# SHAPING THE WAY YOU THINK:

# HOW PANEL SHAPES IN GRAPHIC NOVELS MANIPULATE AND ENGAGE THE READER

by

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Stories need to manipulate readers in order to be engaging. Engage, in this sense, means to take part/participate/become involved in an activity—reading must be active. Graphic novels operate using a different metaphoric literary language than that of prose novels, and consequently, have a different set of rules that need to be applied to engages readers. According to Scott McCloud, a graphic novel[1] or comic (book) is defined as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (*Understanding Comics*, 9). The key part of this definition is the fact that it is through images that we experience the story, but it fails to consider an important aspect of the art—panel shapes.

Panels, which is the outline that encompasses or encloses a single drawing or scene, are the readers' view into the story—the way that we connect and engage with the text. A panel does not have a specific shape or size, nor is there a requirement that dictates how many must be on a page. Without the separation that panels utilize to isolate each specific shot, the grammar of the page might fall apart, and the meaning risks becoming muddled. Craft books like Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art*, and Jessica Abel and Matt Madden's *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures* all provide different approaches to the language of writing comics, and each have their knowledge to pass on regarding panels. But how far do they take it? Do they provide endless amounts of knowledge on the topic, or are they leaving something to be desired?

[1] This essay does not intend to breakdown, analyze, or include alternate definitions scholars have brought against McCloud, stating that this definition also applies to "billboard sequences, photo-essays, sequences of X-rays and MRIs, and those grotesque before-and-after photos of meaty haunches in tabloid liposuction ads" (Dr. Joseph Witex in *The Comics Journal* vol. 211, 59).

After a deep analysis into the work of McCloud, Eisner, Abel and Madden, I determine their valuable, but limited, exploration of "the panel" fails to acknowledge the emotional and storytelling potential of this tool. To effectively engage a reader's emotion, writers need to understand how panels evoke specific emotional, sensory, or intuitive responses from their audience through their shapes, and utilize this knowledge to best service the story, paying acute attention to not only what shapes produce which response, but how they do it.

**Historiography:**

"The comic strip is a living art form, in constant change, and the cartoonist, [their] creation, and the reader grow and evolve together in continuous interaction" (*An Illustrated History of Comic Strip Art*, 9). This description by Jerry Robinson from his 1974 book depicting the early history of comics correctly recognizes that this is a medium subject to constant change. What started as an image within a single panel evolved to a series of panels and onward to expansive works longer than some traditional novels. Various comic book authors have spent time dissecting what makes comics unique, and while all have developed idiosyncratic stances on what works, one element has remained a constant icon—the panel.

Of the various craft books on the market, the ones written by Scott McCloud are of the most popular and influential. He deconstructs every element of comics as an art form. Regarding the panel, McCloud says, "these icons we call panels or 'frames' have no fixed or absolute meaning, like the icons of language, science, and communication…the panel acts as a sort of general indicator that time or space is being divided" (*Understanding Comics*, 99). And his definition isn't wrong—he dedicates an entire chapter to how panels and the element of time are linked.

Despite how groundbreaking McCloud's academic contributions to the literary validity of comics are, none of that would be possible without Will Eisner. His novel titled, *Comics and Sequential Art* set the foundation that McCloud and others built from and is a legend in the industry. Eisner states, "in comics, there are actually two 'frames': the total page (or screen, in digital comics), on which there are any number of panels, and the panel itself, within which the narrative action unfolds. They are the controlling devices in sequential art" (*Comics and Sequential Art*, 41). Eisner sees the potential of panels that McCloud disregards, and spends 64 pages talking about the different ways they can be used.

The most recent addition to the craft discussion, compared to McCloud and Eisner, is *Drawing Words & Writing Pictures* by Jessica Abel and Matt Madden. They go a step deeper into the panel discussion by exploring the concept that there is a grid system on every page. "A typical comics page is made up of three or four tiers of panels. The panels themselves can be different sizes or shapes depending on the effect you want" (*Drawing Words & Writing Pictures*, 71). Abel and Madden explore ways that a more fundamental layout affects panels, a topic not discussed in the other two craft books.

While each of these authors explore the use of panels on the fundamental level, none of them see it as the ultimate tool it can be. At most, they mention that it has the ability to affect the experience, but they don't go into depth on *how.* No matter the number of panels on a page, they are the lens for the story and strengthen the connection readers have, and it's through various shapes that it's possible.

**Section #1 – McCloud's Analysis:**

When discussing comic literary theory, who better to start with than Scott McCloud. His contributions to the industry changed everything about how readers, and especially writers, approach and appreciate comics as a medium. He is known best for his three non-fiction books: *Understanding Comics* (1993), *Reinventing Comics* (2000), and *Making Comics* (2006). According to the Comic Book Awards Almanac, in 1994, *Understanding Comics* won the Harvey Award for Best Writer, Best Graphic Album/Original Material, and Best Biographical, Historical or Journalist Presentation. In addition, it won the 1994 Eisner award for Best Comics-Related book. Since then, influential writers continue to praise and acknowledge McCloud's literary contributions to the comic book discussion.

*Understanding Comics* alone is so widely read that it leads to intense criticism by other literary scholars and authors. Many who support him still make valid arguments against McCloud's ambition. Dr. Joseph Witek, an academic who studies comics, critiques *Understanding Comics* by saying, "from a pedagogical and professional academic standpoint much of it is perfectly useless" (*The Comics Journal*, 59*).* Others try to breakdown his analysis of the idea of "closure," but there is one aspect that I didn't see much criticism for—his opinion on panels. Let's break it down.

As previously stated, McCloud's major statement on panels is how they affect the portrayal of time. He elaborates on this by claiming, "panel shapes vary considerably though, and while differences of shape don't affect the specific meanings of those panels vis-à-vis time, they can affect the reading experience" (*Understanding Comics*, 99). This statement foreshadows that the shape of a panel has the potential of engaging a reader, but limits this to extending time, timelessness, and breaking the fourth wall.

Extending Time:

McCloud's strongest argument for altering the shapes of panels is to simulate the lengthening of time. To illustrate this, he uses the silent middle panel in figure 1 and details how

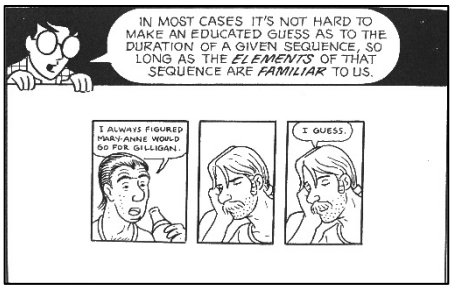


*Figure 1. Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud, pg. 100*

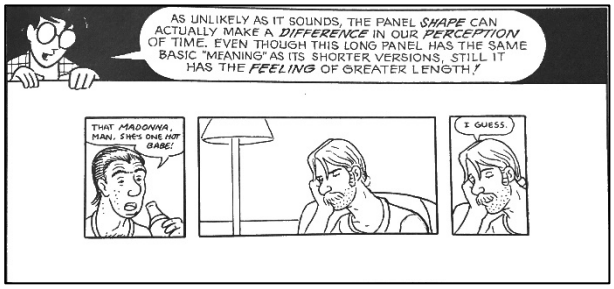


*Figure 2. Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud, pg. 101*

changing the shape affects how one reads the conversation. What results is figure 2: by extending the second frame horizontally, it gives the illusion of time being extended, and thus imparting a different impression on the reader.

We see the widening of frames for the purposes of extending time used in many graphic novels. For example, figure 3 utilizes the lengthened frame technique to slow down time, essentially forcing the reader to pause on this image to process the information. This serves the purpose of not only stopping the moment, but also lends itself to the comedic timing of the scene – three sequential frames that each zoom in on Penny's panicked face, slowly building the tension, finishing with a long panel to highlight the jampacked car – the lengthened beat before the comedic climax of the page.

*Figure 3. Lucky Penny by Ananth Hirsh and Yuko Ota, pg. 18*

Unlike McCloud's example where the lengthening of time serves to shift the focus to the second character, Hirsh and Ota's use of the extended panel equally distributes the attention

between the two characters and the car. The use of the wide panel also frames the car as the focus, while still allocating enough space for Penny and Helen. We, as readers, are able to analyze how they both react to the situation, and by extending the panel shape, it not only serves to provide us with that comparison, but also temporarily stops us in the moment. That being said, McCloud would attribute another panel configuration to stopping time—timelessness.

Timelessness:

While extending the panel can provide the narrative with the illusion of lengthened time, McCloud turns around and claims that "the panel border is our guide through time and space, but it will only guide us so far" (*Understanding Comics*, 103). In figure 4, he introduces the reader to the concept of bleeds and states that removing the confines of the border propels the moment into a timeless space. Specifically, "such images can set the mood or a sense of place for whole scenes through their lingering timeless presence" (*Understanding Comics*, 103).


*Figure 4. Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud pg. 103*

Here we see McCloud acknowledge the potential of how the presentation can affect how the reader *feels*, not just how the reader perceives, which is where the real gold behind panel shapes starts to shine.

In figure 5, we see a single, traditional rectangular panel combined with a full bleed—the confined vs the unconfined, and this serves to immerse the reader. In this


*Figure 5. Just So Happens by Fumio Obata, pg. 12*

page, we don't see the narrator, but we hear their voice, and in turn, imagine ourselves as the protagonist, "being among those different lives—lives with different roots and cultures" (*Just So Happens*, 12), all because we were removed from a confined panel and out into the page. What Obata is experimenting with in this configuration is not just a timeless quality, but more specifically, how the page can be more inclusive and engaging. Timelessness, according to McCloud, has the potential to set the mood, but Obata takes theory into practice. Figure 5 imparts an emotional response to the reader by inviting us into the page and takes McCloud's theory of imparting an emotion one step farther.

Breaking the Fourth Wall:

The last technique that McCloud explains in how panels can do more than house the pictures is what happens when they don't—specifically, what happens when the images inside the panels escape and break through the "fourth wall." To quote McCloud, he defines breaking the fourth wall as "borderless and border-breaking characters and objects" (*Making Comics*, 46).


*Figure 6. Seconds by Bryan Lee O'Malley, pg. 131*

McCloud explains this technique as a way to increase the intensity, which he defines as "visual techniques which add contrast, dynamism, graphic excitement or a sense of urgency to a panel" (*Making Comics*, 45). By choosing to have the contents explode from out of the panel, the action comes to life.

This tool is commonly used in comics, both to add intensity to the scene in terms of action, but also suspense. To explore how it adds intensity, figure 6, from Bryan Lee

O'Malley's *Seconds*, shows the protagonist Katie being chased down a set of stairs. O'Malley's choice to have Katie's hair, shoe, and the "tak tak" of the sound escape from the edges give the reader a heightened sense of urgency and drama. Katie isn't just running down the stairs, she's going at such a speed that it's pushing past the physics of the panel and breaking into the gutter. This is all about emotion, allowing the reader to imagine a time when they've run downstairs with enough force to alert the entire house.

Regarding suspense, O'Malley uses the fourth wall technique in figure 7 to show how Katie's hand is reaching past the panel—almost through it—to find a box that wasn't there moments earlier. This might not register a reader's emotion quite in the same way as figure 6, but it allows us to feel the magic the same way Katie does, prompting us to think that if she had to reach past the panel to obtain this little box, does that mean it's even real?


*Figure 7. Seconds by Bryan Lee O'Malley, pg. 45*

<u>It's all well and good, but…</u>

McCloud's three techniques help us, as readers, understand the added benefits of engaging with the story all because of this manipulation with panels. When analyzing these techniques, I was able to find examples of them in almost every book I read, which indicates that these are fundamental techniques that graphic novels actively utilize. Whether an artist understands that it has a deeper meaning than just making the page look appealing, McCloud educates us on the possibility that panels have to actually *mean something*.

Yet, for as revolutionary as *Understanding Comics* and *Making Comics* have been for the comic book discussion, when it comes to ways that panels can engage and influence the reader's emotions, what we see are three lackluster techniques that are so basic that an eager student might miss one huge flaw in his analysis of panels: McCloud is putting much of the responsibility on the art. His three techniques, extended panel shapes, breaking the fourth wall, and borderless panels / bleeds go from very panel specific to art specific. This realization led me to creating a chart to better help visualize what McCloud was doing. I call it the Spectrum of Panel Shape Interpretation, or SPSI for short (figure 8).

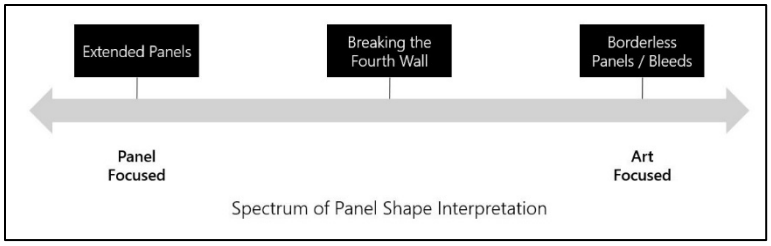


*Figure 8. Spectrum of Panel Shape Interpretation, Katie Dunlop*

SPSI is a tool that places various panel techniques along a spectrum that goes from panel focused to art focused. Panel focused means that the author or artist is using the shape of the panel specifically to manipulate or engage the reader. Art focused means that the panel shape itself isn't responsible for manipulating or engaging the reader, but the art inside the panel is. Panel shapes that fall in the middle balance the focus between the art and the panel shape.

On the left of SPSI, we see that McCloud's extended panels are centered on the idea that it's through its shapes we can influence a reader. This would place it firmly on the panel-focused end of the spectrum. In the middle of the spectrum, we place breaking the fourth wall. This technique pushes the art past the boundaries of the panel and out into the gutter, which gives it sense of intensity. Finally, on the ride side of the spectrum lies borderless panels/bleeds. This is still considered a paneling technique, but it's through the removal of the lines and the immersion into the art that gives the reader their emotion.

What McCloud fails to dig deeper into are the lines of panels themselves. He gives one instance how elongating the shape manipulates how we perceive time, which is innovative, but then ends his thought in favor of exploring additional methods of conveying time. And that is the big clue right there—his point wasn't about panels to begin with, it was about space and time. To McCloud, panels are a support tool, not a driving tool. With so much expertise to share, it is a pity that he didn't even scratch the surface. Panels have the potential to be so much more than the sum of their parts, so it's time to see what other craft books have to say.

**Section #2 – Eisner's Analysis:**

Before there was Scott McCloud, there was Will Eisner. His genius on the subject pioneered the industry as we know it, and if we didn't have his expertise, we wouldn't have *Understanding Comics*. Eisner is known primarily for *Comics and Sequential Art*, first published in 1985. The back matter on the 2008 edition indicates that established authors like Neil Gaiman, creator of *Sandman*, used this book to learn how to write graphic novels and "if [he] were starting out today, with all the books on comics and graphic novels out there, [he'd] still begin with this book" (*Comics and Sequential Art*, back cover).

When it comes to panels, or frames as he also refers to them, Eisner has an expansive section, one that fills 64 pages of his 175-page book. According to Eisner, "in addition to its primary function as a frame in which to place objects and actions, the panel border itself can be used as a part of the non-verbal 'language' of sequential art" (*Comics and Sequential Art*, 44). Here we see that Eisner isn't limiting it to a tool that conveys time, but one that has a *language* of its own, which promises that he understands how panels can engage readers' emotions. He

takes an in-depth look at how panels are a narrative device, have an emotional purpose, and serve a function of perspective.

Narrative Device:

Eisner makes an extensive argument in favor of panels, and the main point he makes is that "the intent of the frame here is not so much to provide a stage as to heighten the reader's involvement with the narrative" (*Comics and Sequential Art,* 45). To illustrate this, he includes eight separate examples, all which focus specifically on the unique ways to create engaging panels. In addition to covering "breaking the fourth wall" and "borderless" examples, he shows how the use of jagged lines can evoke emotion (figure 9), the panel can be disguised as something, like a doorway, to make the scene feel small (figure 10), or how the use of a cloud outline can be interpreted as a memory (figure 11). The point of this is not only to tell the reader what they're seeing, but to "involve [them with the] sensory dimensions beyond sight" (*Comics and Sequential Art,* 48).

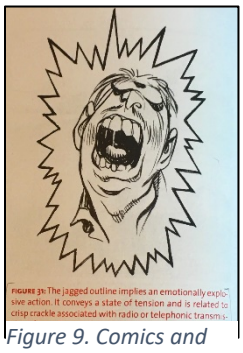


*Figure 9. Comics and Sequential Art by Will Eisner, pg. 48*

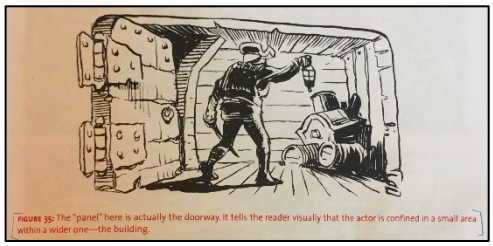


*Figure 10. Comics and Sequential Art by Will Eisner, pg. 49*

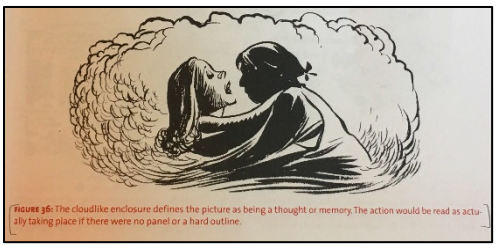


*Figure 11. Comics and Sequential Art by Will Eisner, pg. 49*

A strong examples of a sensory manipulation technique can be seen in *Lumberjanes volume 1*, by Noelle Stevenson, Shannon Watters, Grace Ellis, and Brooke Allen. Here, the jagged edges of the small cave opening are pronounced against the black background of the page. This clever artistic approach creates a juxtaposition we can see in figure 12, where the panel on the left-hand side has the narrowed, cave-like shape, but the right-hand panel has an open, unrestricted feeling. This comparison clearly allows the reader to understand the shift in setting that a traditional square panel might struggle to convey.


*Figure 12. Lumberjanes volume 1, by Noelle Stevenson, Shannon Watters, Grace Ellis, and Brooke Allen, pg. 50*

Emotional Function:

Besides as a purely narrative device, Eisner explores ways in which a panel's shape can be altered specifically so that the reader has an intentional emotional response. This concept may seem similar to his narrative function examples, but the point is not to express some level of additional sensory detail, but to specifically immerse the reader in the shoes of the character by representing what they might be seeing or feeling in that moment. Figure 13 manipulates the panels to ooze and drip, trying to emulate the feeling of being without sight.

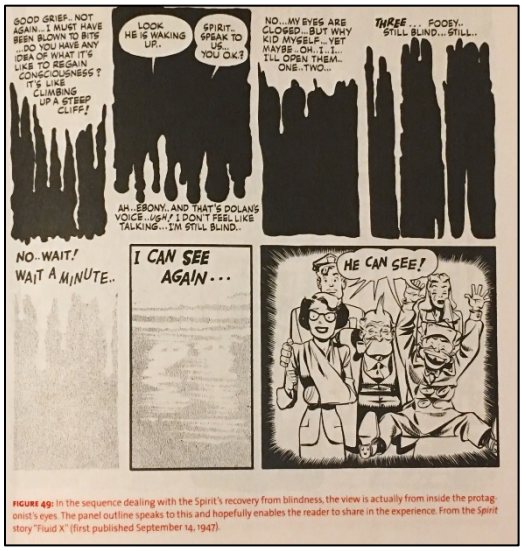


*Figure 13. Comics and Sequential Art by Will Eisner, pg. 61*

We can see an example of this technique from Rumiko Takahashi's *Ranma ½* where Kuno expresses his feelings toward Ranma (figure 14). The flowers here represent his one-sided feeling of admiration, which is why they're only on half of the panel, leaving the righthand side open. The use of flowers gives specific imagery that conveys to the reader a romantic impression, but we are able to determine that, by Ranma's expression, it is an annoyance.

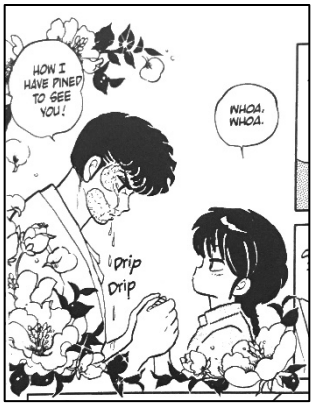


*Figure 14. Ranma 1/2 by Rumiko Takahashi, pg. 170*

Function of Perspective:

Eisner makes a point to mention that an emotional connection to the narrative can be achieved in multiple ways, not just through dripping panels of muddled darkness. Another key tool to use is the technique of perspective. As he explains, it's through the viewer's perspective into the panel that has an important influence on their response. In this instance, a panel can be viewed as the lens into the story. If you're looking at a scene from above, the high angle might give the sense of observer than participant.

*Figure 15. Lucky Penny by Ananth Hirsh and Yuko Ota, pg. 169*

When Eisner speaks of perspective in this way, he is directly referring to the art itself. Eisner further elaborates on this by saying, "the shape of the panel in combination with perspective promotes the reactions because we are responsive to environment. A narrow panel evokes the feeling of being hemmed in—confinement—whereas a wide panel suggests plenty of space in which to move—to escape.

These are deep-seated primitive feelings and work when used properly" (*Comics and Sequential Art*, 92).

This concept might be harder to imagine, but *Lucky Penny* has a very clear example of how perspective and panel shapes can work together to evoke emotion. In figure 15, we see the use of a low-angle to illustrate the discomfort Penny is experiencing from being lifted off the ground by her shirt. We also see the placement of her head in relation to the sharp, upper left-hand corner of the frame. This gives the impression that there is also a sense of pain from having her head shoved into such a narrow corner, and that she has nowhere to go. Remove the sharp edge, and the emotional impact changes as she is no longer trapped by the confines of the panel.

Eisner on Borderless Panels:

Contrary to how McCloud defines borderless panels, "such images can set the mood or a sense of place for whole scenes through their lingering timeless presence" (*Understanding Comics*, 103), Eisner takes a different approach. According to Eisner, "the absence of a panel outline is designed to convey unlimited space. It provides a sense of serenity and supports the narrative by contributing atmosphere to the narrative" (*Comics and Sequential Art*, 49). A graphic novel comprised mostly of borderless panels would use this technique to emphasize specific details that are essential the narrative. In *To The Heart of the Storm* by Eisner, many of his panels favored a borderless approach. Figure 16 includes not one panel line, and it prompts a writer to ask, "why does this work?" Borderless panels, as Eisner theorized, allow the text to


*Figure 16. To the Heart of the Storm by Will Eisner, pg. 31*

focus on atmosphere. Panel lines, no matter how minimal, are still artificial constructs foreign to the world in which the characters exist. In some instances, like with the passionate monologue in figure 16, a square box can distract from the flow of the scene. By removing the lines, Eisner puts the emphasis clearly on the emotion and the change of atmosphere by the overbearing speech bubbles and body language. Borderless panels also provide more space in which the art or word bubbles can go, making the experience of reading fluid and organic.

Graphic novels that utilize this form defy reader's expectations because there is no established pattern—anything goes. This sort of unlimited power over the mood and atmosphere can engage readers more than any other panel technique, and if wielded optimally, borderless panels can evoke both sensory and emotional details without drawing a single border line. That is why figure 16 is a prime example—we, as readers, feel the charged emotion by the bold text, and the sensory confusion by the intentional breaking of the 180-degree rule to throw us off balance. We are engaged on every level without being told what to feel or how to feel it, all because Eisner understood how to best utilize borderless panels for maximum impact. Yet, if it doesn't service the story, a page with no borders might leave your reader with only one emotion: confusion.

Far more comprehensive:

Compared to McCloud's exploration into the uses of panel shapes, Eisner has far more examples that are panel specific. If we add Eisner to SPSI (figure 17), we see that two of the three new techniques that we covered are on the "panel focused" end, with only one being more art dependent (function of perspective). This builds upon McCloud's initial analysis, and if it had

been included in either *Understanding Comics* or *Making Comics*, he would have had a stronger craft book.

Yet, as innovative as these contributions are, I suspect that there is a reason McCloud didn't include them in his craft books, the main one being that they're old-fashioned techniques.

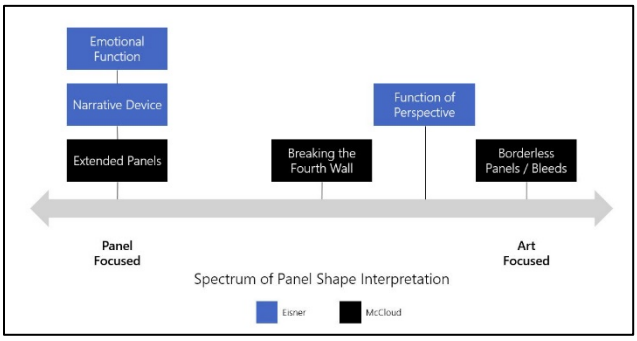


*Figure 17. Spectrum of Panel Shape Interpretation, Katie Dunlop*

When I searched for examples of panels as an emotional function and as a narrative device, I was hard-pressed to come up with examples, the hardest being the former.

Though I claim they are old-fashioned, in no way do I also imply that these aren't beneficial and valid techniques to reference and use. On the contrary, figure 12 might have been hard to locate, but the implementation of the cave entrance as part of the panel shape was refreshing and memorable. What shocks me is that modern craft books don't feel the need to explore panels as deeply as Eisner has. Perhaps they think he has covered every instance and don't see any need to contribute. Before we make any conclusions, we have one more craft book to look at, one that might offer a new perspective.

**Section #3 – Abel and Madden Analysis:**

Jessica Abel and Matt Madden are the authors of our last craft book: *Drawing Words & Writing Pictures*, published in 2008. Abel is an accomplished author and two-time winner of the Harvey award for her graphic novels *Artbabe* (1997) and *La Perdida* (2002). Madden is a cartoonist and best known for *99 Ways to Tell a Story* (2005), and as a member of OuBaPo, an elite French comic-book movement. Together, this wife and husband duo have published two

craft books on comics and have made real contributions to the discussion, but what do they have to say about panels?

To start, they have taken a very different approach to terminology, one far less academic than McCloud or Eisner. Their definition of a panel was simply a picture, seen in figure 18. They made no mention of what its main purpose or potential is, so already we can see that Abel and Madden are intent on the fundamentals.


*Figure 18. Drawing Words & Writing Pictures by Jessica Abel and Matt Madden, pg. 7*

This show-not-tell mentality is prevalent throughout *Drawing Words & Writing Pictures*, and in effect, does what McCloud and Eisner do not—it adds an element of fundamental analysis to how a graphic novel is made rather than a theoretical one. But with such a technical approach, how much creativity will that leave us?

Consistent Panels:

Abel and Madden's main point when exploring what panels can do is to advocate for a grid system. Think back to the various panel shapes we have explored so far. All were unique shapes designed to manipulate the reader into feeling a response. But not once, so far, have we explored the idea of what a square can mean. Consistency is where Abel and Madden focus in. According to them, "using regularly shaped panels gives a metronome-like rhythm that underpins the multiple plotlines and antic adventures that unfold…this simple storytelling setup gives [the writer] a lot of flexibility to fill scenes with action and cut from one scene to another, all the while confidently drawing the reader along" (*Drawing Words & Writing Comics*, 68). Every panel shape, regardless if they have jagged lines or no lines at all, are chosen with a purpose. Each give the reader an

emotional response, even the traditional square, and that's exactly why Abel and Madden start with the basics, and why we are analyzing them.

Consistent panels establish a formula that the reader relies upon. This is especially helpful with comic strips you see in newspapers because it's familiar and easy to jump back in to. In figure 19a, we see the use of four, vertically stacked, consistently sized pictures. This sets up a rhythm with the reader, and like punctuation, the repetitive panel shapes are almost invisible. Doing this allows the reader to focus on and be influenced by the art. This structure is incredibly appealing to an aspiring comic book author who is intimidated by the endless panel possibilities and will always be in vogue.

*Figure 19a. AzuManga Daioh by Kiyohiko Azuma, pg. 5*

Grid System:

Consistency leads us into the grid system, because to talk of one is to talk of the other. It's defined as "the underlying structure that helps ensure a readable, integrated composition for a newspaper, a poster, or a web page" (*Drawing Words & Writing Comics*, 71). Traditional configurations are a 3x3, 3x4, or even a 4x4 grid, but can be anything depending on the preference of the author/artist.

An additional and unique point that Abel and Madden make about consistent panels is what happens when you break the pattern. They explain, "when you do break up the strict uniformity of the grid by introducing a tilted panel, to name one variation, the effect is much more powerful because the tilted panel jumps out at the reader to emphasize mood, plot point, or

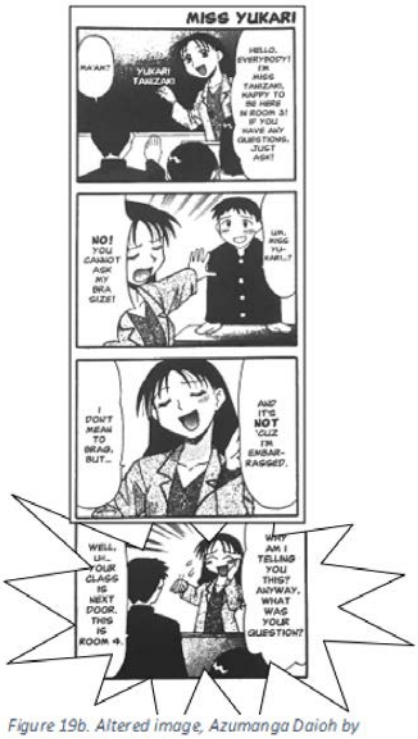


*Figure 19b. Altered image, Azumanga Daioh by Kiyohiko Azuma, pg 5*

dynamic motion" (*Drawing Words & Writing Comics*, 71). Let's look at figure 19b, same content as the previous figure, but with one alteration I implemented so that the last panel has jagged lines. Instantly, we see a difference. Not only has the mood changed, but the innocence and light humor has been altered as well. We, as readers, will also come to expect this as a pattern, if not all the time, then at least periodically.

What Abel and Madden bring to the table are not necessarily fancy tricks but knowledge about how panels work that both McCloud and Eisner assume the reader already knows, and that validates their contributions. But the flip side of that is that it is an uninterested approach to comic book design, one that risks much to be desired. As an author, to choose this grid-system approach is to either put full faith into your story and art, or to put faith into your reader that they'll take all the cues you're leaving and come to the desired emotional conclusion. There is a place for this in graphic novels, that there is no denying, but when added to SPSI, this would be as far right as it gets since it relies on the art to convey the desired emotion (figure 20).

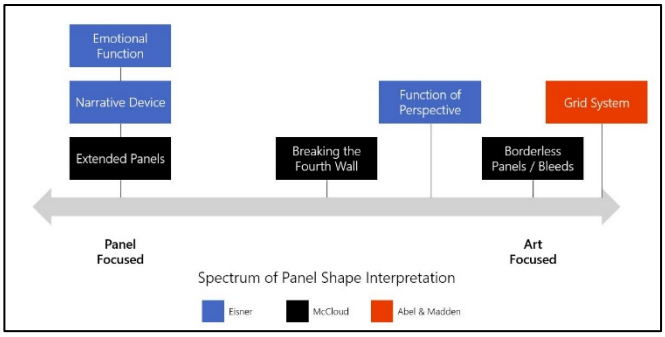


*Figure 20. Spectrum of Panel Shape Interpretation, Katie Dunlop*

What Abel and Madden further elaborate on are elements of page design, which they associate with panel shapes. Yet when given the chance to contribute something of their own, they only regurgitate the ideas of McCloud and Eisner.

**Section #4 – My Analysis:**

What McCloud, Eisner, Abel and Madden have done thus far is taken a look at individual panel shapes. Eisner writes a 64-page love letter addressed to panels in *Comics and Sequential Art*, and McCloud builds off that to expand how the shape can blend together with time. Abel and Madden only discuss the fundamentals of the grid system and advocate for square panels as a standard. Each have separate theories on panels—they are disjointed. But do they have to be?

Consider the Spectrum of Panel Shape Interpretation. This chart is intended to show where a specific panel shape puts most of its emphasis: art vs. panel shape. It provides an academic lens through which to visualize and understand various paneling techniques. As an author, do you want the focus to be on panels or do you want it to be on the art? But can we use this spectrum to obtain a deeper understanding into how panels can manipulate a reader?

Categorizing Panels by their Meanings:

The Spectrum of Panel Shape Interpretation is a range I created that clarifies if emphasis was put on the shape of the panel or the art. But to find a pattern behind what emotional impact this gives the reader, I reevaluated the paneling techniques themselves and determined there needs to be a classification, building off not just the shape of the panels, but the engagement techniques they represent.

In my analysis of Eisner, he makes the point that “emotional function” panels and “narrative device” panels both serve a specific purpose: to evoke either an emotional response or a sensory response. This prompted me to theorize if I could expound upon Eisner’s explanation. As it stands now, Eisner covers emotions and senses, which accounts for a lot of the unique

panel shapes we analyzed, but not all. It was these remaining shapes that caused me to consider that the most important element was missing—the reader, more specifically, their interpretation.

Instead of solely analyzing panels as a spectrum, we need to analyze how their shapes best evoke a response in the reader, and that's where my classification of panels comes in—external, internal, and intuition.

External (Senses): The concept of the external category is to use the shape of the panel to best evoke a sensory response in the reader. Eisner's "narrative device" and McCloud's "breaking the fourth wall" shapes both fit under this category. The panel shape in figure 12 is drawn as the opening of a cave and made to immerse the reader in that confined space. This allows the reader to imagine the change in temperature, the dim lighting, and the damp smell, which are all related to senses.

With "Breaking the Fourth Wall", this detail is used to highlight action, or in the case of figure 6, a sense of movement. By allowing the character to go past the boundaries of the panel, the reader can better visualize the level of physical force used or inflicted in the art.

Internal (Emotions): The internal category is used to guide the reader towards a specific emotion. Eisner's "emotional function" and "borderless panels" both fit into this section. Figures 13 and 14 are strong examples of this, but I'd like to point another prime usage of changing the shape of a panel to produce an emotional response. Figure 21, a spread within *Lucky Penny,* shows how Penny's happiness decays between fall and winter. There is a plethora


*Figure 21. "Best Comic Spread in Existence ~ Katie" Lucky Penny by Ananth Hirsh and Yuko Ota, pg. 126-127*

of information provided, but as much as we identify with the repetition in the art, it's through the shapes of the panels that the reader feels the full impact of Penny's emotional state. If the borders of the panels remained crisp and straight, the impact would be lost. As previously mentioned, panels are the lens that can either zoom out to show a scene, or in to focus on a specific character. Here the lens zooms in until it's so close, that we are meant to imagine ourselves as Penny. Therefore, by incorporating the gradual usage of uneven panel lines, the reader is made to experience the same decent into depression.

Intuition (Interpretation): The missing category that McCloud, Eisner, Abel and Madden didn't factor in that I'm adding to the conversation is intuition. This emotional type is effective when the reader's perception is included. Certain panel shapes can convey a specific emotion or sensory response, but sometimes, a reader's interpretation lends a new meaning to the significance of the panel shape. It might be the author's intention to guide a scene one way, but if the reader interprets it in a different way, then the story has taken on a new meaning. Of the panel types we've analyzed thus far, McCloud's "extending time" and Abel and Madden's "grid system" theories fit within this section.

When analyzing extended panel images as a representation of time, the success of McCloud's theory depends on the reader's ability to interpret that intention. Does every elongated panel automatically translate that time is being extended? That reasoning would be faulty. Consider how the lengthening in figure 3 might bring upon a different interpretation. Instead of a delayed response from the second character, perhaps the reader interprets the wide panel as a representation of open space. This might evoke a different reading than intended, but it is a valid one, especially if the reader is unfamiliar with McCloud's technique.

A reader's interpretation can also be applied to Abel and Madden's grid system. What kind of meaning is a reader expected to gain from a story that uses repeating panel shapes? In *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures*, Abel and Madden say that, "uniform shape and size will give your comic a steady rhythm" (71), however read another way, it also emphasizes the changes in the art. A square panel is artistically chosen to serve some meaning in the story, but due to the simple shape, a reader might not gain any interpretation from the panel whatsoever. Who is to say what a square means in the context of a story—the reader. With a shape so minimal, the author must give some level of control to the reader to interpret the story as they will, using the art to guide them.

Combining Panel Meaning Categorizations with the Spectrum of Panel Shape Interpretation:

As stated, each panel shape has the potential to engage or manipulate the reader through one of three categories: external (sensory), internal (emotional), or intuition (interpretation). These classifications grant comic book writers a fundamental understanding regarding how they can best use panels in their own work to the fullest potential. What happens then when we put that together with SPSI?

Instead of only relying on SPSI as a scale that sorts panels by their degree of art, it can also be used as a categorization tool to help authors best determine how they want to engage their readers. By plotting out various panel shapes on the chart, writers can use SPSI to determine which panel shape will produce the emotion they want to evoke. While it's possible to create a "complete" spectrum with every panel shape example plotted on it, it isn't necessary to be effective. On the contrary, SPSI is best suited to be an individualized tool that each writer creates and then curates as they develop their craft.

To begin using SPSI, comic book writers need only to determine which panel shapes they find the most effective or prefer using and plot them on their personal chart. As the writer grows and discovers new techniques that they'd like to use, they can plot that on their spectrum and add it to their arsenal, or disregard the shape and omit if from their chart altogether. Personal preferences might produce a bias towards one side of the spectrum over the other, and consequently, no two SPSIs will be identical. Yet plotting panel shapes based on personal preference is not the only way this spectrum can be used. SPSI can be used as both an active and reactive tool.

As an active tool, a completed spectrum acts as a reference guide that authors can use to analyze how panel shapes are linked to emotions. It's best thought of as a two-way street. Depending on your needs, SPSI not only tells you what shapes garner which emotions, but which emotions are associated with certain shapes. The practicality behind this is that in some instances, an author may only know what kind of reader response they want, but not know how to achieve it. Alternatively, they may think a full bleed will provide the best look but might change their mind if it provides a different response than intended.

SPSI can also be used to analyze an author's style, not just over the course of their career, but throughout a series or single book. Patterns emerge, and it quickly becomes clear what habits or defaults authors lean on. Having a tool that allows you to breakdown an individual style into understandable terms assists in not only learning more about the craft, but how to become a better comic book reader. It affords the chance to engage with comics on a deeper level, appreciating the subtle intricacies we might otherwise pass over.

Finally, SPSI can be used to push yourself out of your comfort zone. As a writing exercise, you can limit yourself to one side of the spectrum or to a limited number of specific

panel shapes and create a one-page or one-chapter comic. With such restrictions, you need to think deeply and be resourceful in your approach, which encourages you to grow in ways you might not experience if you stuck to your preferences. As Eisner did in figure 16 with borderless panels, it's possible to break the rules and produce every response type (external, internal, and intuition) by using the same panel style—you just have to experiment.

As a reactive tool, SPSI can be used to analyze your own work. By applying it to a personal body of work, it allows you to take a step back and approach your story from a technical angle. It can reveal blank spots in your technique or highlight what your defaults are. By visually identifying possible gaps in your go-to paneling techniques, you'll be able to reevaluate if you have enough tools to best produce external, internal, or intuitive responses to your reader. Whether you want to use SPSI as a means of identifying your habits or as a tool to reference which panel shape evokes which emotion, the beauty is that it is as customizable as you want it to be.

Spectrum of Panel Shape Interpretation – Darwyn Cooke:

To see theory turned into practice, I've analyzed Darwyn Cooke's style in his comic *Batman: Ego* published in 2000. Cooke was an acclaimed DC Comic book author and illustrator, and won thirteen Eisner awards, eight Harvey awards, and five Joe Shuster awards throughout his career. He was known for his strong storytelling skills, but also for his animated artistic style. As Amanda Conner puts it, "his art has movement…like a crazy mash-up of Frank Frazetta's powerful, dynamic movement, Max Fleisher's dramatic, moody Superman shorts and Jack Kirby's supercharged energy. But the quiet moments are just as effective as the busy, bold

moments, making the contrast that much more effective" (*Batman: Ego and other tails*, 6). With such a renowned art style, how will his panels shapes hold up?

The plot of *Batman: Ego* explores Bruce Wayne being confronted by his identity as Batman, struggling with an internal conflict about how best to protect Gotham—kill the Joker or spare him. As the author and artist for this comic, Cooke demonstrates full mastery over his artistic ability to have the reader experience this emotional turmoil on the page. Yet, when we analyze the panel shapes directly, how are they contributing? If we plot the shapes he uses in *Batman: Ego* on SPSI, this is the chart we see (figure 22).

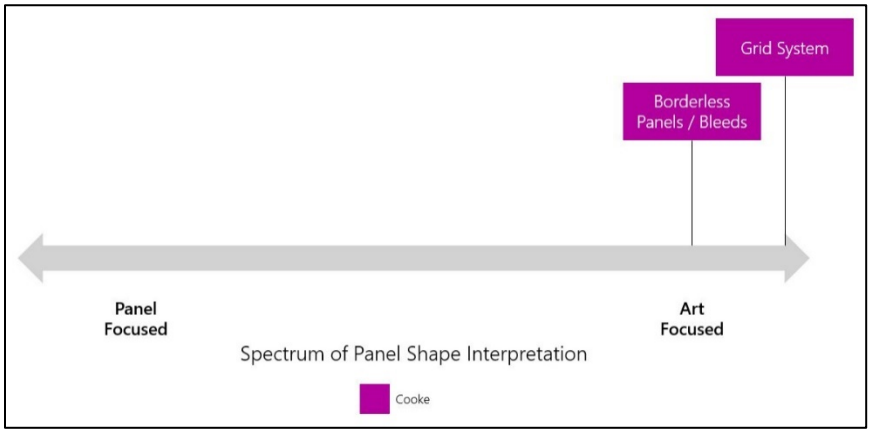


*Figure 22. Cooke's Spectrum of Panel Shape Interpretation, Katie Dunlop*

Cooke overwhelmingly favors the grid system / consistent square panel style in his work. Nearly every page in this comic used some arrangement of repetitive square panels, yet instances of full bleeds or full bleed with overlaying panel combinations were also used to augment a specific moment or highlight a shift in space or time. Consider the impact of the panels in figure 23. We are presented with a combination of a


*Figure 23. "Batman: Ego" Darwyn Cooke, pg. 26-27*

full bleed and a column of three rectangular panels all of equal size. Without the art, it would be impossible to determine that the left-hand page was a revealing moment in the story. Yet it is evident that the emotional shift is there because of the art. There is no doubt that Cooke's SPSI method for this comic would be focused on the right-hand side of the spectrum or under the "art focused" section. This indicates to me that much of the impact I was intended to get from this story was up to my own interpretation. Cooke is letting the art do all the work and using the panel shapes as a container. This steady, rhythmic approach mimics Bruce's slow decent into madness and doubt, and invites the reader to decide for themselves—is this a figment of his imagination or not?

**Conclusion**:

Reader engagement is what we, as authors, strive for. We want our readers to feel something when they read our stories, be it an emotional, sensory, or intuitive response. When it comes to graphic novels, that can be affected through the choice of panel shapes. McCloud, Eisner, Abel and Madden provide us with invaluable techniques and ways of thinking that many comic book writers have learned from. Throughout this paper, I've presented a spectrum and a classification that helps refine that learning into a personalized tool that every comic book writer can use.

The Spectrum of Panel Shape Interpretation coupled with the understanding of the classification behind panels will prompt writers to think deeply about how they approach panels and reconsider whether or not they are using them to best service their story. It's not a tool that demands full mastery of all panel shapes. Instead, it is one that is expected to change and grow as the writer does. Depending on what an author needs or wants, SPSI can either be an active tool

that provides a means to analyze and breakdown another author's panel style or as a reactive tool that focuses on self-improvement.

Panels are an underestimated tool that have endless potential to guide a reader through a story in the way the author intended. Once comic book writers internalize how panels can engage their readers and plot their preferred techniques on the Spectrum of Panel Shape Interpretation, they'll never be at a loss for ways to best communicate with their readers, and at the heart of writing, communication with our readers is what we all want.

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