Multimodal Narratology
Postmodernism in Dystopian Graphic Novels

Stephanie L. Passialis

SENIOR HONORS THESIS

Submitted In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements of the
College Scholars Honors Program
North Central College

May 15, 2017

Approved: ___________________________ Date: __________

Thesis Director Signature
Dr. Matthias Regan

Approved: ___________________________ Date: __________

Second Reader Signature
Dr. Francine Navakas

North Central College
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements. ................................................................. Page 3

Abstract. .............................................................................. Page 4

Introduction. .......................................................................... Page 5

A Genealogy of the Graphic Novel. ........................................ Page 8

A History of Analysis. ............................................................. Page 13

Postmodern Dystopias. ........................................................... Page 17

Postmodern Architecture. ...................................................... Page 23

Postmodern Medias and Mapping. .......................................... Page 45

Conclusion. .............................................................................. Page 57

Works Consulted. .................................................................... Page 60

Notes. ...................................................................................... Page 65
Acknowledgments

I would like to gratefully acknowledge various people who have been essential to the completion of this honors thesis.

First, I would like to thank the College Scholars Honors Program for providing me the tools and resources to conduct this research. I would also like to thank North Central College’s English Department for its support throughout these past four years.

I would like to thank North Central College’s Richter Fellowship Program for providing me the unique opportunity to conduct research on comics at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. I would also like to thank the reference librarians at the Library of Congress’ James Madison Memorial Building, especially Megan Halsband, for accommodating this research throughout my stay.

I would like to thank my campus reference librarian, Frances Elizabeth Nicholson, for aiding me in the editing and formatting of this paper.

I would like to thank my second reader, Dr. Francine Navakas, whose insight on and passion for popular culture and theory have inspired me throughout this project. From zombies to comic books to San Diego Comic Con, I have thoroughly enjoyed each of our conversations.

Finally, I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Matthias Regan, who has continued to push me in my writing and aspirations throughout this project. Dr. Regan’s guidance has been the single most valuable resource in the completion of this research. I am extremely grateful for his patience and support, and I am honored to learn from him as my advisor and to work with him on this significant achievement in the study of comic books and multimodal narratology.
Abstract

My honors thesis provides a formal analysis of postmodernism in six graphic novels with apocalyptic and dystopian narratives: Frank Miller’s *Ronin* (1983) and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), Alan Moore’s and Dave Gibbon’s *Watchmen* (1986), Mark Waid’s and Alex Ross’ *Kingdom Come* (1996), Robert Kirkman’s *The Walking Dead* (2003), and Jeff Lemire’s *Sweet Tooth* (2009). The contemporary graphic novel marks a genuine shift in many aspects of comic book form commensurate with postmodernism in art and literature. Though scholars have begun to situate comic books within a framework for formal analysis, much research does not accurately describe multimodal postmodernism. Additionally, though apocalyptic stories have dominated comic books since the 1930s, many scholars have shunned pulp and superhero narratives at the core of the genre. My analysis applies the most recent critical theory to this lore in order to analyze its themes.
Introduction

This honors thesis refines existing language regarding pre-1960s comic books in order to provide analysis of the post-1960s graphic novel—a postmodern hybrid of the comic book and novel. My analysis focuses solely on American-published graphic novels. Specifically, this paper provides a formal analysis of the multimodal narratology employed in texts with apocalyptic and dystopian narratives. These narratives include some of the most influential graphic novels of the last thirty-five years: Frank Miller’s *Ronin* (1983) and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), Alan Moore’s and Dave Gibbon’s *Watchmen* (1986), Mark Waid’s and Alex Ross’ *Kingdom Come* (1996), Robert Kirkman’s *The Walking Dead* (2003), and Jeff Lemire’s *Sweet Tooth* (2009). Alongside their shared visual dynamics, their apocalyptic narratives have fundamentally influenced twenty-first century popular culture at large. The complex visual, spatial, and temporal aesthetics implemented in these graphic novels shape current dystopic narratives while helping us to understand contemporary aesthetics of the graphic novel.

The substantial break between modern and postmodern narrative is recognizable at a glance when we look at one of the most iconic superheroes in comic books: the Batman. Figure 1 represents the first appearance of the caped crusader: Published in 1939, DC’s *Detective Comics*, no. 27 is responsible for Batman, his sidekick Robin, and a plethora of recognizable villains. Figure 1 depicts a *modern* comic book panel structure. In this image, Batman fights archetypal “bad guys” in a classic rooftop brawl scene. As in most modern comics, Bob Kane (co-creator and illustrator of Batman) depicts this fight sequence in clear lines and bold saturated primary colors. Additionally, Kane illustrates this scene from a modern third-person perspective. Here, Batman and his enemies are depicted as full-bodied figures. Text blocks located at the top of each panel narrate the action depicted within each image from a third-person point of view.
The artist also uses minimal juxtaposing sequential images to convey narrative action. The panels, therefore, serve solely to contain characters as well as to convey easily comprehensible linear action.

Yet, when we think of Batman today, we tend to think of the one depicted in figure 2, of the Batman written nearly fifty years later—a darker, broodier, psychologically-motivated “dark knight” determined to restore a dystopic Gotham City. Written and illustrated by comic auteur Frank Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) depicts a postmodern hero. Phenomenally popular, Miller’s interpretation has supplemented the origin myth from which other stories have sprung as well as inspired dozens of similar narratives and movies—such as

---

**Figure 1.** First appearance of Batman in DC’s *Detective Comics*, no. 27, 1939
The Dark Knight trilogy (2005-2012) and Batman v. Superman (2016). Miller’s interpretation of the dark knight dominates our perception of this iconic character. In this scene, Batman confronts Harvey Dent, who has just been released from Arkham Asylum for his crimes as the villain Two-Face. Miller’s color scheme is muted and monochromatic, using positive and negative space to depict Batman in the very first panel. In the following four images, Miller shifts to Batman’s perspective. Here, the panels repeat the same image—a close up of Dent’s face. This repetition serves little action, but rather emphasizes the psychological drama. Text blocks within these panels serve as Batman’s inner monologue rather than third-person narration. Additionally, while the first, second, and fourth panels depict Dent’s face as his present self, the third panel depicts
him in his Two-Face persona. This sudden visual shift suggests a shift in temporality—Batman’s “flashback” of Dent as his former villainous self. At a glance, Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* demonstrates obvious differences from *Detective Comics* no. 27; and yet, we have little critical vocabulary to describe these complex aesthetics.

Since the 1990s, scholars have begun to provide a basic language for assessing the modern comic book. But they have studied only the most “literary works” of the comic book medium—historical, political, and autobiographical texts, such as Harvey Pekar’s *American Splendor* (1976), Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1980), Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* (2001), and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006). While these texts deserve the attention they have received, most scholars have shunned the pulp and superhero narratives at the core of the genre. My goal is to apply the most recent critical theory to the superhero lore that makes up the bulk of existing comics.

**A Genealogy of the Graphic Novel**

Since its invention in the late 1970s, the graphic novel has continued to increase in popularity and demand. According to *Publisher’s Weekly*, graphic novel sales increased by 12% in 2016 compared to the previous year, topping $535 million in North America (O’Leary 36, Maughan 22). Publishers expect this figure to grow. Over the past ten years, graphic novels have begun to surpass other genres in both popularity and sales (O’Leary 36). Recently, they have appeared in college and primary school classrooms, indicating their increased relevance in the educational market (Maughan 22). This growing presence suggests that the graphic novel is a genre worthy of formal analysis.
In order to understand the aesthetics of the graphic novel, it is necessary to understand its genealogy. Beginning in the 1930s, this genealogy explains the origins of aesthetics and themes present in today’s postmodern graphic novel. Although the graphic novel breaks from the modernism of that era, it draws on modern elements in order to create wholly original aesthetics and narratives. As literary critic and theorist Fredric Jameson writes, it is possible to characterize aesthetics of postmodernism by first assessing the “‘family resemblance’ of such heterogeneous styles” in modernism (55).

Originally reprints of newspaper strips, the first comics were published in the early 1930s (Weiner 2). These first collections were mostly comedies with material inspired by satire and slapstick. The anthropomorphism and fast-paced stories they introduced continued to inform the genre. “Funny animal comics” rose in popularity in the early 1940s. Most notably, *Walt Disney Comics and Stories* (1944), a highly successful series published by Dell in partnership with Walt Disney, featured the beloved characters Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Goofy, among other original Disney cartoons. Publishers recognized the money to be made by releasing issues tied into Disney’s animated films (Sabin 27). The “comical comic” was thus geared toward younger audiences—predominantly children—throughout the 1930s, resulting in a long-lasting cultural perception of comics as a “publication for children designed to excite mirth” (27). At the same time, comics began their century-long interaction with motion pictures. Comic books adapted “cinematic” aesthetics; meanwhile, film and television adapted narrative techniques from comics (Dallacqua 65). In the 1930s and 1940s, films adapted the episodic nature of the rising comic book genre. Additionally, sequels and cliffhangers became popular forms of filmic storytelling, heavily influencing the contemporary action film we see today. Consequently, many well-known “superhero” and genre comics have been adapted to film.
Meanwhile, comic book publishers began to invest in original genre narratives, including mystery, adventure, and romance stories (Weiner 2). In the wake of World War II, these narratives abandoned funny animals in order to pursue darker, more mature genres such as crime, horror, and romance. This original shift from comedy to horror reflected discontent with post-war American society. Tensions of nuclear war throughout the 1950s inspired dystopian fantasies among the American public. Comic books’ portrayal of transgressive, subversive, and even disturbing subjects, as well as their refusal to conform to conservative ideals, appealed to these anxieties (Weiner 7). Additionally, it satisfied a new American subgroup—the “teenager” (7). Originally Educational Comics, Entertaining Comics (EC) emerged as the top player in this new genre. Its titles—Tales from the Crypt (1950), Shock SuspenStories (1952), and Weird Science Fantasy (1954)—claimed to offer a glimpse behind the façade of middle-class American values, tantalizing viewers with depictions of violence, sex, and social deviance. Their sensationalism was reflected in hurriedly printed comics that lacked visual quality (Weiner 8). Indeed, the printing was as murky as the world they offered. These comics directly influenced the pulp genre narratives that recur in postmodern graphic novels. By the 1980s, graphic novels would enhance these pulp narratives by intertextually combining them in single stories as well as by utilizing new and improved printing technologies.

The initial success of the pulp narrative was short-lived. In 1954, at the height of Cold War fears about the “corruption” of society, psychiatrist Fredric Wertham rallied against the genre. His best-selling Seduction of the Innocent accused comics of corrupting American youth by exposing them at a young age to graphic content (Poole 146). The accusations in Wertham’s book resulted in a Senate investigation, leading to the voluntary censorship of comic books known as the Comics Code. Self-imposed by the Comics Magazine Association of America in
order to prevent government restriction, the Code banned most graphic and violent content, including “excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism [and] masochism,” as well as images depicting the “walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism, and werewolfism” (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund). As a result, post-1950s comic books experienced a significant decline in creativity, social commentary, and popularity (Poole 147).

In the years that followed, comic book publishers sought stories that fell within the regulations of the Comics Code—narratives in which authority figures and “good guys” always won. One result was a return to the superhero story (Weiner 8). In the 1930s, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster introduced Superman, resulting in a slew of primary-colored, cape-donning superhero stories published by DC Comics. In 1956, DC revived these superheroes, beginning with The Flash—“the fastest man on earth” (Weiner 9). Competing with DC’s success, Marvel’s editor and head writer, Stan Lee, created a new brand of competing superheroes, including the X-Men, the Incredible Hulk, and their most famous character, Spiderman. Many of these characters received their superpowers as a direct result of nuclear accidents and military experiments, reflecting public anxieties toward the arms race throughout the 1960s (10).

Marvel understood that the appeal of the American superhero was power (Weiner 10). Created by Jack Kirby at the peak of World War II, the Captain America comics (1941)—in which the titular hero punches Hitler in the very first issue—encouraged a decidedly patriotic tone. These superheroes fought alongside the Allies and against German Soviet spies and traitors. Continuing at Marvel throughout the 1960s, Kirby used this archetype to create superheroes that were grounded in political reality. These original political superheroes influenced the new “postmodern” heroes that would emerge in the 1980s. Graphic novels such as
Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and Moore’s and Gibbons’ *Watchmen* introduced heroes that were intimately tied to U.S. politics. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Superman fights Soviet combat forces as an agent of the U.S. government. In *Watchmen*, heroes such as The Comedian and Dr. Manhattan fight for the U.S. government during the Vietnam war.

The Comics Code also gave rise to new styles. By the 1960s, “alternative” comics began to appear under the Code’s radar. Written by young adults for their peers as opposed to an all-inclusive audience, these so-called “underground comix” returned graphic sex and violence to the genre, while appealing to more adult sentimentalities and a more cynical view of contemporary society (Weiner 12). Cheaply produced as a result of self-publishing, comix experimented with black-and-white aesthetics to avoid printing costs. Unlike previous mass-produced stories, underground artists originally sold these works on street corners, and later in head shops, alongside hippie paraphernalia (12). Unaccountable to the Comics Code and the formal rules of the industry, comix artists—most notably Robert Crumb—deconstructed popular forms and themes, developing a new aesthetic. Their experimentation with form influenced a new postmodern panel structure that developed in the graphic novel.

Observing the countercultural success of underground comix, the comics industry began to abandon the Comics Code by the end of the 1960s. Consequently, a new form of graphic narrative was born. Will Eisner is credited with publishing the first “graphic novel”—*A Contract with God*—in 1978. The first original “comic work of art” published by an American trade book publisher, *A Contract with God* was a collection of thematically related stories told through sequential art and organized as a novel—hence the name, “graphic novel” (Weiner 21). Unlike its predecessors, Eisner’s text was not serial. Like the underground comix, it focused on adult subject matter. The stories in *A Contract with God* tackle issues of rape, suicide, pedophilia, and
racism. This maturity in comics influenced graphic novels to come. Recognizing its success, publishers began to modify the pulp narrative and superhero genre to interest adults (Weiner 29). Contra pre-1960s superhero comics, Eisner’s text did not render moral judgements. Instead, it concerned itself with depicting nuanced characters and their lives (Weiner 20). This interest in the human condition influenced psychological themes and realism present in postmodern graphic novels. For instance, the 1980s made way for psychological heroes—caped men and women who experienced consequences of their actions or inactions.

A History of Analysis

Thanks to Wertham’s campaign and the more general sense of comics as children’s entertainment, literary critics have been slow to publish research on the genre. As graphic novels became more popular and more literary in the 1980s, comic book artists attempted to define the aesthetics that constructed “sequential art,” or the juxtaposition of narrative images. Written by artists within the field, the first assessments of the graphic novel contributed basic language for describing comic books for the first time. By the 1990s, scholars pursued more in-depth analyses of sequential art, refining this basic language and situating the graphic novel in a framework for literary and visual theory. These analyses have contributed the information we know about graphic novels so far.

In 1985, Eisner made the first attempts to assess the peculiar aesthetics of comic art. His influential analysis of “sequential art,” *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist*, was followed by *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* in 1996. In *Comics and Sequential Art*, Eisner attempts to assess how the individual parts of the comic book create a seamless reading experience. Drawing on his own work, he invents a
“grammar” for “sequential art”—a term he defines as “images deployed in a sequential order” (2). According to Eisner, creation of sequential art—and thereby analysis of it—is dependent on understanding this primary grammar. The fundamental unit of Eisner’s vocabulary is the panel (or frame or box)—a spatial mode “fundamental to the transmission of timing” (26). Additionally, he writes of the importance of juxtaposing images, icons, and symbols in creating graphic narrative. In *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, Eisner argues that, “Comic book art deals with recognizable reproductions of human conduct. Its drawings are a mirror reflection, and depend on reader’s stored memory of experience to visualize an idea or process quickly. This makes necessary the simplification of images into repeatable symbols” (11). Images act as narrative tools: apparel can determine a character’s occupation, anthropomorphic features can determine a character’s personality, etc. According to Eisner, this repetition of “images and recognizable symbols” is equally fundamental to the language, or “literary form,” of sequential art (2).

In 1993, comic artist and writer Scott McCloud published his own explanation of comic book aesthetics, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Like Eisner, McCloud examines the fundamental poetics of the medium. He separates that form from its content in order to observe the interaction between forms. McCloud dubs the essential technique as “sequential imaging,” or the juxtaposition of “pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to […] produce an aesthetic response” (9). McCloud observes, “Taken individually, […] pictures […] are merely that—pictures. However, when part of a sequence, […] the art of the image is transformed into […] the art of comics” (5). According to this theory, text, image, and spatiality produce independent patterns of significance that are combined with one another to generate new composite meanings, or “complex” graphic narrative. Like Eisner, he recognizes the importance
of iconography in modern comic book narrative, noting that it has realized a certain form of “universal communication” within the twentieth and twenty-first century cultural sphere (58). McCloud’s analysis is ultimately an extension of Eisner’s original assessment, albeit more complex. Unlike Eisner, McCloud more thoroughly dissects the components of sequential art. His assessment also serves as one of the first genealogies of comic book art, carefully exploring the origins of certain aesthetics in order to better understand their purpose in contemporary comic art. In this way, his analysis attempts to find cultural relevance of the comic book medium (Weiner 48). Finally, his assessment emphasizes the multimodality of comic books. Using other forms of art—such as literature, visual arts, and music—as points of reference for readers, he situates the comic book within a frame of literary and visual analysis (48).

While Eisner and McCloud are still revered as the first to contribute to research on the multimodal structure of comic books, their contributions have only begun to scratch the surface of analysis as applied to the graphic novel. These assessments illuminate the core principles necessary for formal analysis; however, their contributions simplify and generalize the aesthetics of graphic texts. They are limited to the basics of their form. Consequently, both Eisner and McCloud fail to acknowledge the postmodern deconstructionism of the post-1960s underground comix and eventual graphic novel. One goal of the present study is to refine and expand on their work in order to evaluate the style present in comic books since the 1980s.

Since the late 1990s, literary scholars have begun to explore the medium’s potential. New analysis of multimodal narrative, or the unique integration of textual, visual, and spatial/temporal meanings, has begun to situate graphic novels within a more advanced framework for formal analysis. In 1999, scholars Jean-Louis Tielleuïl, William Moebius, and Anne Cirella-Urrutia provided a structuralist reading of Hergé’s *The Adventures of Tintin* (1929). They called attention
to the author’s “clear line” style—a graphic “language” that utilizes bold lines, minimal shadows, and light anthropomorphism to create instantly comprehensive narrative. Additionally, Tielleuil et al. observed the absence of texture and shading present in Hérge’s art. This clear line style dominates in most modern comic books. Beginning with the underground, later artists would radically reverse these elements through the implementation of rough hatching techniques and postmodern medias (Weiner 53).

The last decade has seen the greatest flux of comic book scholarship in academia. Histories of comics, such as Roger Sabin’s *Comics, Comix, & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* (2001) and Stephen Weiner’s *The Rise of the Graphic Novel* (2012), challenged notions that the comic book was nothing more than a “convenient pop culture prop” by tracing its aesthetics and cultural influences (Sabin 1). Peer-reviewed literary journals, such as the University of Florida’s *ImageTexT: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*, are now entirely dedicated to scholarship on comics and related media. The presence of these journals is testament to the number of academics who have begun to pursue comic books in recent scholarship. For instance, Mark Bernard and James Bucky Carter analyze Alan Moore’s conflation of space and time (i.e. “the fourth dimension”). Jason Dittmer analyzes the spatial and temporal features of comic books (which he refers to as comic book “geography”). Others, such as Elaine Martin and Ashley Kaye Dallacqua discuss the relationship between graphic novels and other media. Most notably, Hillary Chute has provided one of the first analyses of postmodernism in graphic novels. In her article “The Popularity of Postmodernism,” she provides a language to discuss postmodernism in comics. For instance, she offers the term “architecture” to describe postmodern panel structure (359). Additionally, she provides the term “mapping” to describe postmodernism’s sophisticated focus on space (359). These terms connote a certain complexity of design. Both Chute and other
scholars have further expanded on the language and themes of comic art, delving past reductive analyses to incorporate themes as well as formal aesthetic practices. However, these analyses rarely venture away from the more “literary” works of graphic narrative, such as *Tintin* or Spiegelman’s *Maus*.

**Postmodern Dystopias**

The contemporary graphic novel marks a genuine shift in many aspects of comic book form. The graphic novel reconfigures the modern in a manner similar to the changes made by visual art and literature with postmodernism. Because apocalyptic narratives are dominant in contemporary society, I have chosen to analyze postmodernism in graphic novels with dystopian themes.

At its core, postmodernism is “a profound collective self-transformation, a reworking and rewriting of an older system” (Jameson xiv). Since the 1960s, postmodernism has dominated American culture. Jameson describes postmodernity as “more formal […] and more distracted, [as] the ‘aestheticization’ of reality” (x). Postmodern artists rejected modernism’s existential “deep memory” and “master narratives” (Jameson 154). They shifted their interest from temporal experiences to experimenting with spatial forms. They embraced simulacra, pop culture, and “pastiche.” Jameson defines pastiche as any work in which “unity […] is no longer to be found within its language but outside itself, in the bound unity of another, absent book” (30). In pastiche, the simulacrum is not a reference to the real world but to other forms of popular culture—visual art, literature, and music, for instance. It relies, therefore, on the reader’s or viewer’s interpretation or knowledge of the pop culture simulacrum. As a “late-Capitalist” aesthetic, postmodernism blurs modern distinctions between “high” and “low” art.
The comic book played an important role in early visual postmodernism. Indeed, according to Bernard and Carter, comic books may be “the epitome of the postmodern art” (13). For instance, in the 1960s, Roy Lichtenstein’s paintings borrowed the style and narrative of the 1940s romance comics. Similarly, Andy Warhol mimicked the clear-lines and bold color schemes of the medium. In short, postmodern art borrows its kitsch culture, optimistic colors, and simulacra subjects from comic books. As Slavoj Žižek writes, this borrowing of the comic book form in postmodern art lends itself to the comic book’s ability to create “distinctive mass appeal” (Bernard and Carter 13).

While art was becoming “comic,” comic books were innovating along their own lines. In the 1960s, underground comix supplemented superhero comics by pursuing more adult themes and experimenting with figuration and layout. These styles coalesced in the graphic novel. Modernist literary and artistic techniques emerged in order to convey darker, more sophisticated themes. They embraced realism, psychological depth and the “difficulty” associated with modernism’s juxtaposition of multiple fragmented narratives. Additionally, they developed new ways to portray space and time. At the same time, the graphic novel’s necessary hybridity—the combination of words and pictures, comic’s “low art” with the novel’s “high art”—pushed the boundaries of the form.

In order to contribute to a scholarly understanding of what they achieve in terms of the graphic novel, I would like to refine Eisner’s and McCloud’s analyses of “sequential art.” I begin by expanding on Chutes’ term to define postmodern panel structure—architecture (359). The connotations of this term suggest elements of design in addition to structure. Chute alludes to influences of postmodern architectural building design of the 1960s—which placed primary emphasis in the façade rather than functionality of design. In postmodern graphic novels, panel
structure similarly serves a more aesthetic purpose. Whereas modern artists concerned themselves with functionality, postmodern comic artists concern themselves with display. These panel structures may be functional, but also may seem experimental purposely. The term architecture also connotes the possibility for deconstruction. This term is not to be confused with Jacques Derrida’s literary theory of deconstructionism, which critically interprets the relationship between text and meaning. Rather, architecture suggests the deconstruction of form—the tearing down and building up of panel arrangement (Chute 359). Furthermore, techniques borrowed from cinema—such as the reaction shot, the cut shot, and the free-indirect image—allow artists to experiment with nonlinear narrative. Spatial and temporal aesthetics—such as the bleeding image and gutter—are “deconstructed” to serve neither time nor space. Finally, I would argue that iconography serves complex narrative that takes advantage of intertextuality and pastiche.

Because literary scholars have focused their energies on more “literary” works in graphic narrative, specifically autobiographical or nonfictional works such as Spiegelman’s Maus or Bechdel’s Fun Home they have neglected the use of generic plots or pulp narratives in comic books. Horror and dystopian comic books have been particularly ignored. Since the 1930s, dystopian and apocalyptic narratives have repeatedly been used. Early comics—such as DC’s Superman (1938) and Marvel’s The Fantastic Four (1961) and X-Men (1963)—concerned superheroes who repeatedly saved the earth from near-destruction and terrifying futures. Since the 1970s, multiple graphic novels and manga (the Japanese equivalent of the American comic book) have explored apocalyptic and dystopian themes. The influence of these narratives cannot be overlooked when considering the most innovative graphic novels. For instance, Miller’s The Dark Knight Returns and Moore’s Watchmen are two of the most influential and popular graphic novels to date (Weiner 34). Additionally, Kirkman’s The Walking Dead was adapted into the
wildly popular TV show of the same name in 2010. Indeed, apocalypticism dominates contemporary popular culture.

According to Kirsten Moana Thompson, the term “apocalypse” originally meant to “uncover or disclose” (3). Today, it refers to catastrophe at a global scale: alien invasions, zombie pandemics, nuclear holocausts. These contemporary fantasies stem from Jewish and Christian texts (Ezekiel and Daniel within the Old Testament and Revelations within the New Testament) as well as medieval iconography (for example, the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse) which depict “a prophetic vision of the future” (Thompson 4, Mulligan 349). Additionally, these stories contain libidinal monsters that orchestrate the end times. The Book of Revelation, or the Apocalypse of John, predicts at length a predestination of monsters signaling Armageddon: a giant seven-headed red dragon, a hybrid leopard-bear-lion beast, [and] a two-horned creature “that emerges from the underground,” among others (Asma 67). These creatures dominated medieval religious culture, symbolizing satanic evil and explicit “enemies to be crushed and overcome” (66, 69). In addition to their socio-political connotations, monsters of the apocalypse signified anxieties of human morality, of the individual soul, and of the wrath of God at the end of the world. The coming apocalypse is, therefore, dependent on “the interpretation of signs to predict and prepare for the future” (Thompson 5). Thompson dubs this historical fear of “the future and anticipated end of the world” as “apocalyptic dread” (3).

As the title of Žižek’s book *Living in End Times* would suggest, today more than ever we are living in apocalyptic dread. In the last century, this dread was expressed frequently in popular culture. Nuclear paranoia and fears of communist infiltration resulted in the dystopian narratives of the 1950s (Mulligan 349). Throughout the 1950s, and again in the 1980s, an “apocalypse” of “family values” led to an upsurge of the horror genre—tales of violence, deviance, profanity, and
moral ambiguity that produced hideous monsters of human and non-human origin (Poole 145). Echoing the “culture wars” of the 1980s, these stories articulated fears of the annihilation of morality and the individual soul.

By the 1990s, a new secular apocalypse rose to predominance, inspired by contemporary events such as the AIDS crisis, the year 2000, and global warming. These narratives were more global, blending elements of their horror predecessors into narratives of worldwide cataclysm rather than moral degradation (Thompson 12). However, like the religious apocalypse, this secular, or “postmodern” apocalypse, contains remnants of the apocalyptic plot, most often consisting of two significant stages: “destruction and renewal” (Gomel 186). This secular apocalypse can be categorized into three types of narratives: technological, environmental, and social.

The technological apocalypse considers the dangers of the posthuman. According to Stephen T. Asma, the concept of posthumanism refers to the idea that technology will “usher in a superior life for our species” and that we will “transcend our […] finite flesh” (261). The posthuman is, therefore, a being that exists in a state beyond flesh and blood. In many versions—for instance, in the Terminator trilogy (1984)—this narrative pits humanity against artificial intelligence and out-of-control science. As Asma writes, “Technology may alienate us from ourselves, dehumanizing us and turning us into self-made monsters of a new sort altogether” (263).

Influenced by fears of global warming and nuclear war, the environmental apocalypse pits humanity against monsters or forces of unstoppable nature. These monsters most often arise from humans tampering with the natural world. For instance, in Godzilla (1954), American nuclear weapons testing results in the creation of an unstoppable creature. Like monsters before
him, Godzilla both represents the evils and dangers of unnatural destruction as well as punishes humans responsible for such evils against nature and life (Asma 266).

The social apocalypse narrative, most frequently incarnated as the “zombie apocalypse,” pits humanity against its most historical fear: death. In this social apocalypse, the dead refuse to die, forcing humanity to face its own mortality. Inevitably, society collapses. This scenario emphasizes the critique of social relations, as explored in George Romero’s *Living Dead* trilogy (1968). Žižek argues that zombies are “figures of pure habit,” reflecting the mechanical habituation of people under capitalist society and questioning freedom of the human condition. In this way, zombies are also figures of the “uncanny”—dead but not dead, they are figures that represent *us* and not *us* simultaneously. Quite recently, the zombie narrative has infected hundreds if not thousands of comics, films, and novels in popular media. From Romero’s *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968) to *28 Days Later* (2003) to *World War Z* (2013), apocalyptic dread takes the popular form of our flesh-eating neighbors.

If apocalyptic narratives are ubiquitous in contemporary graphic novels, perhaps it is because such texts have proven to be effective modes of telling such stories. For instance, the postmodern apocalypse is on-going—a world reduced to a continual chase scene in which survivors face the same challenges again and again. This narrative structure reflects the seriality of the comic book medium. Additionally, as the “end-times” would suggest, the apocalypse is a literal end of all time. As a result, it is defined almost entirely by space (Gomel 188). Similarly, graphic narratives operate almost entirely in a spatial mode. Thus, the aesthetics of the graphic novel suggest an ability to convey the seriality and spatiality of contemporary dystopian and apocalyptic narratives.
Postmodern Architecture

In the late 1970s, the underground comix first developed an “avante-garde approach” to comic book narrative by experimenting with the medium’s temporal and spatial constraints (Chute 357). According to McCloud, the “comic panel” is the essential temporal and spatial constraint in modern comics. He writes, “Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (67). This closure is created by another temporal element in comics: the “gutter,” or the blank space between comic panels (McCloud 67). Comix artists deconstructed the comic panel and gutter in order to manipulate time and space. This deconstruction allowed them to express “simultaneity, multiple perspectives, shifting temporalities, and paradoxical spaces” (Chute 157). As Chute writes,

Figure 3. Comic by Victor Moscoso, from Zap Comix, no. 2, 1968
“Postmodernism has given us […] a perceptual modality. Comics, then, in the realm of the literary, places the reader within a space of a narrative, amplifying postmodernism’s concern with location, boundaries, depth, and mapping.”

Figure 3 portrays this experimentation with panel and perspective introduced in the 1970s. In this illustration from Robert Crumb’s *Zap Comix*, no. 2, Victor Moscoso focuses solely on the portrayal of space. In the second panel of the bottom row, “Mr. Peanut,” an anthropomorphic creature from Planter’s Peanut commercials, pushes his top hat through a door that protrudes through the ceiling of the panel above it. Here, comic book “gutters” do not function to pause or segment narrative time, as they traditionally did. Instead, they separate the “fun house” space of the comic.

Frank Miller was the chief architect of postmodern design in comics—the Michael Graves of graphic novel architecture. His debut graphic novel, *Ronin*, introduced a new range of spatiality and temporality to the comic book. Miller’s *Ronin* is a pastiche of samurai and dystopic city narratives, using virtual reality and cyberkinetics to link them. A samurai is reincarnated in a futuristic New York after being cursed eight centuries earlier by the demon Agat. In the twenty-first century, Billy Challas, a ward of the Aquarius Corporation, dreams of the ronin. After an explosion releases both the ronin and Agat from an ancient sword, Billy (born without limbs due to a genetic disease and possessing telekinetic powers) fuses with the ronin. With Billy’s biocircuitry and telekinetic powers, the ronin seeks to avenge his fallen master by defeating Agat in the twenty-first century. Simultaneously, Billy seeks freedom from his corporate captors.

Miller’s deconstruction of the comic book panel was not only inventive, but brilliantly mimetic of its content: *Ronin* is filled with ruined architecture. Figure 4 depicts muted buildings crumbling into heaps of rubble. Miller’s deconstruction of the city also suggests the
reconstruction of genre narrative via pastiche. Throughout the graphic novel, imagery of the samurai narrative—demons, horses, bows and arrows, and swords—combine with imagery of the technological apocalypse—robots, computers, and laser weapons. This combination of foreign elements produces a version of Sigmund Freud’s “uncanny”—or unheimlich—a term which refers to “that which is familiar and congenial” and “that which is concealed and kept out of sight” (420). In other words, when the familiar and the foreign conflate, they produce a sense of recognition and lack thereof simultaneously. This uncanny doubling heightens Miller’s biotechnological themes. For instance, in figure 4, biotechnology (in the form of blue orb-like
structures) begins to peak through the buildings of the desolate city. Miller integrates these structures into the architecture of the existing buildings; however, they obviously represent an entirely different kind of architecture. Miller juxtaposes the organic shapes of the orbs with the harsh lines of crumbling buildings. Additionally, he juxtaposes the colors within the image. While these colors are muted and dull, signifying the dystopic nature of the setting, the turquoise of the orbs stand out against the greys and browns of the old city.

Miller’s deconstruction of panel structure is seen in the two-page bleed of figure 5. In the aerial view, ruins of the city’s tenements become covered by the Aquarius Corporation’s

![Figure 5. Two-page bleed of Aquarius’ fungal-like biotechnology, from Ronin, by Frank Miller, 1983](image-url)
biotechnology. Ironically, this technology appears more biological than technological. Plant-like and green, the technology appears as a fungus feeding on the urban landscape. In the bleeding image, pages act as panels, or the boundaries in which the action of the comic is contained. However, this action is not contained by the page; rather, it extends beyond it. According to McCloud, the use of the bleeding image generates the effect of timelessness: “Time is no longer contained by the familiar icon of the closed panel, but instead hemorrhages and escapes into timeless space” (103). In figure 5, Miller adapts the connotations of this image to convey continued growth. Aquarius’ technology is not contained within the two-page bleed; rather, it appears to grow beyond it. Miller takes advantage of the bleeding image’s timeless effect to convey that this technology will continue to grow and spread into a determinate future. He incorporates more of these two-page aerial views throughout the graphic novel. With each of these spreads, the fungal-like technology consumes more and more of its urban setting, further emphasizing this continuous growth.

Furthermore, in figure 4, Miller uses the visuals and architecture of the page to convey uncanny pastiche as well as narrative duality. Figure 4 shows another two-page spread with a full bleed. In this scene, Casey (the head of security at the Aquarius Corporation sent to kill the ronin) wakes up from the ronin’s fantasy and sees his demons for what they truly are: biotechnological machines. On the left side, Miller depicts a swarm of demons from the ronin’s feudal Japan. On the right, he depicts almost identical biotechnological machines present in New York. The bleeding image emphasizes the degree to which time is compounded thematically throughout the graphic novel. Indeed, the two pages appear as one illustration. This seamlessness is indicated by the creature at the very bottom of the image, whose body represents a demon on the left page but whose arm becomes biotechnological on the right. Thus, both the demons and
biotechnological machines occupy the same space. However, Miller separates this illustration with the binding of the book. In this instance, the binding acts as a temporal mode—much like a comic gutter—separating the two pages, or “panels,” and indicating the passing of time from one to the other. Thus, though the demons and machines occupy the same space, they are separated temporally. In this image, the organic and technological, past and present, converge. About *Ronin*, Pramod Nayar writes, “The uncanny is at once technological and organic, and biology meshes with fantasy to produce the uncanny’s unnerving effect” (135).
Miller underlines the scene’s visual duality through the use of floating panels within the two-page bleed. These panels depict Casey’s reactions as she wakes from the ronin’s fantasy. In the first panel located on the left page, Casey sees what the ronin sees: Agat’s demon slaves. In the second panel, she begins to wake from this fantasy. Miller locates her second reaction directly on the binding in order to indicate this perceptual split. In the final panel, on the right page, Casey sees the demons as they are: Aquarius’ biotechnological machines. These panels are not designated by gutters, but by lines, suggesting they occupy the same space as the two-page bleed. Casey’s dialogue—segmented by each panel—implies the passing of moment-to-moment time. They act as reaction shots to the action occupying the full-page spread. Thus, time elapses while the space remains the same. Miller demonstrates a prime example of graphic architecture in which the uncanny is revealed through both “spatial/geographic distance” as well as “temporal distance” (Nayar 137). As the reader, we are meant to look through Casey’s perspective as well look at her reaction. The multiplicity of these two pages makes it a prime example of graphic architecture.

Miller also innovates a sense of filmic temporality that comes to dominate postmodern graphic novels. In Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative, Eisner argues against this influence. According to Eisner, both filmic and print modes of graphic narrative employ spatial/temporal “rhythm” of juxtaposed images. In cinema, this rhythm is conveyed through a sequence of cuts; in print, through a series of panels. Eisner maintains that film rhythm in comic books hinders readability. He writes, “In print, the rhythm of reading requires images that truly connect in order to more clearly evoke the intervening action […] Comics makers frequently are unsuccessful in emulating [film] because they underestimate the amount of space this requires in print. [I]t can lose readability. The same event can be told more frugally, leaving room for the
rest of the story” (Eisner 70, 72-73). In other words, comic books are incapable of emulating complex narrative techniques, such as montage, close-ups, or perspective framing.

Yet, other critics link the terminology used to describe comic books with that used to explain film (Martin 173). According to Dallacqua, cinematic terms such as “framing, angles, camera movement,” and even “lighting” can be applied when explaining the form and aesthetic of comic books (67). In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud alludes to this complex relationship between film and sequential art, likening comic panels to frames in a film strip. He writes, “Space does for comics what time does for film. However you might say before its projected, film is just a very, very, very, very slow comic!” (8).

Contra Eisner, Miller’s work demonstrates a sophisticated handling of filmic narrative techniques that can only be understood by resorting to interpretation associated with cinema. In *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, for instance, he employs a series of reaction panels to heighten narrative drama. This cinematic influence makes sense: An already popular character, DC’s Batman appeared in multiple animated and live-action television shows since the late 1960s.

Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* features an alternate Bruce Wayne, who returns from retirement to fight crime in the streets of dystopic Gotham City after gangs known as the Mutants run rampant in his absence. After he defeats the Mutant leader, the gang disbands and inspires a new group called Sons of the Batman, using excessive violence against criminals. Batman’s return motivates his arch enemy the Joker to awaken from his catatonic state at Arkham Asylum, and he begins to murder once again. After a battle in which Batman disables the Joker, the Joker commits suicide in order to incriminate Batman for murder. Batman’s vigilantism ignites
backlash from the Gotham police force and, eventually, the United States government, who order Superman to confront Batman in Gotham.

Throughout *The Dark Knight Returns*, Miller uses reaction shots to slow down narrative time. In one of the novel’s most iconic scenes, Miller uses cinematic rhythms to convey the experience of a painful and traumatic memory, leading to Bruce Wayne’s reclaiming of the Batman mantle. In this scene (figure 7), Bruce remembers the night he witnessed his parents murdered in an attempted robbery. On the left page of figure 7, for instance, the linear images do not transition in linear time. Instead, they transition from present to past to present realities. The

![Figure 7](image.png)

**Figure 7.** Cinematic reaction shots depict Bruce Wayne’s memory of his parents’ murders, from *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, by Frank Miller, 1986
first panel of the second row depicts a present Bruce in his apartment as he begins to remember his parents’ death. The second panel of this row cuts to the instant of this memory, with no narrative transition. The rest of the scene depicts the past through the use of reaction shots: each panel pans in and around a young Bruce Wayne. By the fourth panel of the fourth row, the scene cuts to the object young Bruce sees in the third panel of this row (the gun). The rest of the scene develops in similar cinematic fashion, transitioning between frames of young Bruce and the objects he sees: the robber, the gun, the trigger, his father and mother falling to the ground. Miller stretches the scene across three full pages in a series of compressed, closely-situated frames. As a result, the action becomes dramatically segmented; temporality slows, illustrating McCloud’s observations of a “very, very, very, very slow comic!” (Eisner 30, McCloud 8). Miller turns Eisner’s problem into an advantage: the slowed temporality of the scene conveys the intensity of Bruce’s trauma.

Miller first experiments with this use of cinematic temporality in *Ronin*. Figure 8 depicts a moment of intimacy between the ronin and Casey. After the ronin rescues her from cannibals deep in the sewers of New York, they kiss. Like figure 7, the panels depicting this scene are composed of compressed, closely situated close-ups. In the style of a flip book or film strip, images repeat with only slight variations. As a result, every touch is emphasized, calling attention to the cinematic cliché of the “first kiss.” Deliberately segmented and prolonged, this structure heightens the scene’s intimacy.
In their seminal work *Watchmen*, Moore and Gibbons use cinematic cut shots to similarly effect narrative time. Recognized in *Time’s* List of the 100 Best Novels, *Watchmen* is renowned for its literary merit and influence on postmodernism in narrative. The graphic novel combines elements of the detective novel, pre-code horror comics, and nuclear apocalypse to create a wholly original and highly influential narrative: the post-1960s fraught superhero. Like Miller’s Batman, these heroes were entirely psychologically motivated. Unlike Batman, they are depicted as “throwaway” characters—heroes who are disillusioned, mortal, and impotent without a costume (Weiner 33). Unlike Marvel’s pre-1960s political superheroes, these heroes were less than “super,” serving to comment on the human condition rather than to fight foreign enemies.
*Watchmen* depicts an alternate reality in which superheroes emerge in the 1940s, changing history. These “heroes,” many of whom are political reactionaries, win the Vietnam War for the United States. By 1985, most of these heroes are forced into retirement. Others continue to work for the U.S. government or underground as criminal vigilantes. When the Soviet Union invades Afghanistan, threatening World War III, retired heroes don their capes to investigate the murder of one of their own.

In *Watchmen*, Moore and Gibbons further complicate the modern grid developed in *Ronin* and *The Dark Knight Returns*. Figure 9 depicts the crime scene in the apartment of Edward Blake—publicly known as The Comedian. Gibbons portrays this scene in two different...

*Figure 9*. Cinematic cut shots depict the murder of The Comedian in his apartment, from *Watchmen*, by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, 1986
temporalities: the scene of The Comedian’s murder as it occurs the night before and the scene of the investigation. In the first panel of the third row on the left, crime scene investigators inspect broken glass as evidence of foul play. The next panel juxtaposes this image with a moment from the past—similar to a cinematic flashback—in which The Comedian’s head is bashed into the glass by an unknown assailant. Gibbons uses visual cues to indicate this shift from narrative present to narrative past. For instance, word bubbles in the present become narrative text blocks in the past, similar to a voice over in a filmic flashback sequence. Additionally, Gibbons’ juxtaposition of color schemes indicates this sudden temporal shift. Gibbons illustrates the preceding scene in analogous greens. In the second image, he juxtaposes this color palette with its complement—analogous reds. Here, space remains the same while color is used to designate changes in temporality. This use of primary color to designate the transition between narrative present and narrative past is a more sophisticated use of color than one expects when viewing Lichtenstein’s or Warhol’s comic book images. Additionally, this juxtaposition clarifies a shift in violence. Juxtaposed by the calm greens of their counterparts, the reds of these panels connote passion and bloodshed. Like the use of color temperature gel in film, in which filmmakers incorporate colored tints to scenes in order to connote specific emotions, this use of analogous colors informs the reader that the scene has not only shifted temporally but thematically as well.

Gibbons’ grid structure, a six-by-six layout reminiscent of the modern comic, becomes the architecture for a complex nonlinear narrative. Like Miller’s, this sequence appears filmic in nature. But while Miller’s grids slow time in order to emphasize moments of trauma and intimacy, Moore and Gibbons juxtapose alternative temporalities. In other words, the present and past scenes are “filmed” at different speeds. For instance, in the present tense panels designated by green, crime scene investigators observe the scene at a walking pace. Contrarily,
past tense scenes designated by red depict the Comedian in short, sudden bursts of action. These “flashes” of time also serve to connote the sudden violence of the past. Bernard and Carter refer to this temporal shift as the “fourth dimension”—a term used to refer to “a special relationship with space and time wherein the two conflate such that infinite multiple dimensionalities become simultaneously present” (1). This constant shift between present and past is thus mimetically reminiscent of another Watchman character: Dr. Manhattan, whose superhuman abilities allow him to remain in the past, present, and future simultaneously.

This juxtaposition between past and present produces ironies throughout the text. For instance, in the bottom panel of the right page of figure 9, Moore juxtaposes a character’s present-narrative response—“Ground floor, comin’ up”—with past-narrative imagery of the Comedian plummeting to his death. This morbid irony is typical of Moore’s narrative deconstruction of the superhero genre. Contrary to DC’s and Marvel’s traditional superheroes, The Comedian does not possess the archetypal “all-too-heroic” qualities of Superman or Captain America. Rather, The Comedian is a political reactionary, rapist, and murderer. Furthermore, he is brutally killed off in the first three pages. This opening sets the tone for a series of other fraught “heroes” who are not super but pathetic and vulnerable.

Miller’s and Moore’s works influenced numerous contemporary graphic novels. Published nearly twenty years after The Dark Knight Returns and Watchmen, The Walking Dead adapts a postmodern aesthetic particularly reminiscent of Miller’s style. Written by Kirkman and illustrated by Tony Moore and then Charlie Adlard, the comic’s black-and-white, clear line style is also reminiscent of the underground comix of the 1960s. Like The Dark Knight Returns, The Walking Dead’s adaptation of cinematic reaction shots is particularly fitting. The story follows police deputy Rick Grimes, who awakens from a coma in the midst of a zombie apocalypse.
Disoriented but resourceful, he travels to Atlanta, Georgia, where he reunites with his wife and son. He soon becomes the leader of a group of survivors, who trek across the apocalyptic landscape. Rick encourages them not only to survive the zombie apocalypse but to establish a community where his son can thrive. Since its publication in 2003, the comic has been adapted into a hit television series, multiple video games, novels, board games, and even phone apps.

Like *Ronin* and *Watchmen*, *The Walking Dead* is a pastiche of multiple narratives. For instance, the text references elements of the father-son family dynamic through the relationship between Rick and his son. 

*Figure 10.* Rick Grimes rides horseback into apocalyptic Atlanta, from *The Walking Dead*, by Robert Kirkman, 2003
between Rick and Carl. Most notably, the text combines the zombie apocalypse trek with the American western film. Kirkman and Moore use variations of Miller’s architecture in order to convey this pastiche: Figure 10 depicts perhaps the most iconic image in both comic and television versions. In this scene from volume one, Rick rides horseback into Atlanta, searching for his wife and son. Moore mixes western and apocalyptic iconographies. Clad in cowboy boots and a sheriff’s hat, Rick is introduced as the western hero of American nationalism. His version of white masculinity is meant to suggest a culturally “universal” hero—the white male protagonist as savior and survivor (Nyong’o 5). As an icon, Rick connotes the “sovereign subject” of contemporary culture. However, Kirkman and Moore present this trope ironically: the hero does not walk into an end-of-movie sunset; rather, his dwarfed figure marches into a dystopic city reminiscent of Miller’s New York and Gotham. Graphic lines that construct the boundaries of the highways converge at the central focal point of the city, drawing the reader’s eyes and creating a linear perspective that encapsulates the desolation of the city, while reducing the character physically. Icons of the apocalypse genre—strewn garbage, abandoned vehicles, and zombies—situate the gunslinger in an uncanny setting. This juxtaposition enhances the uncanniness of the scene. Juxtaposing western and apocalyptic icons, the scene conflates the past and present realities. As a result, the gunslinger is out of place and time. This juxtaposition further diminishes Rick’s iconicity while emphasizing the foreignness of the zombie icon. Through this juxtaposition, Kirkman and Moore introduce a wholly original narrative—the western hero in apocalyptic wasteland. This narrative will go on to influence future apocalyptic narratives, such as the *Cowboys & Aliens* comic (2006) and film (2011).

Also reminiscent of Miller’s work, figure 11 of *The Walking Dead* demonstrates the use of cinematic reaction shots. In this scene, Glenn implements a new way to kill “walkers”
Figure 11. Cinematic reaction shots depict a zombie kill, from *The Walking Dead*, by Robert Kirkman, 2003

along the perimeter of their community’s wire-fence. In the top panel of figure 11, the reader views the action of the knife entering the zombie’s temple; however, only the object of this action—the zombie, itself—is depicted. The perpetrator of the action, Glenn, is not visible. The panel structure is postmodern in two distinct ways: First, while the panels follow each other in a coherent temporal sequence, the absence of the subject of the action hinders readability since the reader cannot know the subject of the action until after the consequences have already occurred. In Eisner’s grammar, the first panel would efficiently depict the subject, the action, and the object within consecutive frames. This modern rendering would rely on only two panels to
convey the same narrative: one depicting Glenn’s actions, the other depicting the consequences as Glenn pulls the knife out. Second, the panel structure demonstrates film rather than comic book rhythm. As in Miller’s work, three panels in the second row are segmented so that the action—the zombie’s skull sliding off the knife—is slowed. This “slow motion” temporality conveys the narrative’s gross apocalyptic humor. The prolonged anticipation of waiting for the zombie to fall becomes weirdly yet ironically comical.

Moore and Adlard frequently use a filmic technique known as the “free indirect image,” a method of narrative that conflates the subject-object relationship. Originally coined by Gilles Deleuze in Cinema (1983), the free indirect image “constructs a continuum between the poles of subjective and objective images,” ultimately rejecting the binary of the subject-object relationship by moving indeterminately between them (Schwartz 109). This filmic technique brilliantly captures the uncanny dichotomy between human and zombie antagonists in zombie narrative. Tavia Nyong’o writes, “Rather than see someone, or see what they see, in the free indirect image, we see from an indeterminate point of view in which subject and object become indiscernible” (5). He continues, “This free indirect image is perhaps closest to the collective point of view of the zombie horde itself: it unlocks or alerts us to the oddity of the presence of reaction panels, ostensibly from the point-of-view of the zombie, alerting us to the ruse through which such an animation or projection of vision is effected” (5). In The Walking Dead, Moore and Adlard employ this use of the free indirect image in order to conflate the perspective of the human-zombie dichotomy within the narrative.

In figure 12, Moore uses the free-indirect image to emphasize the blurred perspective between subject and object, the living and the living dead, at the nexus of all zombie narratives. In this scene, the reader sees Rick enter the zombie-infested streets of Atlanta. Moore situates
Figure 12. Free indirect image conveys zombie horde’s point-of-view, from The Walking Dead, by Robert Kirkman, 2003

this frame from the point-of-view of the zombie horde closing in on Rick’s position rather than from that of the protagonist himself. The silhouetted zombie hand in the top left foreground indicates this embedded perspective. Silhouetted backs of zombies’ heads further establish this shift. Thus, the reader views Rick from the perspective of the zombie horde. This shift of the free indirect image is officially realized in the second linear panel when Rick turns his head to look directly at the reader. Unlike Miller’s use of reaction panels, in which the reader is intended to look at Casey’s reaction and through her perspective simultaneously, in figure 12, the reader is only meant to look at Rick. Not only does Rick become objectified, but the reader becomes an
active participant of the zombie horde, blurring distinctions of the human-zombie dichotomy
within the narrative.

In figure 13, Moore continues to emphasize the indiscernibility of human-zombie
perspective. Rick and Glenn sneak back into Atlanta in order to ransack a gun store by disguising
themselves in zombie entrails. On the left, the reader views this action from the perspective of
the zombie horde in the bottom third of the panel. This scene is significant not only for its
indeterminacy of the subject-object dichotomy, but also for its ambiguity of the foreground-
background within the bleeding image. The zombie horde nearly swallows the entire panel

![Figure 13](image_url)

**Figure 13.** Free indirect image conflates foreground-background, subject-object distinctions,
from *The Walking Dead*, by Robert Kirkman, 2003
frame, undermining the relationship of figure and ground. The zombies become indiscernible from the setting itself. Allan Cameron writes, “the identification of frame, the separation of figure and ground—these things mark an intentional relationship with the visual world. Zombie [media] partially undermine this relationship by putting forward, at key moments, a zombie vision devoid of sense and intentionality” (78-79). The conflation of the foreground-background emphasizes the degree to which society has literally decayed within the social apocalypse, echoing Glenn’s solemn realization within the panel: “It’s worse than we thought.” On the right page of figure 13, Rick and Glenn find the shop and point to the building labeled, “Gunsite.” Contrary to this indication of direction, which invites the reader to look at the building, the reader views the scene from the perspective of the zombie horde. Lines that construct the base of the gun shop converge toward Rick and Glenn in the background, indicating their purpose as focal point. As a result, the reader’s eyes are drawn to Rick and Glenn, rather than to the gun store. Minimized and objectified by the angle and perspective in the background, the two protagonists become objects of the subjective zombie horde.

In figure 14, Adlard combines the use of the free indirect image with cinematic reaction shots. In this image, Adlard illustrates sixteen panels, each containing either a human or zombie portrait figure. The full-page four-by-four panel structure resembles Miller’s architecture: It’s structure does not efficiently progress the narrative. Indeed, the panels are not sequenced in time, but by space. They do not proceed action-by-action, but character-by-character. Adlard cuts between human and zombie faces: For instance, in the first panel of the first row, a human character is depicted; in the second, a zombie; and so on. Adlard draws these faces in similar fashion—each panel contains debris, blood splatter, and gun fire. As a result, the humans and zombies become indistinguishable (Riley 86). While the four-by-four panel structure mimics
Miller’s style, it conveys a different rhythm: Rather than slow temporality, time within this scene quickens as the reader’s eye glances over each figure for a brief moment. The panel structure in this scene, therefore, acts as a filmic montage. Moore hones in on reaction shots within each panel, emphasizing the indiscernibility of these images and blurring the familiarity of these gestures. The formal implementation of panel structure in this scene highlights the interchangeability of human and zombie violence and likeness, highlighting the humanity, or lack thereof, of the human-zombie subject-object.
Moore’s and Adlard’s adaptations of cinematic techniques result in a slippery subject-object relationship between humans and zombies throughout the text. This visual manipulation enhances Kirkman’s thematic narrative. By introducing zombies, the social apocalypse focuses on the drama of human relationships. As often as the zombies, throughout *The Walking Dead*, humans are constantly depicted partaking in “monstrous” acts—murder, rape, torture, and cannibalism, among other horrific actions. Adlard’s and Moore’s visual manipulation of the human-zombie dichotomy through the use of cinematic images, therefore, is mimetic for Kirkman’s “human versus monster”—or “us versus them”—narrative.

**Postmodern Medias and Mapping**

In addition to emphasizing temporality via spatial modes in comics, since the 1970s comic books began to emphasize and experiment with multimedia art and “spectacular” illustrations and images. Deserting the bold, primary colors of the 1930s, these comics and graphic novels experimented with other media such as photography and watercolor forms. Abandoning the clear line style, they experimented with both realism and abstraction in color and texture, producing images that sometimes appear oddly gratuitous in the comic book context. This transition to multimedia artwork resulted from an advancement in printing technologies around the 1970s. During the golden age of the medium, comic book artists were limited to basic mass printing technologies. As advances in new printing methods began to improve in the mid-1970s, comic book artists began to experiment with more multimedia art forms (Eisner 23).
In figure 15, Bill Sienkiewicz’ mini-series *Stray Toasters* (1988) demonstrates a transition from underground aesthetics to high quality printing technology. *Stray Toasters* is a murder mystery: Eleven boys and a woman have been violently slain. Egon Rustemagick, a psychologist locked up in a mental hospital by his former lover, is released only to help catch the serial killer responsible. Meanwhile, the devil vacations through the streets of New York. Sienkiewicz’ series borrowed heavily from past crime and horror comics. Like the underground comix of the 1960s, it employed adult narratives and graphic architecture that emphasized narrative themes. Sienkiewicz experimented with dramatic, abstract imagery and multimedia art,
such as watercolor, acrylic, and collage. These expressionistic images set the scene for the series’ deeply psychological narrative. Its rendering of familiar images strange was also mimetic for the series’ themes of uncanniness—for instance, its depictions of Todd, a child-cyborg experiment whose brain had been attached to a power outlet. The pages of *Stray Toasters* were visual spectacles as much as comics—an effect produced by the high-quality printing technologies available at artists’ disposal. In figure 15, for instance, Sienkiewicz seamlessly combines real images of clamps and wires with his own hand-drawn and hand-painted illustrations.

This use of multimedia art and illustration within comic books demonstrates a conflation of “high” (or traditional) and “low” (or mass) art forms (Chute 354). Chute defines “high” art as any art mode pertaining to traditional or canonical technique or style, for instance: oil painting. She conversely defines “low” art as any mass mode of art, such as the comic book. By definition, the graphic novel alone is inherently self-reflexive in its use of mainstream comic book aesthetics (“low” art) to convey novel-length and -quality stories (“high” art). The implementation of traditional art forms within the style of the text further demonstrates the postmodernism of the medium.

Written by Mark Waid and illustrated by Alex Ross, *Kingdom Come* demonstrates an intense use of multimedia in comic books. Unlike *Stray Toasters*, which uses more exaggerated multimedia art to illustrate underground themes, *Kingdom Come* combines elegant visuals—Ross’ watercolors—with mainstream superheroes—iconic characters who were only ever represented in low quality printing. Published in 1996 and clearly influenced by *Watchmen*, the graphic novel takes place in an apocalyptic future in which DC Comics’ most famous superheroes have retired or gone underground. A new generation of unprincipled and irresponsible super-humans and vigilantes—many offspring of the traditional heroes—run
rampant throughout the world. After the state of Kansas falls victim to nuclear fallout during a battle between these young heroes, Clark Kent reclaims the Superman mantle in an attempt to contain them, though inadvertently edges the world ever-closer to end times. Meanwhile, Batman and an assembled team of retired and new heroes attempts to prevent a super-human war that would result in global deconstruction.

Figure 16. Super-humans perish after United Nations launch nuclear warheads, from Kingdom Come, by Mark Waid and Alex Ross, 1996
Waid’s and Ross’ superheroes serve a different purpose than their modern predecessors. In modern comics, superheroes saved the earth from nuclear annihilation. In Waid’s and Ross’ narrative, however, these same heroes become the cause of nuclear destruction. During a battle in Kansas, Captain Atom—a super-human vessel containing pure nuclear power—explodes. This detonation destroys all of Kansas, foreshadowing the fate of the world under super-human oppression. In a final epic brawl between Wonder Woman’s Justice League, Batman’s army, and the Gulag prisoners, the United Nations launches nuclear warheads to destroy the cluster of super-humans before they can destroy the earth. One warhead strikes, resulting in an obliteration of almost all superheroes. In figure 16, their bones result in a landscape reminiscent of the barren settings of the environmental apocalypse. Borrowing heavily from *Watchmen*’s fraught heroes, whose presence also threatens the start of World War III, Waid’s and Ross’ heroes become metaphors for “nuclear power and international cooperation” (Darius 4).

Ross illustrates these pages using gouache rather than more conventional inks. Blended through the combination of water, pigment and chalk, this technique is most notably associated with the Impressionist painters of the 19th century, such as Claude Monet. It is, by Chute’s definition of the term, a medium associated with “high” art rather than graphic illustration (354). Ross’ use of this “high” art form to revive a myriad of DC comic book characters, such as Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman, produces a jarring juxtaposition of form and content. In figure 17, for instance, Ross uses an entirely modern panel structure. Here, time and space are used in very traditional ways to depict two of the most traditional characters in comics: Bruce Wayne (Batman) and Clark Kent (Superman). However, Ross’ illustrations are not traditional. Unlike the clear line style found in modern comics, they are intricate, textured illustrations that
suggest realism. To some extent, these illustrations are too real. They thus become a visual analog for Moore’s all-too-human-superhero. Indeed, Waid’s and Ross’ Superman is as human as he looks. This use of unorthodox style to revive traditional characters mimetically deconstructs the modern all-too-heroic superhero.

Ross’ illustrations are not only gorgeous; they are gratuitous. Both Waid and Ross fill their novel to the brim with pages upon pages of nearly every DC Comic character ever created—from the well-known members of the Justice League, to each of their respective

Figure 17. Ross depicts an older Bruce Wayne and Clark Kent in gouache, from *Kingdom Come*, by Mark Waid and Alex Ross, 1996
Figure 18. Two-page bleed depicts chaotic battle between super-humans, from *Kingdom Come*, by Mark Waid and Alex Ross, 1996

villains, to more obscure heroes such as Nightstar and Captain Atom. Eisner assesses this gratuitous image in *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*. Here, he argues that the overuse of visual “pyrotechnics” can only result in “bravura art” and a simple plot (22). Ross’ illustrative choices go thoroughly against Eisner’s established ratio of visual and narrative harmony. Hyperaware of its aesthetic, *Kingdom Come* almost commands the reader to pay attention to it simply for its beauty, emphasizing visual over temporal significance. However, this visual “bravura” does not overwhelm the narrative as Eisner suggests; rather, it becomes mimetic for the story it tells. Indeed, the overwhelming size of Waid’s cast of characters is portrayed by the
overwhelming nature of Ross’ illustrations. Figure 18 for instance, depicts a scene in which citizens take cover from a seemingly purposeless fight between groups of young, powerful super-humans. These illustrations—often depicted as bleeding images or two-page bleeds—leave little room for white space. They are both chaotic and beautiful. This visual chaos conveys the thematic chaos of its near-dystopian narrative—in which super-humans threaten to overwhelm and destroy the world.

On the opposite end of Eisner’s visual spectrum, Lemire’s *Sweet Tooth* experiments with under-illustrated images. *Sweet Tooth* is set in an environmental apocalypse in which a majority of the human population has died off in a pandemic of unknown origins. Only human/animal hybrid children—born at the time of the outbreak—are immune. Gus, a hybrid with the ears and antlers of a deer, assisted by Jeppard, a tough ex-hockey player whose family has died, ultimately discovers the apocalypse’s origins. Like *The Walking Dead*, *Sweet Tooth* mixes the zombie narrative with a father-son adventure story—as evidenced through Gus’ and Jeppard’s as well as Buddy’s and Jeppard’s relationships. Reminiscent of the social apocalypse, the mysterious pandemic results in a fallen society—gangs control the remaining resources and survivors must continually flee across ruined landscapes. Thus, Lemire’s narrative borrows thematically from many zombie films and visually from *The Walking Dead* as well (see figure 19). It also rewrites this narrative to incorporate elements of the environmental apocalypse. Here, the “zombies” of this social apocalypse are replaced by the childish hybrids, who turn out to be the protagonists. Like *The Walking Dead*, the text plays on the subject-object reversal of determined monsters. Indeed, in *Sweet Tooth*, the “monsters” are the true heroes. Like Godzilla, these apocalyptic “monsters” originate after humans directly tamper with “nature”—in this case, Native American burial grounds. Originating from the spirits of vengeful anthropomorphic
gods, Gus and his hybrid gang are meant to usurp humans in order to save the earth. This environmentalism is emphasized by the anthropomorphism of the hybrids themselves.

Lemire is a graphic architect with clear influence from Miller, Moore, and Sienkiewicz and whose illustrations are wholly postmodern. For instance, in figure 20, Gus and the other hybrids attempt to escape their captivity by travelling through an underground sewer system. However, when Wendy—another hybrid—is attacked by a gator-child, Gus beats the child to death with a brick. This example combines elements of both Miller’s and Moore’s architecture.
Like Miller, Lemire illustrates this action through a series of individual floating panels within one larger frame. The implied diagonal line of these consecutive panels conveys the motion of Gus’ action in this scene. Reminiscent of Moore’s work, this structure also combines multiple temporalities. While we read the whole page as one scene, we read the individual consecutive floating panels as multiple, staccato moments within the larger space. Also like Moore’s, Lemire’s use of saturated reds within the panels against their white backgrounds and surrounding muted space emphasizes the intensity and violence of Gus’ action. While the panels enhance this narrative, Lemire tends to overuse this aesthetic throughout the text. Additionally, these visuals
almost over-emphasize the action. Thus, like postmodern architecture, Lemire’s visuals are sometimes seen implemented for their own cleverness, rather than to heighten the intensity of the narrative.

Figure 21 similarly employs postmodern graphics in order to over-emphasize narrative action. In this scene, Jeppard rescues Gus from a bear. Lemire emphasizes this impact of Jeppard’s knife through the convergence of lines surrounding the bear’s eye. These lines are composed of the comic book’s gutter—traditionally used to indicate the passing of time. However, in this instance, the gutter serves a spatial rather than temporal purpose. Here, it is used only as a visual cue—emphasizing the violence of the knife’s contact. Three lower gutters

![Figure 21](image)

**Figure 21.** Comic gutters emphasize violence of knife’s contact, from *Sweet Tooth*, by Jeff Lemire, 2009
connect to the bottom panels in order to connote three moments in the subsequent narrative—Jeppard standing over the dead bear, Jeppard looking back at Gus, and Gus looking at Jeppard. These graphic lines do not pass time, but draw our attention to these panels as well as emphasize cinematic reaction shots. This example may be the ultimate use of postmodern graphics. The modern temporality is converted entirely into spatial relations.

Lemire plays with the visual possibilities of the gutter throughout *Sweet Tooth*. In these instances, the graphic novel appears more akin to a map than a film strip, illustrating a postmodern concern with “location, boundaries, depth, and mapping” (Chute 157). In *Sweet Tooth*, this concern is mimetic of the plot, which ultimately hinges on the discovery of old maps in order to navigate the landscape. Figure 22 takes place immediately before Jeppard rescues Gus in figure 21. After the bear has knocked Jeppard to the ground, he lays bleeding and thinking about his dead wife, his long-lost hybrid son, Buddy, and Gus. Here, the gutter lines “map” Jeppard’s thoughts. In the top left corner of the page, three close-up panels depict Jeppard’s

*Figure 22. Comic gutters “map” Jeppard’s psychic geography, from Sweet Tooth, by Jeff Lemire, 2009*
memories of his wife, whom he lost at the beginning of the pandemic. Gutter lines link these panels to three panels in the top right corner—those of Jeppard’s son, Buddy, whose face transforms into Gus’ via juxtaposing panels. Finally, this panel of Gus’ portrait is linked to a bottom panel of Jeppard’s close-up face, completing the connection and amplifying the father-son narrative. Here, the gutter serves a psychic geography. According to Jason Dittmer, “this [geography] enables space-time to be manipulated in ways that allow for experience to be rendered more explicit” (223). The panels act as a map, linking Jeppard’s invisible thoughts to the visual scene. This lack of temporal distinction and emphasis of spatial mapping and geography reflects the timelessness of the apocalypse itself—a setting undistinguished by temporal modes. Additionally, it becomes mimetic for both the physical and psychic geography the characters’ experience throughout the text. It completely combines the apocalypse with the postmodern, making Sweet Tooth the ultimate example of the postmodern graphic novel.

**Conclusion**

While past assessments establish a basis of formal analysis for comic books, they do little to assess the postmodern possibilities present in graphic novels. This assessment requires refinement of language necessary for such analysis. This refined language better connotes the complexity and hybridity of graphic novel aesthetics. For instance, graphic novels possess an architecture which emphasizes overlapping, sophisticated narrative. Temporal modes, such as bleeding images and gutters, are deconstructed and reconstructed to convey spatial meaning. This emphasis on spatial meaning deconstructs linear narrative. Additionally, graphic novels make use of cinematic techniques in order to intensify narrative drama while visual icons are
implemented to create thematic pastiche. These visual, temporal, and spatial deconstructions are mimetic for narrative themes.

While this honors thesis adds to the multimodal narratology of graphic novels, its limitations prevented deeper discussion of other subjects within the medium that deserve further attention. My project limits its analysis strictly to American-published, English-language texts. Consequently, it does not analyze the numerous European-published graphic novels available. Additionally, it does not analyze Japanese manga—of which many apocalyptic and dystopian narratives exist, such as Katsuhiro Otomo’s *Akira* (1982). While my project analyzes some of the most influential graphic novels within the last twenty-five years, its limitations prevent it from assessing other texts worthy of similar analysis. For instance, Moore’s *V for Vendetta* (1988) shares similar dystopian and political themes as *Watchmen* and Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. Furthermore, while my project explores some literary qualities, it does not mention others, such as narrative voice. While it briefly mentions the significance of figuration in comics, it does not delve any deeper into anthropomorphic styles in graphic novels.

My honors thesis refines the language necessary for analysis of postmodernism in dystopian graphic novels. However, the language necessary for other areas of comic book analysis still requires refinement. The way in which we read comics is constantly evolving. In an age of digital communication and literacy, graphic artists have turned to online platforms for publication. It is worth researching the new graphic styles that have appeared in digital comic books within the last decade. These styles appear to abandon texture and return to the clear-line style of their modern predecessors. Additionally, while comics’ and film’s histories have been closely intertwined since the 1930s, the last decade has seen the most intense intertextuality between comic books and film. While my analysis assesses the adaptation of cinematic
techniques in film, it is worth researching the ways in which comic narratives are adapted onto screen. Furthermore, while postmodernism and apocalyptic themes inform one another, postmodernism in comics is not limited to dystopian narratives. It is worth researching the aesthetics that compose other postmodern texts, such as Marvel’s Deadpool (1991), which uses extreme forms of irony and self-reflexivity.
Works Consulted


Notes


AMC’s The Walking Dead has birthed a global fan base as well as its own annual fan convention, known as “Walker Stalker.”


Tony Moore illustrated the first six issues of The Walking Dead. Charlie Adlard has been the penciller of The Walking Dead since 2004 (beginning with issue #7).