⁴⁸ Kish did so again in 2013 with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

same logic that sees the reader of comics consenting (or not) to formal indications of space and time in order to form an image relative to the described world also sees a reader of *Moby-Dick* contending with the limited worldview that frames the description.

As suggested briefly in this project's opening chapter, *Moby-Dick*'s opening command addresses head-on the role of the reader in constructing the narrator's perspective as it relates to the images that follow. Simultaneously, Ishmael here asserts the dominance of his perspective over the form and structure of the text itself, asking to be called Ishmael whether that is his 'real' name or not. However, despite seeming to posit the dominance of Ishmael's imagination over that of his audience, the language of "Call me Ishmael" suggests a model of exchange between reader and narrator, rather than mere dominance⁴⁹. Put simply, 'calling' is an action. As opposed to, say, "Imagine I am Ishmael," the act of calling invokes the active voice of the reader in constructing and locating Ishmael as both a narrator and character. Before any actual description can enter the text, the narrative presents as its backdrop a discursive relationship between source and audience in which the information provided by the former is given space and sequence by the active imagination of the latter.

While "Call me Ishmael" functions well enough by itself as an example of this acknowledgement, tracing the progression of Ishmael's commands to his reader throughout *Moby-Dick*'s opening pages better serves an understanding of the reader's construction of Ishmael's perspective as it relates to the ideas of space and time embodied by and experimented

⁴⁹ Melville, 18.

with by the more actively visual language of comics. To see how Ishmael continues to regard his reader as he transitions into the novel's more descriptive sequences, one does not have to go very far at all. Indeed, the novel's first description is interrupted by the narrator once again directly addressing his audience's imaginative powers:

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago — never mind how long precisely — having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world⁵⁰.

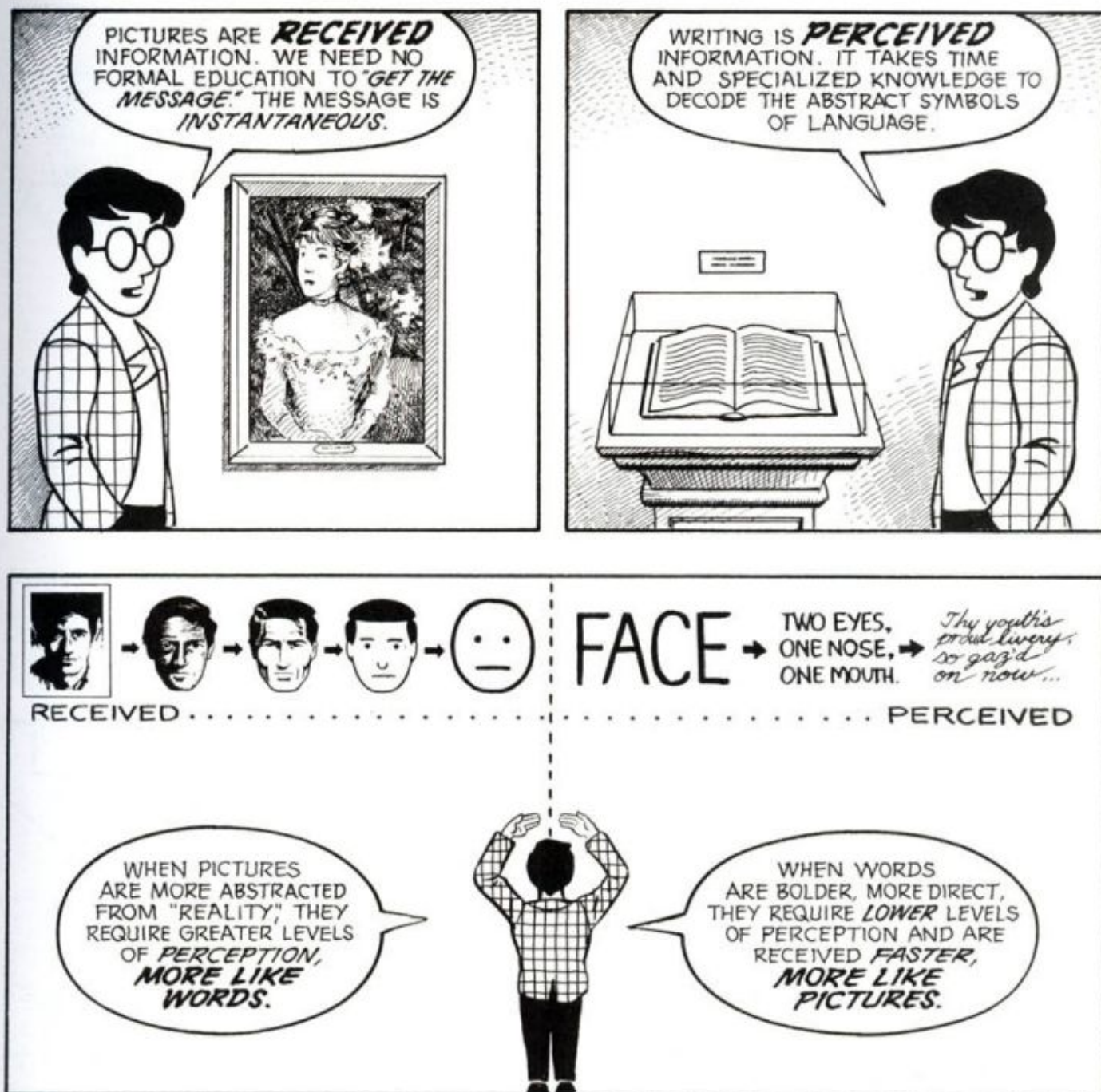
Immediately after declaring his perspective-based identity and acknowledging the necessity of action on the part of the reader, Ishmael — and therefore the reader — is unable to complete *Moby-Dick's* opening image without noting the conscious decision to “never mind” the specific duration of time being described. Like in the novel's opening command, Ishmael here asks the reader to submit to the narrator's ability to withhold certain descriptive information, then goes on to demonstrate that power three times in a row. His concealment of the exact length of time elapsed is followed immediately by a similar concealment of how much (“little or no”) money he had, and of what was “on shore” that failed to pique his “interest”. In this last example in particular, Ishmael uses the acknowledgement of the reader to assert the dominance of his “interest” over the portrayal of time and space within *Moby-Dick's* imagery and structure. Because of the narrator's apparent lack of interest in the object of description, the reader is denied information with which to locate that object in the portrayed reality's time and space.

⁵⁰ Melville, 18.

However, armed with Scott McCloud and graphic narratology's understanding of reading as a visual experience, it is possible to link this 'denial' of 'objective' information to an expansion of the role of the reader's subjective imagination. *Understanding Comics* is particularly useful here for McCloud's imagination of words and pictures on the same spectrum, a spectrum of what he labels "iconic abstraction"⁵¹. Essentially, McCloud argues that, as visual representative objects, pictures become 'more like words' the further they get from showing the 'objective reality' of their objects, by requiring more interpretive, perceptive power from the viewer in order to complete the image. *Understanding Comics* accomplishes this by imagining a spectrum between images of purely "received" information (photographs), and words wherein objective information is more ("Thy youth's proud livery, so gaz'd on now") or less ("FACE") "perceived" by the viewer (figure 10).

Understanding Comics hinges its visualization of the link between words and images on the degree to which the reader is involved in imagining the objective facts of an event or image being described, thereby creating a sense of *perceived* and *experienced* space and time that gesture in various ways towards the 'reality' of the described moment. For McCloud, words, as symbolic icons, obscure objective representation and contain their meaning within the imagination of the viewer. In comics such as *Here* and *Building Stories*, artists can attempt to accomplish a similar obscuring by visually restricting the panel(s) to certain objects or moments, forcing the reader to infer the space and time that encapsulate them.

⁵¹ McCloud, 50.

Figure 10: Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 49.

This idea extends to literature however, and specifically *Moby-Dick* when one considers how Ishmael fills and refers to the visual ‘space’ of his text. Specifically, one finds in *Moby-Dick* An attention given by the narrator to his reader’s ability to imagine and know things outside of the text itself. In order to see this, one can return to the opening of the novel, and Ishmael’s descriptions of himself and the world around him. Just as Ishmael’s various requests of his reader (“Call me,” “never mind”) embraces the reader’s ability to imagine specific details within the image, the body of *Moby-Dick*’s opening paragraph finds the narrator embracing the word’s ability to redirect objective representation into the mind of the viewer⁵².

It has already been explored how the novel’s opening lines, in addition to calling upon the reader in various commands, exhibit the role of Ishmael’s “interest” in obscuring certain information from the reader, allowing them to fill in the gaps. In doing this, Ishmael highlights internal processes — his interests, passions, and thoughts — as the guiding force providing structure to the narrative and to the text as a visual object itself. The descriptive language that Ishmael uses embraces the poetic ability of writing to contain the final image in space and time as perceived by the viewer.

In this current section of *Understanding Comics*, McCloud creates a visual spectrum of words to go alongside that of varying degrees of ‘realistic’ drawings. In order to gauge how certain arrangements of words require increasing amounts of ‘perceived’ information, McCloud transforms both the visual style and the content of the words themselves. Both of these changes suggest an increase in reader involvement the more the text betrays the subjectivity of its

⁵² Melville, 18.

narrator. Visually, the letters change from a minimalist, bold font (“FACE”); to the standard comic’s minimalist handwriting (“two eyes...”); and finally elaborate script; highlighting the ‘hand’ of the artist or narrator behind the writing. Alongside this, the content of the writing accumulates notably poetic words as more information is deflected to the reader’s imagination, with the language itself describing more and more the perspective of the narrator describing the face “so gaz’d on now”⁵³.

While the multiple editions of *Moby-Dick*, and the various standardized printing practices that produce their physical objects, deflect much exploration into the visual style of the text, one remains able to observe the object of the text as a whole and what content is used to fill that visual space. In order to transfer McCloud’s conceptualization of language as a form onto a reading of *Moby-Dick*, one can here temporarily abandon the discussion of how different styles of letters influence the experience of reading, and instead turn to content of language as filling the visual space of the page similar to comics. In McCloud’s illustration, there is a subliminal link between the poeticism of content and how much information is perceived by the reader because, according to *Understanding Comics*, that poeticism betrays the ‘hand’ of the author just as if the lettering were written in script.

McCloud’s connection between poeticism of language and perspective of the storyteller is founded on a conception of words as the ultimate form of representational abstraction. In considering how words ‘represent’ the objects and events they are describing, *Understanding Comics* unites words and images under the representational spectrum of “iconic abstraction”(46)

⁵³ McCloud, 49.

⁵⁴. Essentially, an image is more iconic the more it emphasizes the *concepts*—as opposed to the appearance—of its object. In turn, cartoonists can therefore entice the involvement of the reader in piecing together the images of the narrative itself. This concept is best explained when McCloud justifies drawing himself in such a cartoony style:

When you look at a photo or realistic drawing...you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon, you see yourself...The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled...we don't just observe the cartoon, we become it! That's why I decided to draw myself in such a simply style. Would you have listened to me if I looked [more realistic]? I doubt it! You would have been far too aware of the messenger to fully receive the message...I'm just a little voice inside your head, a concept⁵⁵.

Here, McCloud solidifies the connection between the iconic representation of cartoons and the involvement of the viewer's imagination in piecing together their images. Additionally, McCloud links his form's 'conceptual' style to an exchange of "identity and awareness" between narrator and reader. In telling the story, McCloud invests his "identity" into his framing of the narrative; however, the images he described are ultimately interpreted within the "head" of the reader.

McCloud's logic of 'concept' used here is defined relative to the experiences of reader and narrator, when *Understanding Comics* turns to discussing 'life experience' at its most general:

⁵⁴ McCloud, 46.

⁵⁵ McCloud, 36-37.

All the things we experience in life can be separated into two realms, the realm of the concept, and the realm of the senses⁵⁶.

Into the realm of senses, McCloud places “the sight, smell, touch, taste, and sound of our own bodies. And of the world around us”. Particularly, McCloud argues that humans begin to understand the sensual realm once they mature enough to “reach beyond [them]selves” and understand their “identities” as part of a larger physical context. In a text or comic, the world of the senses best describes the experience of the narrator doing the telling, recalling their knowledge of the events and objects being described. However, McCloud suggests that this ‘sensual’ experience is filtered through the realm of concept when represented in a narrative form. The conceptual realm, on the other hand, refers to the “ideas. And everything else” that exists in one’s imagination⁵⁷. Transferred onto the act of reading, this idea describes not only the influence of the narrator’s perspective on the story as a whole, but also the subjectivities of the reader in navigating the form itself. In distilling Ishmael’s feelings and observations into text on the page, those concepts themselves take physical shape to be worked through or around by the reader.,

Understanding Comics uses this logic specifically to parse the *formal* differences between comics and other forms of narrative, including film and literature. For instance, McCloud argues that a traditional ‘cartoon’ style “de-emphasiz[es] the appearance of the

⁵⁶ McCloud, 39.

⁵⁷ McCloud, 40.

physical world in favor of the idea of form”⁵⁸. In this way, many comics’ images exist in the space between visually representing the physical world and reflecting the feelings and ideas of their narrator.

As seen in earlier readings of McCloud’s work, this abstraction away from the physical world gradually requires more information to be “perceived” in the act of reading⁵⁹. In this way, comics (and, to a greater degree, literature) task the reader with imagining the representative form of the narrative relative to the space and time they are describing. Within McCloud’s logic of the concept is an exchange of imagination between narrator and reader, each in turn defined by the ‘sensual’ experience with the described world and narrative form respectively.

Applying McCloud’s theory of reading to *Building Stories* and *Here* saw both works suspending objects and moments in space and time, employing the reader’s personal perceptions of space and time to give narrative sequence to the images on the page. This narratology works against many traditional notions of reading, while simultaneously cementing a link between poetic narrative and reader imagination. This note of poeticism allows one to transfer the freedoms of reading affording in comics to a text like *Moby-Dick*. When one reads the beginning of the novel through the prism of McCloud’s unification of subjective language and reader involvement, one finds an Ishmael that embraces a dual power to both invoke and predict the perceptive capacities of the reader. This embrace corresponds with McCloud’s

⁵⁸ McCloud, 41.

⁵⁹ McCloud, 49.

representative logic of word and image; the opening description of the novel finds Ishmael embracing his reader's lack of access to a pictorial view of the portrayed world, employing subjective thoughts and concepts to fill the space of objective representation:

It is a way I have of driving off the spleen and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship⁶⁰.

This opening image of *Moby-Dick* begins with the narrator invoking his own corporeality as a physical object within the action being described. By calling upon his “spleen” and “circulation,” Ishmael illuminates his physical being within the described world while simultaneously occupying the abstracted perspective of the storyteller. Accomplishing both of these tasks at once, the opening phrase of the quoted section brings to mind Ishmael's ‘object’-ness while also illustrating his power *as narrator* to do so poetically. While the corporeal language of description alludes to Ishmael's physicality within the action, he also demonstrates his poetic ability to link the systems of his body with his going to sea. In his opening description, Ishmael exhibits his form's filtering of images through his perspective, allowing him to reappropriate and replace objective representation with the feelings and experiences of himself and his reader.

⁶⁰ Melville, 18.

More generally, this passage also exemplifies Ishmael's use of vivid metaphor throughout his novel, a tool which almost inherently requires the imagination of concept in place of fact.

Though he begins the quoted section by alluding to a discussion of his physicality, the progression of the passage finds Ishmael transforming his descriptive mode into one of imagination and poeticism. Immediately after inciting his "regulating the circulation," Ishmael establishes yet another descriptive link between his "growing grim about the mouth" and his need to go to sea, specifically his feeling "a damp, drizzly November in my soul". Instead of reflecting the objective experience of the narrator's body, the space of description is filled with that which is unique to the form of language; that is, metaphor and imagery more generally as reflecting of feeling instead of fact. This abstraction invokes the imaginations of both reader and narrator in piecing together the described image and the sequence of the story. Like McCloud's cartoons, Ishmael's image here tends more toward the "realm of the concept" and feeling as opposed to a physical representation of the object⁶¹. If one follows McCloud's theory of reading here, Ishmael's allusion to the "drizzly November" requires objective information being 'perceived' by the reader, instead of 'received' from the image itself.

This is indicated first by the reader making sense of the metaphor substituting Ishmael's urge to sea with the "November" in his soul. In doing this, the reader not only employs their own conceptions of what "November" means, but positions these concepts relative to their image of Ishmael and the world that *he* occupies. Secondly, and more in line with McCloud's analysis of comics' visual language, is the notion that these opening images exist free of portrayed, objective

⁶¹ McCloud, 37.

space and time. Imagining Ishmael's feelings in relative sequence to each other requires the reader navigating the text to create a sense of time tied to their experience navigating the space occupied by the text. 'Time' in the opening image is defined only relative to how much time the reader spends navigating that section of text, just as the viewer of comics spends a certain amount of time on and within each panel. Furthermore, when the reader places these images in context with those that follow—once described space and time are introduced into the narrative—they create a sense of perceived space as they navigate the icons on the page, constructed alongside the various settings occupied by the narrator. Ishmael's turn to poeticism and feeling in his opening description invites the reader to navigate and contend with Ishmael's personal perspective, manifested in their navigation of the text on the page.

In order to frame the description of the mouth in context, the reader next comes to decipher the "strong moral principle" involved when Ishmael's "hypos"⁶² get the "upper hand" of him. The link here between Ishmael's "hypos" and "moral principle" again illustrates his form's power to substitute thought and inclination with objective representation. This is triggered by the use of "hypos," which suggests a transition 'under the skin' of the narrator. Just as Chris Ware, in *Building Stories*, employs a red arrow to bring the reader into his protagonist's imagination (providing imagined faces for her blind date), *Moby-Dick's* exposure of Ishmael's subjectivities allows him to fill the narrative space with hypothetical images and situations,

⁶² From the Greek *Hypo* meaning 'under,' as in 'Hypodermic' (under the skin). Volume VII of Henry Watts' *A Dictionary of Chemistry and the Allied Branches of Other Sciences* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1879) uses the prefix primarily in reference to "a standard solution of sodium hyposulphite" injected "to determine the quantity of oxygen contained in blood" (200).

suspended in both space and time. These include (emphases mine), the images of Ishmael “involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses,” “bringing up the rear of *every* funeral I meet,” and *hypothetically* “stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off,” strung together with the four-times-repeated, timeless “whenever”. By not opening the novel with a description grounded in objective, portrayed space and time, Ishmael’s turn to poetic and allegorical comparison capitalizes on the written word’s involvement of the reader’s imagination in navigating the visual text itself. By filling the space of objective representation with timeless, hypothetical allusions to real situations and places, Ishmael begins to require the reader to place those images in sequence and relation to one another, without relying on information, in McCloud’s terms, ‘received’ from the image itself.

Just as *Here* and *Building Stories* offer multiple ways to imagine their portrayed events in sequence, this passage of *Moby-Dick* allows one to observe multiple ways to imagine the situations described in both space and time. For instance, one can imagine Ishmael *actually* doing the actions he describes, or simply immediately infer the emotions associated with the image and move on. Perhaps, the former path requires one to spend more time within each description, before moving onto the next; for example, when one jumps the comma between “pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral”⁶³. This image, like those comics, employs an interplay of experienced space and time to construct their images in sequence around their reader’s personal perspective. But if words are, as McCloud calls them, the ‘ultimate abstraction’ of visual representation, then one can view Ishmael’s substitution of

⁶³ Melville, 18.

feeling for fact in the space of his narrative as extension of the formal logic underpinning McCloud's analysis. Indeed, that Ishmael's opening descriptions are dominated by his feelings and imagined situations resembles those comics' abstraction of objective space and time into the mind of the reader. Furthermore, because of text's iconic representation on the page as opposed to the pictures provided in comics, this abstraction in *Moby-Dick* depends even more on reconciling the narrator's feelings and subjectivities with those of the reader.

As *Moby-Dick*'s opening image progresses, Ishmael continues to expose the filtering of his images through a formal poetic and abstract representation. This comes to a head when Ishmael abandons hypothetical images of himself performing actions (such as knocking off hats), and describes "quietly [taking] to the ship" as his "substitute for pistol and ball". Instead of illustrating his hypothetical suicide, Ishmael fills the body of his description with the "philosophical flourish" of "Cato throw[ing] himself upon the sword" The image of Ishmael going to sea is replaced with a historical reference to Cato the Younger, which the reader either understands or not. In this way, the reader is called upon to fill the image with their own knowledge and imagination, and the final image conforms itself to that knowledge.

By turning briefly to the significance of this reference to Cato particularly, one can see how this example functions particularly well as an example of the reading text as such. The logic employed here recalls that used by McCloud to understand the form of text as "perceived" information, in which "it takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language"⁶⁴. Just as reading itself, unlike viewing a picture, requires the reader's "specialized

⁶⁴ McCloud, 49.

knowledge,” Ishmael’s reference to Cato the Younger transforms the described image relative to the reader’s knowledge outside of the work itself. For the sake of this reading, we will look at two possible readings of the reference, one based on a knowledge of Cato’s death in contrast to Ishmael’s hypothetical pistol and ball, and one without.

Without knowledge of the reference itself, the focus of the described image becomes the ‘philosophical flourish’ with which Ishmael takes to sea. Reading this way, understanding *why* Ishmael boards the ship becomes a matter of interpreting the ‘philosophical flourish’ itself. This shifts the content of the image onto Ishmael’s perspective as narrator, and his describing the events as an escape in and of itself. Without knowing who Cato was, one only understands Ishmael’s escape in relation to the referential act itself. The image, essentially, conforms to the reader’s acknowledgement of Ishmael’s ability to describe, in his form, things outside of the portrayed event. As a result, the sense of time as the reader perceives it may very well shape the experience of navigating the physical text; perhaps, not knowing who Cato is, one would spend almost no time at all imagining him upon his sword, instead spending more time envisioning Ishmael’s flourish.

With a knowledge of Cato’s death, however, the content of the image is obstructed by a subliminal contrast that exists between the two objects being described, that is, Ishmael and the historical figure himself. For a description of the historic event, one turns to Plutarch’s 11th-Century *Lives*, a series of biographies of historical figures as translated into english by Bernadotte Perrin in 1915. Describing Cato the Younger primarily in terms of his “good discipline, self-control, courage in all emergencies, and sagacity,” the description of his death

that follows stands out for its gruesomeness and spectacle, in contrast to Ishmael “quietly” taking to sea”⁶⁵:

Cato drew his swords from its sheath and stabbed himself below the breast. His thrust, however, was somewhat feeble...so he did not at once dispatch himself, but in his death struggle fell from the couch and made a loud noise by overturning a geometrical abacus that stood near. His servants heard the noise and cried out, and his son at once ran in, together with his friends. They saw that he was smeared with blood and that most of his bowels were protruding, but that he still had his eyes open and was alive...The physician went to him and tried to replace his bowels...and to sew up the wound. Accordingly, when Cato recovered and became aware of this, he pushed the physician away, tore his bowels with his hands, rent the wound still more, and so died.⁶⁶

The death of Cato the younger is, as Plutarch illustrates it, slow and loud. *Lives*’s description is marked by corporeality and agony, objectifying the event and in turn creating a sense of ‘truth’ to the image. In describing Cato’s “death struggle,” the narrator’s lens moves methodically from one objective element of the scene to the next — from “the couch” to the “geometrical abacus” — before tracing the corporeal manifestations of Cato’s suffering; from his body “smeared with blood,” to his “protruding” bowels, his open eyes, then back to the bowel wound torn open “still more”. Simultaneously, these images are framed within the various perspectives of a number of witnesses to the event, including Cato’s servants, son (and his friends), and the physician. This serves to further emphasize the physical and objective fact of that which is being described, by insisting that there are others who experienced it besides the narrator. How this influences the

⁶⁵ Melville, 18.

⁶⁶ Bernadotte Perrin, trans. *Lives* Vol. VIII (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919), 406-407.

physicality of the scene can be seen in the ‘noise’ present in Plutarch’s description. Alongside the visual representation of Cato’s wounds and actions, the description highlights the “loud noise” made by Cato and heard by his servants and son.

The volume of Cato’s death is instrumental in allowing the reader to imagine the scene relatively objectively, by placing the representational details of the event outside of the reader’s creativity. Instead of guessing how or why these other people enter the space, the framing of the image through visuals and sounds allows the reader to “receive” more information from the image itself. This idea stands in contrast to McCloud’s conception of poetic language as “received” information, and also to the role of the reader in the sections of *Moby-Dick* explored early. We showed earlier how, in beginning Melville’s novel, the reader is faced with the fact that they cannot know how much time exactly had passed before Ishmael decided to go to sea (“never mind how long exactly”), or how much money exactly he had in his purse (“little or no”). In reading this section of *Lives*, the reader not only imagines the narrator’s experience of the scene, but also the sensory experiences of everyone else, in the oral (“loud noise”) and visual (“he still had his eyes open and was alive”) details of the illustration. This serves to cement the image itself as an objective representation of an event, rather than a memory tainted by personal subjectivity. Additionally, using logic that recalls *Battleship Potemkin*, the reader is tasked with constructing one cohesive image of the event out of this multiplicity of perspectives.

In reappropriating the image of Cato’s death for its “philosophical flourish,” Ishmael and *Moby-Dick* provides an optional and consequential viscosity available only to those readers who either have previous experience with the referenced material or take time away from the text

to look it up. Without knowledge of Cato, Ishmael's escape to the ship is as "quiet" and timeless as the reader chooses; with that knowledge, the reference gives space and time to the description with the allegory to the more grounded source text. In either case, time and space within the novel's opening conform to how much of each is invested by the reader. Recall here that Ishmael's allusion to Cato's "philosophical flourish" comes as the endnote of a progression of references to hypothetical situations and the "drizzly November" in Ishmael's soul. As the ultimate manifestation of the powers regulated to Ishmael's chosen form, the historical reference serves to almost completely construct time and space within the image based on how much the reader invests of both.

From this notion of text in the novel as something navigated visually by the reader (or not), one draws further parallels to McCloud, Ware, and McGuire's conceptions of how a reader's imagination functions within the visual and sequential narrative of comics. For all three of these artists, the images provided by a graphic novel serve to gesture towards how much time and space a reader should imagine as existing. In the cases of *Building Stories* or *Here*, the structure of the page often capitalizes on this freedom of reader's imagination, offering multiple ways to construct sequence from the provided pictures and words.

In reading *Moby-Dick*, one constructs a sense of 'time' in the opening image relative to how much time one spends navigating that section of text, before placing it in sequence with those that follow — just as the comics reader spends a certain amount of time on and within each panel. Furthermore, when the reader places these images in context with those that follow—once described space and time are introduced into the narrative—they perceive a sense of space

relative to the icons on the page that functions alongside the spaces described directly by the narrator.

It is possible to observe this dual function of space in reading once Ishmael, in beginning *Moby-Dick*, moves into describing spaces outside of himself. While the images explored up to this point — of the hypothetical streets in which Ishmael knocks people's hats off — serve to position the description relative to his own subjective feelings and emotions, the descriptions of spaces that are 'real' within the world of the narrative that follow show an even greater focus placed on the imaginative power of the reader. Like requiring the reader to "Call" Ishmael by name, the narrator similarly begins his first description of space by asking the reader to acknowledge the narrative power to guide the reader's attention:

There now is your insular city of the Manhattoes, belted round by wharves as Indian isles by coral reefs—commerce surrounds it with her surf. Right and left, the streets take you waterward. Its extreme downtown is the battery, where that noble mole is washed by waves, and cooled by breezes, which a few hours previous were out of sight of land. Look at the crowds of water-gazers there⁶⁷.

This section of *Moby-Dick*'s opening pages provides the earliest example of Ishmael establishing his narrative lens to move throughout, above, and within a scene or place, here the "insular city of the Manhattoes," or what is now thought of as the island of Manhattan. Throughout the quoted description, Ishmael moves from one position relative in space of the object being described to the next, simultaneously making use of his ability to take the reader with him. Crucially, this ability is the direct result of Ishmael's, and the novel's, choice of form, with Ishmael's

⁶⁷ Melville, 18.

movement relative to the island working directly in contact with the form of writing's denial of a pictorial or visual representation of that object. For instance, Ishmael begins this section by framing the island, as it were, from above, offering what seems to be a direct representation of the Island's shape; "your insular city, belted round by wharves". In claiming to describe the wharves "belted round" the island, Ishmael assumes a perspective wherein he is able to observe the entire circumference of the island at once, launching himself and reader above the island in the space described by the text.

To see what makes this parallel abstraction between reader and narrator unique to Ishmael's chosen form, it is useful to briefly consider *Moby-Dick* in the context of its original publication. The 'bird's-eye' view of the landscape offered in this moment is one that was, at the time, not *directly* available to any author or reader of the time; i.e., no one could fly yet. The only way to imagine a place like Manhattan this way was through mapmaking, which unlike the novel offers a direct, visual representation of the places being described. Indeed, the abstraction above the object in Ishmael's description here, even moreso than in the comics examined earlier, relies on text's iconic filtering of the represented object through the narrator's subjectivities in order to direct and command the reader's attention. As suggested by artists like Scott McCloud, this filtering through a "conceptual" narrative space leads to a decisive split, of both space and time, as experienced by the reader and portrayed within the description itself. By further showing how the form of *Moby-Dick* accomplishes this splitting in a manner distinct from that of comics, one can see how a visual navigation of letters on the page can mirror, but not overlap, that of the narrator through the spaces being portrayed.

Despite suggesting a turn to objected, abstracted narration with his map-like view of the island, Ishmael's language and form serve instead to construct a distinct sense of space as perceived when the reader interacts with the physical object of the text itself. The first and most obvious evidence of this continuing involvement of the reader is Ishmael's promise to portray "your" city, the syntax of which positions the image that follows, like the reference to Cato, relative to the reader's experience outside of and prior to reading the book, in this case, their knowledge and ability to imagine 1850's Manhattan. Simultaneously, Ishmael requests that the reader allow him to assume and direct their perspective. When the reader reads past that opening line, and imagines and internalizes the description that follows, they implicitly and unconsciously agree that their image of the city is the same, in the reading, as Ishmael's.

In order to understand this noting of reader experience and imagination as related to the space and time contained by the text on the page, one can extend the logic of this direction of reader perspective onto Ishmael's promise to offer the image of the city immediately and within the space of the page itself. While claiming to offer a picture of "your" Manhattan, Ishmael also claims to offer that picture "There now;" it is the use of this phrase that allows one to see the involvement of the reader working alongside the narrative form to create a sense of space and time distinct from those being described within it. As we have seen, because the image offered is one of "your" city, the reader accepts in the reading an overlap of their perspective over the described space and the narrator's; however, because of this dual model of space and time, the form of the novel itself prevents this from being the case.

Because the opening of *Moby-Dick* is restricted to (originally non-illustrated) text, the narrative itself fails to provide any ‘objective’ representation of the island as Ishmael sees it, neither in the spatial “There,” nor the temporal “now”. If the description of Manhattan were accompanied by an illustration painting the entire circumference of the island “belted by wharves,” then the “There now” could refer to that drawing. But because it does not, these words refer to space and time as perceived by Ishmael during the described experience. Furthermore, because the image offered is one of “your” city, this phrase also comes to refer to the form of the text itself in the act of reading. Because one is reading the novel instead of walking alongside Ishmael while he describes the reality in front of them, and because the text offers no actual pictures of the island as Ishmael describes is, the “There” and “now” correspond to the space filled by the icons on the page, and the time consumed by the reader’s navigation of them.

While certainly having to do with the theory of abstracted representation in various artistic forms, the mirroring abstractions of Ishmael and the reader over their respective objects can be imagined, in the example of *Moby-Dick*’s Manhattan, quite literally. As noted earlier, Ishmael’s narrative perspective is launched above the city, able to perceive all at once the wharves that frame its every side; basically, Ishmael introduces the city from a ‘top-down’ view. In this way, Ishmael’s view of the city mirrors the reader’s view of the page and text itself, all while both reader and narrator accept this overlap implicitly when moving past Ishmael’s claim to show “your” island. Like Ishmael viewing the island from above, a reader of the novel perceives the icons of representation (that is, the words and paragraphs on the page) as an island, “belted round” by blank margins and the dimensions of the paper. In this way, Ishmael’s claim to

describe “your” island further suggests an attempt to recapture and direct the perspective of the reader navigating the text. Because the reader is not provided a picture or map to which the “there” of “there now” could refer, and because the narrator is unable to command his reader to look at the island directly as he is perceiving it, the object of that call to observation is the structure of the page itself, and the images as composed by the arrangement of icons (letters). This recalls the logic of reader freedom that allows more time to be invested in certain words and/or images than others, as used in Ishmael’s reference to Cato or *Here*’s construction of narrative sequence. Reading Ishmael’s description this way allows one to link his direction of the reader’s perspective to the creation and navigation of space as occupied *by* the narrative, rather than described *within* it.

Even once Ishmael abandons the abstracted ‘bird’s-eye’ view of the Manhattoes, the opening description of *Moby-Dick* continues to gesture toward the narrative power to direct reader navigation of the page. After launching himself and the reader above the city by encompassing its entire circumference, Ishmael plunges his perspective back down to sea-level, asserting that “Right and left, the streets take you waterward”. Here, Ishmael eludes to the potential freedom of the forming space around reader navigation; after viewing the island as a whole, the reader is placed in the middle of it and, seemingly, asked to pick a direction. However, just as the form of the text confines the (English) reader to a top-down, right-to-left navigation of the page, Ishmael leads the perspective, through the space described *within* the narrative, literally downwards. Entirely rejecting the established binary of “right and left,” Ishmael reasserts his power to choose a direction for the reader, and pushes them to the southern

end of the island (“Its extreme downtown is the battery”) while the form of the narrative directs them to the bottom of the page⁶⁸. In this moment, the reader’s navigation through the representative icons themselves mirrors that of the narrator through the described space. Thus, this example illustrates how the form of the novel creates these two distinct senses of space, while simultaneously showcasing the inherent power of that form to filter the perception of the image through the narrator’s feelings and subjectivities.

This model of navigating the opening pages of *Moby-Dick* recalls in many ways the logic used by *Building Stories*, *Here*, and *Understanding Comics* to describe the process of understanding the panels on a comics’ page in relative sequence to one another. As seen in *Building Stories*, for example, the viewer’s access to all of the information on the page at once allows the narrator to offer multiple paths throughout that space, mirroring the ways in which the tenants of a Chicago apartment building navigate its rooms and hallways. But because *Moby-Dick*’s form of text alone reduces the images it provides to McCloud’s realm of “concept” and “perceived” information, the senses of space and time that form around the act of reading text alone adhere even more so to the narrator’s choice of perspective when describing a given object.

Like reading a comic, deciphering a narrative out of a block of text requires the joining, in the reader’s mind, of space and time both as experienced by them and as filtered through the thoughts and feelings of the narrator. In *Moby Dick*’s description of Manhattan, Ishmael points to the form of his narrative and the experience of the reader (“there now is your insular city”) to

⁶⁸ Melville, 18.

substitute the block of text in place of the island being described. If one can read the “there” of “there now” as indicating the space contained by the narrative and navigated by the reader, then a similar model of time can be observed by viewing “now” as related to both reader and form. Just as ‘there,’ for the reader, refers to the immediate object of the novel itself, ‘now’ suggests a sense of time activated by the reader agreeing to imagine to described events in sequence to one another.

This suggestion can be primarily observed by reading the “now” of “there now” within the content of the image itself (that is, the experience being transcribed by Ishmael), and then observing the complications that arise when the reader attempts to adopt that sense of time, forcing them to create their own from the icons on the page. Within Ishmael’s narrative, the “now” presumably indicates Ishmael’s moment of observing the island, and refers to the immediate ‘present’ of the portrayed action. In the same way that he proclaims access to “your” view of the island, Ishmael here claims to overlap his view of the described events with the reader’s view of the narrative itself. However, just as the reader is denied Ishmael’s direct image of the city through pictorial representation, so too are they denied access to Ishmael’s mode of time, as they are inherently reading the text ‘after’ the events within took place. Because the reader cannot see the island or experience time as Ishmael does, they implicitly imagine a mode of time that can never reach this overlap.

This is indicated especially well in the second mention of time in Ishmael’s tour through Manhattan. After the reader is led downtown, they are shown “that noble mole...washed by

waves, and cooled by breezes, which a few hours previous were out of sight of land”⁶⁹. Like providing a bird’s-eye view of the island, Ishmael’s description of “the breezes” as a visual object in space, alongside the waves, is a descriptive abstraction unique to the novel’s form; in making the invisible visible, the text exemplifies its ability to plot the sight of waves and the feeling of wind onto the same descriptive plane. Alongside this, however, Ishmael employs his ability to observe or imagine the mole “a few hours previous” to the moment being described, essentially positing that he beat the reader there. In the process, time as Ishmael experiences and describes it is divorced from that created by the reader, piecing together the icons on the page in the continuous “now”.

Just as “there” points to the space occupied by text and viewed by the reader, and because the form of the narrative blocks the reader’s access to a direct image of the object, Ishmael’s “now” refers to two different immediate moments, both within and occupied by the narrative form. In time *within* the narrative (that is, as experienced by Ishmael in the moments he is describing) the ‘now,’ qualified by Ishmael’s access to “a few hours previous,” suggests a sense of time available only to the person who spent that amount of time on the island, specifically in the moment that Ishmael is talking about. Even to an 1850’s Manhattanite reader, Ishmael’s language anchors his sense of time to the specific waves and breezes hitting the mole at those precise moments. Still operating under the claim to showcase “your” island, these references to particular moments in time display a formal attempt to overlap Ishmael’s perspective with the reader’s by filtering the image through the former’s personal experience.

⁶⁹ Melville, 18.

This immediate sense of “now” in relation to “a few hours” as Ishmael perceives it, however, is inaccessible to the reader’s construction of time while navigating the text to which “there” refers. In the time that the reader *perceives* from the text, the “now” refers to the moment they first lay eye upon the word, and subsequently each word that follows and came before. Even when Ishmael is not noting it directly, there is a continuous sense of time built relative to the space filled by the iconic form, whenever a reader makes the visual jump from one word to the next.

In unconsciously understanding the representative relation between the words on the page and the events and objects they are describing, a reader of literary narrative tacitly creates a sense of time and space irreconcilable with, but perhaps similar to, that of the narrator. *Moby-Dick* serves as a useful example of this phenomenon because of Ishmael’s apparent interest in directing the attention of his reader. Noting the experience of reading during these moments allows one to see how this need ultimately succumbs to the reader’s freedom of choice, but that the form of literary narrative remains more abstracted from its object than that of comics.

The purpose of highlighting the role of the reader in both comics and literature is to explore the extent to which the latter can be, like comics, considered a visual language, while simultaneously upholding the inherent differences between the forms explored by scholars of both. In particular, holding readings of *Moby-Dick* against those of *Building Stories* and *Here* serves to more practically apply McCloud’s notion that text alone, even moreso than cartoons,

require the reader to ‘conceptualize’ described space and time as related to the narrative form and the narrator’s subjectivities.

Additionally, this reading allows one to view comics, like much literature, as a matter of deciphering the influence of the narrator on the images and descriptions that are provided. Like a reader of *Moby-Dick*, a comics viewer must clash their perceptions of space and time with the limitations of the narrative perspective, in the process recognizing the exchange of descriptive power that takes place between them. The structural narratology required to view *Moby-Dick* this way works against traditional relationships between describer and described, requiring a new theory of reading attentive to the imaginative power of the reader and their freedom in framing described images.

Conclusion

Five-hundred and forty-three days after launching “Every Page of Moby-Dick,” Matt Kish publishes his final drawing, accompanied by the novel’s final line; “On the second day, a sail drew near, nearer, and picked me up at last. It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan⁷⁰. Alongside the drawing, Kish remarks on the attitude with which he began the project:

in my innocent exuberance I had written “[...]I am now going to create one illustration for every single one of the 552 pages in the Signet Classic paperback edition [sic].” That made me smile. Especially the “I am now going to...” as if it were a simple card trick or a demonstration on how to make a pie crust. I had no idea where this would end up taking me⁷¹.

What Kish failed to grasp when beginning his project, and what he later realizes once completing it, is the complexity of reading itself, and of illustrating one’s interpretation of a block of text. Manifesting his perceptions of Ishmael’s narrative in a distinct visual language is not a one-to-one relationship, like a “simple card trick” in which a card seen by the audience reappears later, integrity fully intact. Instead, Kish’s illustration of his reading required contending with multilayered memories and associations, all framing Ishmael’s description of the world around *him*.

⁷⁰ Kish, 552.

⁷¹ “MOBY-DICK, page 552”. *Every Page of Moby-Dick*. January 29, 2011.
<http://everypageofmobydick.blogspot.com/2011/01/moby-dick-page-552.html#comment-form>.

Like Kish, this project unearthed a theory of reading considerate of reader experience, by associating the reader's personal freedoms and experiences with the perspective put forth by the narrative itself. In doing this, one constructs models of perceived and portrayed space and time, allowing for a formal and experiential comparison of differing and multilayered narrative forms. Also like Kish, it is difficult to predict where this line of thought will lead.

The purpose of this project was not to offer decisive or overarching statements about one's reading experience, but to develop a language around the freedoms afforded to a multiplicity of narrative experiences in a variety of forms. As such, it was useful to confine this analysis to precise sections of expansive works, such as the very opening of *Moby-Dick* or single pages and panels from cited comics. This focus allowed one to separate the events and objects being described from the visual experience of reading, and subsequently aspects of narrative such as the representative power of individual letters and words. Consequently, it is nearly impossible in this project to extend the relationships seen between reader and narrator to *every* section of *Moby-Dick*, much less any textual narrative.

Even throughout Melville's novel, the visual object of the text itself is experienced in different ways, such as when Ishmael switches to a play-writing format (complete with stage directions), or the briefly mentioned 'extracts' which suspend the reader from actually beginning Ishmael's story, or the multiple editions of the novel that include illustrations⁷². These examples begin to touch upon the various ways in which the form of textual narrative can itself be transformed in terms of the reader's navigation of the physical object. By using comics as the

⁷² Or one could always skip over them.

gateway to this logic of visual reading, one develops models of space and time relative to the perspective of a reader or viewer, which in turn place words and images on the same plane of symbolic representation. Rather than suggesting that all text may be read the same, this theory of reading allows experimentations with text's physical form to contend with the reader's experience and knowledge, and subsequently the imagery and chronology within the narrative itself.

Additionally, this analysis provides methods for reading narrative works specifically in the context of their chosen form. Under this logic, seemingly adaptive works such as Kish's construct narrative perspectives unique to their form and distinct from that of the original work, seen through the task of perceiving the work's arrangement physical objects and language. Such works of supposed adaptation can be viewed as reflections of this logic of reading itself, providing new ways to conceptualize the perceived differences between different forms of media. How would model of perceived space and time change, for example, were *Here* or *Building Stories* adapted to film or literature? The purpose of this project, in essence, was to view the interpretive act of reading *Moby-Dick* as more than Kish's "simple card trick," a mere transposition of imagery from the mind of narrator to that of the reader. With the resulting models of imagined space and time, one sees in Melville's novel (and the visual function of text itself) the construction of the narrative lens hinged on the potential freedoms contained in reading itself.

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