

A Definition of Comics

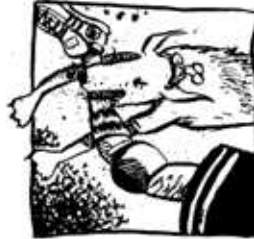
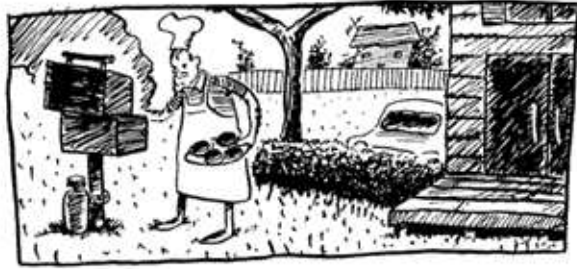
It is an impossible task to define what a comic is. For some it is any image drawn in a certain cartoony style, for others it is any combination of image and text that can include children's books or flight safety cards. Some consider any sequence of images like cave paintings or Medieval tapestries comics while others associate the medium strongly with the genres of humor and fantasy.

While I am hesitant about putting forth a definitive definition of what a comic is, the question, nevertheless, should be asked. It makes for a lively debate. In the classroom it gives everyone an opportunity to voice their own definitions and hear others.

I often show the following to my class to instigate a discussion. Since we are looking at something specific, the conversation is a less hypothetical (but it often drifts in that direction anyway).

First, I show them the following two pages:





I ask if it is a comic or not. Some believe it is, others no and they explain their reasons. Many expect an explicit narrative. Others might argue that a Peter Greenaway film is still a film even though the "story" is tenuous at best. Others dismiss it because it has no words. Others infer their own narrative by connecting the images.

For those that think it is a comic I ask if they would feel the same if photographs were used instead of pen and ink drawings. For those that think it is not I ask them if they would think differently if the panels were in a more traditional grid (three even tiers, 1-3 panels a tie).

I show them the next 2 pages:

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I SHOWED THESE PICTURES TO MY GIRL FRIEND.



SHE THOUGHT
THIS GUY WAS
60 YEARS
OLD.



SHE THOUGHT
THIS WAS A
TRAIN.



SHE COULDN'T
FIGURE OUT WHAT
THIS WAS.



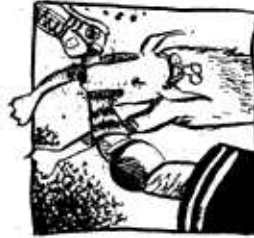
THIS ONE WAS EASY.



SHE LOOKED AT THE IMAGES ON THIS PAGE.



SHE BELIEVED THE



EVENTS OCCURED SIMULTANEOUSLY,



NOT SEQUENTIALLY.

I ask if it is a comic or not. Is the coupling of text and image enough to qualify it as a comic? Is this a story? What is it about? Who is the protagonist? Where are the word balloons?

I show them the final 2 pages. Most seem to agree that this is indeed a comic.

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EVERY SUMMER UNCLE SAL WOULD COME TO VISIT. HE WOULD STAY IN MY ROOM. I WOULD GET STUCK WITH THE PULL OUT BED IN THE LIVING ROOM.



UNCLE SAL NEVER BROUGHT PRESENTS WHEN HE VISITED.



MY FOLKS ALLOWED HIM TO SMOKE IN THE HOUSE



HE DRANK ALL MY PEPSI AND ATE ALL THE FIG NEWTONS. I WOULD COMPLAIN.



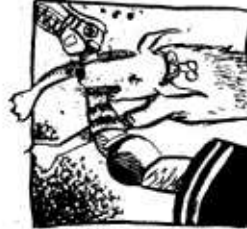
HE WAS ALWAYS THE LAST TO GO TO SLEEP. HE'D WATCH MOVIES ALL NIGHT, THEN STAY IN BED UNTIL NOON.



UNCLE SAL ALWAYS HAS TO BE THE CHIEF AT THE FAMILY BAR-B-QUES. HE COOKS THE HAMBURGERS TOO RARE.



THE WORST WAS WHEN HE TOSSED MY FRISBEE INTO THE LAKE. HE SAID HE'D REPLACE IT BUT NEVER DID.



THE BEST WAS WHEN HE WENT JOGGING AND GOT BIT BY A DOG.



EVERYTIME HE LEAVES I FIND CIGARETTE BUTTS ON THE FLOOR OF MY ROOM. THE SMELL STILL LINGERS

By the end of this class we wind up with far more questions than answers. We have, however, thoroughly staked a territory to explore in future classes. If nothing else, this discussion widens students' definitions of what a comic can be and how they can function. It is my hope and belief that it also allows for more possibilities in the comics that they have yet to create.

-- Contributed by James Sturm