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“Pictures are material signs of the invisible:” Medieval Visual Theory and Modern Graphic Narratives

By Dominique Hoche, West Liberty University

Comics – a form once considered pure junk – is sparking interest in literary studies. Those of us in literary studies may think the move obvious: making claims in the name of popular culture or in the rich tradition of word-and-image inquiry (bringing us back to the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages). But comics presents problems we’re still figuring out... the field hasn’t yet grasped its object or properly posed its project.¹

Noting that comics are starting to be taken seriously in literary studies, graphic narrative scholar Hillary Chute argues that the claim seems to be a natural evolution from traditional analysis of texts with images. Her focus was on the connection between comics and history; however, I am intrigued with her parenthetical connection of comics with medieval illuminated manuscripts. Being a medievalist who often teaches classes that use graphic novels, it seems like an obvious connection that the theories behind medieval illuminated manuscripts should be easily connected to the theories behind graphic narratives. And yet -- currently there has been no body of work that explores the connections between the two genres.²

¹ Hillary Chute, "Comics as *Literature*? Reading Graphic Narrative," *PMLA* 123.2 (2008): 452-65.

² The closest full-scale comparative work known thus far is *Myth, Montage and Visuality in Late Medieval Manuscript Culture: Christine de Pizan's Epistre Othea* by Marilyn Desmond and Pamela Sheingorn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), a study that analyzes the power of visual images to affect the reading experience and the reader. They argue, "The luminous nature of the reading experience in a manuscript culture situates the reader as a spectator constructed by the luminous quality of the page... This aspect of the reading experience in late medieval manuscript culture is analogous to the modern cinematic experience" (2). The connection between graphic novel narrative techniques and the cinema has been widely noted, but there is little to no

Using aspects of semiotics and hermeneutics, visual language, and grammar, this article will offer arguments towards making the connection between medieval visual theory and modern comic studies theory in order to explore the following thesis: *If* comics are an innovative narrative form in a tradition similar to the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages, *then* we can read comics using medieval visual narrative theory and vice versa, that is, reading medieval illuminated manuscripts and iconography using comic studies theory.³ In using an example of medieval wall paintings in a Romanesque or Anglo-Norman church, this inquiry will broaden the field of medieval visual theory, but I anticipate that it will also offer a way for the younger field of comic studies to grasp its “object or properly pose its project.”

Justification and Rationalization

No discussion of image and narrative in the Middle Ages can begin without mentioning Gregory the Great’s often-quoted justification of art as the “bible of the illiterate” in which he corrects the actions of Bishop Serenus of Marseille who, c. 599 AD, destroyed the images in his church:

Pictures are used in churches so that those who are ignorant of letters may at least read by seeing on the walls [of churches] what they cannot read in books (*codicibus*). What writing (*scriptura*) does for the literate, a picture does for the illiterate looking at it, because the ignorant see in it what they ought to do; those who do not know letters read in it. Thus, especially for the nations (*gentibus*), a picture takes the place of reading. ... Therefore you ought not to have broken that which was placed in the church not in order to be adored but solely in order to instruct the minds of the ignorant.⁴

mention of the techniques and imagery in the Middle Ages.

³ Comics and graphic novels are a medium as well as a genre. The term “comics” is a site of contention in terms of definition, despite several years of academic discussion. For the purpose of this paper, I am using it in the general sense of “sequential art”: a graphic novel is a specific way of transmitting sequential art, but it is not limited to the constraints of the physical medium of a book, and so it is easier to use the generalist term “comics” to mean the entire spectrum of articulation within the medium and genre of sequential art.

⁴ Lawrence Duggan, “Was Art Really The ‘Book of the Illiterate’?” *Word & Image* 5 (1989): 227-51.

Pope Gregory's defense of images was seldom challenged in the medieval period and became a foundation for the rationale behind the creation of religious art. He believed that pictures must not be worshipped or adored because it violated the commandment regarding not making graven images or idols. He cautioned that these pictures should not be destroyed, however, because the depiction of sacred events and saintly persons were useful for converting pagans and teaching newly converted Christians, both of whom were probably illiterate. Pictures, according to Pope Gregory, "activate emotions which, when properly channeled, lead the faithful toward contemplation of God."⁵ As Herbert Kessler points out, "Gregory's statements about the value of art are not original, nor are they systematic or altogether clear... But they invested diverse earlier ideas about images with the authority of a 'doctor ecclesiae,' thereby providing an unassailable response to Byzantine iconoclasm during the eighth and ninth centuries and to later criticisms of art."⁶ Pictures were defended and justified with a variety of phrases and paraphrases of Gregory's statement, and "books for the unlettered" became "books for the illiterate" which became the "bible of the illiterate," and when the word *codicibus* began being translated as *bible*, Gregory's ideas gained an even more authoritative tone.

In addition, the idea of pictures being "books for the illiterate" would have had a different meaning in Italy and France versus Anglo-Norman England: written and spoken Latin was a Mediterranean language and so what was spoken in church would have been comprehended by the congregation. In England, the situation would be very different: most church-goers, even after the Norman Conquest, neither spoke nor read Latin, so the words of missionaries and

⁵ Herbert L. Kessler, "Gregory the Great and Image Theory in Northern Europe during the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries." *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic Art in Northern Europe* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 151-172.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

priests needed translation, thus requiring pictures as examples.⁷ The earlier Anglo-Saxon imagery, with its knots, stylization, and intense concern for symmetry, would seem normal to those in England, whereas the illusionistic approach to art would have seemed very strange, possibly incomprehensible to the new converts.⁸ That is why simplicity reigned: art and architecture were based on Roman models that were “static and imposing” with figures that were “heavier and less linear than before.”⁹ Organization and coherence dominated over realism or expression.

The conditions behind medieval wall paintings and medieval manuscripts were obviously quite different – one was meant for public view, while manuscripts would have a limited, even exclusive audience. Understanding a wall painting required a different set of skills from understanding a manuscript, even though both types of art had accompanying inscriptions in Latin, and a viewer had to move through space to see the wall painting, while the reader had only to turn the pages.¹⁰ Still, many of the wall paintings resemble illustrated manuscripts: the Hildesheim doors were modeled after a ninth-century bible, making the entrance of the church into a veritable book, but they also transformed the illustration to suit the new context.¹¹ Kessler gives many examples of this interplay between manuscript and wall paintings from Ireland to Germany to Rome and beyond. The differentiation between the art in a manuscript and the art or sculpture on the wall of a church, therefore, may be argued to be a matter of narrative as opposed to offering a completely different artistic impulse.

As churches became more divided to accommodate new architectural styles and the

⁷ William J. Diebold, *Word and Image: An Introduction to Early Medieval Art* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2000), 19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

⁹ Roger Rosewell, *Medieval Wall Paintings in English and Welsh Churches* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008), 11.

¹⁰ Herbert L. Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004), 108.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

developing Christian liturgy, pictures became markers for various spaces and the transitions between these spaces. Kessler explains that

...narratives disposed on the lateral walls generally served several purposes at once. The sequential flow asserted God's working in historical time; juxtapositions, oppositions, and thematic repetitions chronicled a divine plan; and spatial positioning plotted spiritual movement. Following a system introduced during the fourth or fifth century in Saint-Peter's and Saint-Paul's, many churches, including Ceri and San-Pietro-in-Valle at Ferentillo, opposed Old and New Testament sequences on facing walls of the nave, and joined them together with a scene from the Book of Revelation. ... However, no fixed system governed decoration.¹²

Kessler continues by offering an almost exhaustive series of examples regarding decoration from church architecture to manuscripts to textiles to metalwork to reliquaries, and concludes, "While the distribution of pictures in these and other churches suggests an ordering of pictorial narratives in response to the functional spaces, the structure was, in fact, never rigid. As the *De diversis artibus* reminds artisans, 'a human eye cannot decide on which work it should first fix its attention.'"¹³ Instead of focusing on creating order, artisans in the Middle Ages were encouraged to know that decorations and pictures served different groups in different ways, and therefore, the focus should be on creating art that elicits "emotional responses to the events portrayed and to direct those responses to the invisible presences... Such work realiz[ed] the conceit that William Durand of Mende would later state explicitly, i.e. that pictures are material signs of the invisible."¹⁴ Durand was quoting Gregory, and in turn elaborated on the Pope's explanation on the value of pictures, by explaining:

Indeed, pictures seem to move the soul more than texts. Through pictures certain deeds are placed before the eyes, and they seem to be happening in the present time, but with texts, the deeds seem to be only a story heard, which moves the soul less, when the thing is recalled by the memory. For this reason we do not show as much reverence towards

¹² Ibid., 116.

¹³ Ibid., 126.

¹⁴ Ibid., 128. I wonder if McCloud knew of this medieval definition of pictures when he sub-titled his work "Understanding Comics" as "The Invisible Art." See: Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers., Inc., 1993).

books as we do to images and pictures.¹⁵

Clearly, Durand was aware of the synchronic and diachronic aspects of wall paintings in churches, and the necessity of human memory to understand the sequential flow: if the memory of a story is fragmented, then interpreting the sequence will inevitably be damaged. His conclusion regarding the aesthetic response is a product of his time that prizes visual literacy over textual literacy (and sounds unnervingly postmodern in his observation).

The intentionality of the creation of these pictures and art (“to move the soul”) leads us to the question of whether pictures can be read as books can. Some art historians, taking the question seriously and often literally, rebut any statement that pictures can be read in the same ways that books can be read.¹⁶ They say that comparing “reading” verbal-based texts with “reading” visual images is an incorrect analogy because religious art functions within a specific context, and without that context, an image cannot tell the story of an unknown narrative to a naïve viewer. Images, therefore, only serve a purpose in conveying a visual accompaniment to a story that has been already heard in a sermon because illustrations, as opposed to natural language, do not have any grammatical rules. That is, they argue, “one can recognize the content of images but one cannot ‘read’ this content.”¹⁷ In this, the critics of the “bible for the illiterate” maxim disagree with medieval and Renaissance scholars from Leonardo Da Vinci to Desiderius Erasmus, the latter of which believed “Painting is much more eloquent than speech, and often

¹⁵ Durand of Mende, *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum of William Durand of Mende: A New Translation of the Prologue and Book One*, ed. and trans. Timothy M. Thibodeau (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 34.

¹⁶ See G.G. Coulton, *Art and the Reformation* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1953); Duggan; Ernst Hans Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye: Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London: Phaidon Press, 1994); Athene Reiss, “Beyond ‘Books for the Illiterate’: Understanding English Medieval Wall Paintings,” *British Art Journal* IX.1 (2008) 1-20; Rosewell; and Flint Schier, *Deeper into Pictures: An Essay on Pictorial Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). See Mare for a succinct summary of the rebuttal: Estelle Alma Mare, “Can one ‘read’ a work of visual art?” *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue* VI.1 (2006) 63-74.

¹⁷ Mare, *Visual Art*, 4.

penetrates more deeply into one's heart."¹⁸

Making the Connection

It is true that not all works of visual art can be designated as equal to a "text," but I agree that making the connection between reading comics and reading medieval art requires going through the exact same five steps of hermeneutical discussion as examining the Gregory's aphorism of pictures being the "bible of the illiterate."¹⁹

First, are comics art? Or are they literature? Or are they both? Most comic studies scholars today say yes: comics are literature because they must be *read*.²⁰ They are also art. Therefore, we can list comics as both art and literature, the same way medieval wall paintings resemble illustrated and inscripted manuscripts.²¹

¹⁸ Mitchell Stephens, "By Means of the Visible," *Picturing Texts*, ed. Lester K. Born (New York & London: WW Norton, 2004), 56-65. The art historians who agree are far more numerous: see Richard Brilliant, *Visual Narratives: Storytelling in Etruscan and Roman Art*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Michael Camille, "Seeing and Reading: Some Visual Implications of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy," *Art History* 8.1 (1985): 26-49; Kessler; and Mare.

¹⁹ A later artist, Giotto, was so admired for his Paduan frescoes circa 1305 because of how his parallelism guided the viewer in the way Giotto wanted them "read." Alpatoff argues "the composition of the whole Paduan program shows that Giotto attended to both tasks; he succeeded in showing the moral basis of the legend, and the spiritual significance of its events; and at the same time he sought to emphasize their visual resemblances." See Michael Alpatoff, "The Parallelism of Giotto's Paduan Frescoes," *The Art Bulletin*. 29.3 (1947): 149-154. In the history of ideas, Alpatoff believes that Giotto's parallels were a deliberate commentary on the rules of how such wall paintings should be read, and thus function as a text within a text. Alpatoff concludes with Berenson's thoughtful analysis: "His thoroughgoing sense for the significant in the visible world enabled him so to represent things that we realize his representations more quickly and more completely than we should realize the things themselves." See Bernhard Berenson, *Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1896), 19.

²⁰ I follow Groensteen's observation that "A page of comics... demands to be traversed, crossed, glanced at, and analytically deciphered. This moment-to-moment reading does not take a lesser account of the totality of the panoptic field that constitutes the page (or the double page), since the focal vision never ceases to be enriched by peripheral vision," 19. He argues later that comics must, through necessity, also be a conceptual frame, a "system" in order to gather the "differences and commonalities within the same medium," 20. This frame or system is read through "iconic solidarity", a condition where "visual images can, in first approximation, be assimilated within a comic," 20. See Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*. Trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007). Also see note 18 above.

²¹ I hesitate at this point to have a full semantic discussion of the terms "art" and "literature" since many of the terms of the discipline of literary analysis of graphic novels and comics are still under discussion. See Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art* (Princeton, WI: Kitchen Sink Press, Inc. 1992) and *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996); Groensteen; Charles Hatfield, "An Art of Tension." *A Comics Studies Reader*, eds. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009) 132-148; Jet Heer and

Second, are comics hard to read? For new viewers, the answer is yes. I taught a class on the graphic novel last spring, and many of my students complained that they had a very difficult time reconciling the need to both look at the pictures and interpret the pictures, while also needing to read and interpret the text. Other students, who had grown up reading comic books, never had a second thought that the reading and interpreting could be, or would be, difficult for others. The reaction to wall paintings and manuscripts in the Middle Ages probably garnered the same reaction: those who had grown up with the forms of depiction and the Latin language had little problem interpreting or “reading” what was before them in picture form; others, like the Anglo-Saxons, would have needed assistance in comprehending the new illusionistic art and understanding the principles and metaphors within the intended illusions.²²

Third, comics have naturally evolved into a divide between audiences: the earliest audiences were raised on the printed medium, but soon thereafter the characters became the staple of radio plays, motion pictures, and television. The printed medium has a limited, exclusive audience, but the public medium is created to appeal to viewers all around the globe. Medieval wall paintings and manuscripts had the same divide between public audience and

Kent Worcester. “Introduction.” *A Comics Studies Reader* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009); Ann Miller, *Reading Bande dessinée: Critical Approaches to French-language Comic Strip* (Chicago: Intellect Books, 2007); Scott McCloud; Matthew J. Smith, and Randy Duncan, eds., *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Rocco Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature* (New York: Continuum, 2007); and Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007) for examples of a discipline evolving and establishing its own terms and theories. McCloud offers a much-quoted and discussed definition in the beginning of his work *Understanding Comics* as “comics (kom’iks) n. plural in form, used with a singular verb. 1. Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” 9.

²² Rosewell concludes, “...it seems reasonable to assume that wall paintings cemented the familiar, helped people remember stories, encouraged devotion and stimulated curiosity. Different audiences may have responded to them in different ways at different times. According to a French source, the ferocious Duke of Lorraine, one of the first crusaders to enter Jerusalem in 1099, who was known as the *Advocatus Sancti Sepulchri* (Defender of the Holy Sepulcher), often stayed behind after services to ask priests about the meaning of wall paintings he did not understand,” *Wall Paintings*, 183-84.

limited, exclusive audience: one was for public consumption, the other, private.²³ Critics caution that the two media supposedly require a different set of skills, believing that one set was much more elitist than the other,²⁴ however, I cannot see the argument carrying much weight when the same exact parallel is seen today. It is true that most people who have seen a *Batman* movie have never read a *Batman* comic book, but it is improbable that those fans that read the comic books have never seen a *Batman* movie. One medium flows with easy interpretation into the other, and while the reverse is less common, it is not problematic: that is, if I gave someone who had seen a recent *Batman* movie a graphic novel with Frank Miller's interpretations of the character, I am fairly certain that comprehension would soon follow.²⁵ Just like the persons of the Old Testament, the characters in *Batman* are established as public knowledge, even though the particular adventure might be new. Marvel Comics forces this mental connection at the beginning of each film: there is a quick opening montage where pages of a comic book are flipped quickly before the audience's eyes in the theatre, establishing the connection between the limited, exclusive medium of the comic book and the public medium of the film.²⁶ The

²³ Although Books of Hours were almost mass-produced in France, they were rare in Germany and "of poor quality" in England. Nevertheless, according to de Hamel, "Most people learned to read from Books of Hours," 13, and yet while "The Book of Hours was a very precious possession in [a] household... it was probably their only book," 198. See Christopher De Hamel, *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts* (London: Phaidon Press, Ltd, 1997).

²⁴ See Reiss for the argument that it was more difficult to understand wall paintings than the images in illuminated manuscripts. See Brilliant for the counter-argument.

²⁵ See Frank Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 2002).

²⁶ Granted, this montage does not follow Sergei Eisenstein's theory that there must be closure for meaning to be constructed from/between panels, as he argues that film's "Montage is a mighty aid in the resolution of this task," 4. Eisenstein's classic definition of montage as "two film pieces of any kind, placed together, inevitably combine into a new concept, a new quality, arising out of that juxtaposition," 4, does allow for the establishment of a book/film connection, because his next paragraph clarifies that "this is not in the least a circumstance peculiar to the cinema, but is a phenomenon invariably met with in all cases where we have to deal with juxtaposition of two facts, two phenomena, two objects," 4. The comics' reader, like the film viewer who is watching a montage, must combine the images into a connection or meaning in order to create closure. See Sergei M. Eisenstein, "Word and Image," *The Film Sense* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), 3-65. The Marvel montage of comic images does create the connection but not the "deliberate and voluntary closure," McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 69, because it is, indeed, only a sample of images and not a narrative, nor is it intended to be, I believe, anything else but a reminder – a way of evoking an emotional response by stirring a viewer's (or fan's) memory of reading Marvel comics.

difference between the two media is a matter of narrative, the same as with the difference between wall paintings and manuscripts.

Fourth, when Kessler described the pictures on the lateral walls of a church or cathedral as “narratives” that served the purpose of directing a “sequential flow [that] asserted God’s working in historical time [with] juxtapositions, oppositions, and thematic repetitions,”²⁷ the use of the terms “sequential” cannot but help lead us to Will Eisner’s axiomatic definition of comics as “sequential art.” Scott McCloud expands Eisner’s definition of comics to mean “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.”²⁸ When comparing McCloud’s definition to Kessler’s description of the pictures as narratives that direct a sequential flow, the connection must be tested by examples, but even in the world of comics the work of Eisner often serves as the exception to the rule, and likewise, Kessler reminds us that the structure or order of the pictorial narratives was never rigid. In addition, Kessler’s statement that “art in churches was intended also to elicit emotional responses to the events portrayed”²⁹ is directly parallel to McCloud’s conclusion to his definition that the intention of a comic must be to “produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.”³⁰ Indeed, comic book fans can be fiercely emotional about the characters they like and are more than happy to spend hours on-line on the Internet and in person discussing the casting of the newest movie, or the aesthetics of a costume change in their favorite character. The wording of the definitions remains an uncannily similar call to the necessity of using phenomenology to open our understanding of the emotional and physical reactions that come from the human experience of art.

²⁷ Kessler, *Seeing*, 116.

²⁸ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 9.

²⁹ Kessler, *Seeing*, 128.

³⁰ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 9.

Fifth, the problem of whether pictures can be read as books does rely on a critic's view on the issue of whether pictures have "grammatical rules." Those who deny the analogy that "reading" verbal-based texts is equal to "reading" visual images rely on the idea that without an inscription or title, an image cannot be read because there must be an *a priori* title at least to begin the process of narrative.³¹ Those who accept that a viewer can "read" visual images like text find it difficult to counter the fact that illustrations are not generally considered to have grammatical rules.³² Here, I propose the counter-argument: use the grammatical rules of comics (defined below) to open the analysis of whether pictures, pre-modern wall art, or manuscripts without text can be read as graphic narratives.

The reason this argument has not been used before is because the "questions of comics form have received relatively little attention in English-language scholarship, which has tended to view the medium through historical, sociological, aesthetic (literary), and thematic lenses."³³ The two major contributors to the approach in English are Eisner and McCloud, and these works,

³¹ Note 16 above, *et al.* especially Reiss.

³² Note 18 above, *et al.* especially Brilliant. Camille takes the middle road, stating that most wall paintings could not have functioned as a book for the illiterate (outlined by St. Gregory) "since its whole referential system was to the written signs from which the latter were excluded" and the ability to read the images left-to-right presupposes training in literacy that sequences information in left-to-right. He does acknowledge, however, "Of course, many medieval narratives radiate from different points and follow no strictly regulated code of order, but nevertheless there existed what might be termed a visual literacy, which implied the systematic viewing of a series of pictures" (Camille, *Medieval Literacy*, 34). Visual literacy, then, does not necessarily imply the presupposition of text reading skills, because many "design[s] also contain[s] elements which can be associated with the needs of an audience still imbued with oral patterns of thought," 34. This "implication" comes from Schapiro's groundbreaking analysis of Image-Signs that examines the historical development of the frame, the needs for a smooth surface, the conception of ground vs. field, and the "habits of seeing" or "directedness" in various cultures from prehistory to the present. Schapiro suggests that while there are not "necessary or universal" rules for art, there is a need for the work to be intelligible, in that "the picture field has local properties that affect our sense of the signs," Schapiro, *Semiotics*, 229, and that a work must express a direction: "Directedness as such is not conventional; it arises from the transitive nature of the objects represented and the task of expressing an order of time in an order of space... The varying orders of left-to-right or right-to-left and even of downward vertical alignment in pictorial art, as in writing, were probably determined by special conditions of the field, the technique, and the dominant content of the art at an early stage," 231. See Meyer Schapiro, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs," *Semiotica* (1969): 223-42.

³³ Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen, "Foreword," in Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2007), vii.

while offering a significant dialogue and terminology, have a lack of theoretical sophistication or semiotic development.³⁴ Thierry Groensteen's groundbreaking work, *The System of Comics*, published in 1999, on the other hand, offers a sophisticated argument called "iconic solidarity" based on visual analysis and semiotic forms, but even though he is the most prolific scholar on the subject of comics, the French work was not translated into English until 2007 and offered for worldwide distribution in 2009. Groensteen's masterpiece is indeed one giant definition that "reveals, through minutely detailed analysis of case studies, that comics are preponderantly visual language in which text plays a subordinate (though far from superfluous) role."³⁵ Semiotics has been applied across the humanities to language, culture and arts, but very rarely to comics, and this is where the lacunae has occurred in what appears to be a very valuable (and possibly obvious) way of opening the door to creating a grammar for reading the visual language of medieval wall paintings and manuscripts.

Application

What does it look like to apply graphic novel theory to medieval wall paintings or manuscripts? The church of St Mary's, Houghton-On-The-Hill in Norfolk, England (**Figure 1**)

³⁴ Eisner gives us this fascinating paragraph in *Comics and Sequential Art*, but it is unfortunately not expanded with further theoretical development: "In its most economical state, comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a distinct language – a literary form, if you will. And it is this disciplined application that creates the 'grammar' of sequential art," 2. His discussion flows immediately into examples, which are intensely accurate, but there is not a sense of speculation or conveyance of any further aspects of the argument. In *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, we are given a concise continuation of the idea: "The reading process in comics is an extension of the text. In text alone the process of reading involves word-to-image conversion. Comics accelerate that by providing the image. Then properly executed, it goes beyond conversion and speed and becomes a seamless whole. In every sense, this misnamed form of reading is entitled to be regarded as literature because the images are employed as a language," xvii. Eisner likens comics to *kanji* because of the relationship between the visual shortcuts of a character-based writing system and the image-to-word conversion that is the vital part of the language of comics. His argument, in this book as well as the earlier work, relies on artistic examples from his own *oeuvre* to communicate the finer points of his theories and viewpoint, but the lack of verbalization offers too many choices for a reader to create a concrete conclusion, and thus hinders a more sophisticated argument.

³⁵ Beaty and Nguyen, *Foreword*, viii.



Figure 1 St. Mary's, Houghton on the Hill, Norfolk, England. Photo: Simon Knott, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/norfolkodyssey/10000731403/sizes/l>

has medieval wall paintings that are believed to be the oldest and best preserved in the entire country.³⁶ I am using these wall paintings as an example because they are a new discovery, and thus we do not have academic analysis that would cause us to approach them with presuppositions, as scholars have just begun offering competing and cautious explanations for the curious and unclear Romanesque or Anglo-Norman frescoes. Perhaps if the paintings are looked at through the view of the system of comics' grammar, we might shed new light on their

³⁶ See Rosewell, *Wall Paintings*, 9-11, and Tobit Curtis Associates, "Conservation of the Wall Paintings at St. Mary's Church, Houghton-on-the-Hill, Norfolk." (#HHM01.1, November 2006. Cambridge, UK), 2.

meaning? For this reading of the frescoes, I will be using Groensteen's "iconic solidarity" theory that is based on visual analysis and semiotic forms, with the intent of opening the door to creating a grammar for reading the visual language of medieval wall paintings and manuscripts.



Figure 2 St. Mary's, Houghton on the Hill, Norfolk, England. Photo: Nick Ford
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/nickpix2008/7023293131/>

St. Mary's was built on the remains of a Roman building on or before the 11th century, according to Tobit Curtis Associates, who wrote the Conservation report.³⁷ The evidence of the church's Roman roots can be seen in the use of Roman bricks in the structure, the nearby remains of a villa, and the church's proximity to Peddler's way, a Roman road that crosses the northern part of Norfolk on the outskirts of North Pickenham near Swaffam.³⁸ The church was

³⁷ Tobit Curtis, *Conservation*, 2.

³⁸ See Simon Knott, *Norfolk Churches: St. Mary, Houghton-on-the-Hill*, <http://www.norfolkchurches.co.uk/houghton/houghton.htm>

lost to record from 1933 to 1992, and its existence completely forgotten by locals. Already a fading and rarely used church, in World War I a returning Zeppelin dumped its bombs into the courtyard, ruining the chancel and the roof of the tower, and damaging a cottage beside it and the farmhouse across from the church. By 1930, the parish had moved away, and since there had never been a proper road leading to the hamlet, it was abandoned. In 1992, Mrs. Gloria Davey was on a walk with her women's club when they stopped for a rest on the edge of an overgrown graveyard. Intrigued by the gravestones, she cleared a path through some tall briars, and stepped into the churchyard itself. The church had become invisible because the entire shell was encased in ivy! She and her husband Bob Davey got the attention of the Norfolk City Council and had it added to the "Buildings at Risk Register," setting into motion the process of repair and attracting funding.³⁹

Cleaning the ivy off the building, clearing the graveyard, and making the floor safe was typical of the restoration process: the baptismal font was discovered in a nearby rectory garden, planted with tulip bulbs, and the holy water stoup from the nave was found being used as a birdbath in a neighboring garden. The next step was to rebuild a roof for the church. Bob Davey contacted the Norfolk Archaeological Service, who sent over an architect to view the site. The architect felt that the walls were sound, and it would be possible to rebuild the roof on the old timbers rather than bringing in new oak beams to build an entirely new structure. Under the crumbling Victorian plaster the archaeologist's team discovered painted texts from Elizabethan times – and under them, wall paintings from the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries – and still under them, the treasure: one of the best sequences of Romanesque wall-paintings in England.⁴⁰ When this happened, the Courtauld Institute, the English Heritage and other national

³⁹ Ibid., 1.

⁴⁰ Tobit Curtis, *Conservation*, 2.

heritage and archaeological organizations stepped in to provide help and funding for this little church.⁴¹

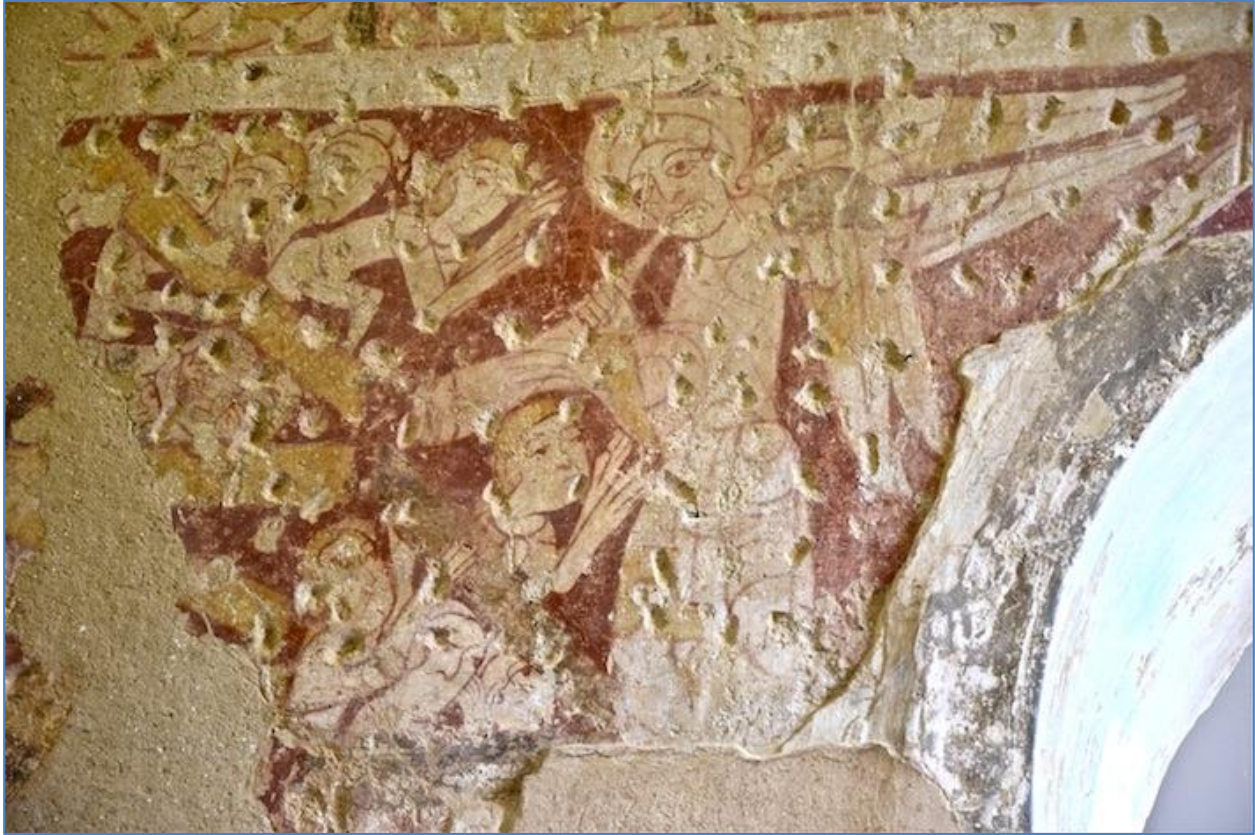


Figure 3 Gabriel blowing horn on Judgment Day, St. Mary's, Houghton on the Hill, Norfolk. Photo: Echoes of the Past, <https://blosslynspace.wordpress.com/category/churches-of-norfolk/>

The wall paintings on the east wall have three main scenes: The Seat of Mercy Trinity, the Harrowing of Hell, and the Creation of Eve. The Seat of Mercy Trinity is a very rare image, and indeed is the earliest known example of a wall painting showing the Trinity in this manner in Europe.⁴² Scholars speculate that it might have been unique to Britain, and the Conservation Report agrees, stating, "...the iconography is unquestionably sophisticated, suggesting a patron with a clear idea of how the scheme should be constructed. Because of the unique nature of the

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Tobit Curtis, *Conservation*, 7.

paintings at Houghton there are now no direct parallels in English wall painting.”⁴³ The image is right above the chancel arch: God is enthroned in the center and on his knee a cross – the depiction of a cross on God’s knee is the only one known in England. In the front of the throne is a smaller image of Christ on the cross, and by God’s head is a dove, haloed, representing the Holy Ghost. To the left of the arch is the fresco of Gabriel blowing the last trumpet and presiding over the dead who are rising from their graves on judgment day. **(Figure 3)** The circles (or roundels) show a scene that is disputed by scholars. These figures may be prophets holding scrolls of revelation, apostles carrying napkins to carry the souls of the saved to heaven, apostles carrying the shrouds of the resurrected dead, apostles carrying dead serpents as a sign they have conquered evil, or patriarchs carrying honor cloths.⁴⁴ The apostles are shown with very somber and miserable faces, a popular depiction prior to the twelfth century.⁴⁵

The Seat of Mercy Trinity fresco is the center of my focus, as it allows me to test the theories regarding image and narrative. The roundels **(Figure 4)** are especially useful for testing

⁴³ Ibid..

⁴⁴ The answer to what the men are carrying may depend on the timeframe in which they were painted. Petersen notes: “the convention of using scrolls to represent a spoken text becomes prevalent only in the High and Late Medieval period. The practice may have first been conceived as an expansion of the use of honor cloths in Ancient Greek and Roman frontispiece illustrations of authors that adorned classical texts.” See Robert S. Petersen, “Metamorphosis of the Phylactery: Changes in Emanata from the Medieval Times through the 18th Century.” (IJOCA) *International Journal of Comic Art* 10/1 (2008): 226-247. Durand of Mende, writing circa 1294-96, states that “Patriarchs and Prophets are painted with scrolls in their hands, and some of the Apostles are depicted with books and some with scrolls. This is clearly because before the coming of Christ, the faith was shown figuratively, and many things remained unclear; to represent this, the Patriarchs and Prophets are painted with scrolls, as if to denote this imperfect knowledge. But since the Apostles were instructed perfectly by Christ, they can be shown with books, by which is suitably depicted their perfect knowledge. But because some of them put down in writing what they had learned, for the instruction of others, they are fittingly depicted as if they were teachers, with books in their hands.... But others, who wrote nothing that has survived or has been approved by the Church, are not depicted with books but with scrolls, as a sign of their preaching,” Durand, *Rationale*, 36. If the fresco were painted in the 11th century, would the practice have been codified at that point? If yes, then the men in the image could be Patriarchs, Prophets or Apostles, since all three were depicted with scrolls. If no, then what they have in their hands might not reflect text, but the earlier tradition of honor cloths – which, in turn, might suggest that the fresco was based on a manuscript from an earlier century. The Conservation report supports this speculation, noting “...it is entirely possible that such parallels existed and it may have been possible for a patron simply to refer the painters to a nearby example. However it is also possible that there was a source such as a manuscript, with which the patron could demonstrate how aspects of the scheme should be laid out.” Tobit Curtis, *Conservation*, 7.

⁴⁵ Rosewell, *Wall Paintings*, 15.

the theoretical analysis because scholars are not sure what is actually being depicted here. Are they holding napkins, shrouds, snakes, scrolls or honor cloths? Is it Jesus on the far right, or is that a modern analysis that would seem redundant to the medieval viewer?



Figure 4 St. Mary's Church, Houghton-On-The-Hill. "Galleries." Photo: retouched by Avalon Graphics, 2011.⁴⁶

Understanding a wall painting requires a different set of skills from understanding a manuscript: even though they may be viewed as similar, they involve different kinds of narratives – the manuscript often only had one purpose, but wall paintings involve multiple purposes that include both narrative and sequential flow, juxtapositions, and spatial positioning. The painting of the Holy Trinity invites a multi-purpose reading from the parishioners, and asks us to examine just how, in the words of William Durand of Mende, "pictures are material signs

⁴⁶ See St. Mary's Church, Houghton-On-The-Hill. "Galleries: 11th Century Wall Paintings." Friends of St. Mary's Church Trust Website, 2013. For Avalon Graphics, LLC, see Cathy Helms, Graphic Designer, Photographer and Writer at Avalongraphics.org.

of the invisible.”⁴⁷ Diving into the fresco itself: above the chancel arch are the images of the Trinity – that is, it has been identified as the type of Trinity familiar in Western art that is similar to the famous fresco by Masaccio in Santa Maria Novella, Florence, where God the Father stands behind the cross on which the Son is crucified, and is supporting the cross. The Holy Spirit, represented by a dove, is in flight from God’s right shoulder. Anne Marshall of PaintedChurch.org speculates, “...not only is this painting much earlier than Masaccio’s early 15th century example, it seems on present indications (more of a roundel still remains to be uncovered) to be combined with the Doom, or Last Judgment. If this turns out to be true, then this treatment of the subject may be unique.”⁴⁸ It is interesting to speculate if the Anglo-Saxon parishioners who first saw this painting knew of the uniqueness and originality of the artist’s choices.

What has been uncovered thus far indicates three tiers. The top with the roundel containing the Trinity, a middle tier with figures each in their own roundel, presenting scrolls, and the lowest is the Last Judgment. Marshall notes that another three are faint but detectable to the right of the arch, and that these figures

...are thought to be the Twelve Apostles, shown here as co-assessors at the Judgment. The belief that they would actually take part derives from Luke 22:30 where Christ at the Last Supper promises the disciples that they will ‘sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.’ The figures, all painted as young and beardless, hold scrolls, perhaps bearing the appropriate sentence from the Apostles Creed.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Kessler, *Seeing*, 128. Kessler was paraphrasing Durand in 2004 through a German translation in 2000 of the original Latin. See Kirstin Faupel-Dreves, *Vom Rechten Gebrauch der Bilder im Liturgischen Raum* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 215-23. A recent translation of Durand from Latin to English in 2007 by Timothy Thibodeau can give us a closer idea of what Durand actually wrote, even though Durand himself was paraphrasing Pope Gregory’s *Pastoral Care* in saying, “When the shapes of external objects are drawn within, it is as if they were painted in the heart, whenever the faint images are thought about carefully.” Durand, *Rationale*, 33. Kessler’s paraphrase, if less exact, is chosen for being more poetic.

⁴⁸ See Anne Marshall, “Medieval Wall Painting in the English Parish Church: A Developing Catalogue.” (PaintedChurch.org, 2002). <http://paintedchurch.org/>

⁴⁹ Marshall, *Catalogue*, <http://paintedchurch.org/>.

Marshall's analysis is a modern one – but would a medieval analysis come to the same conclusion?

Groensteen's theory can help us: his argument asks us to look first at the *spatial positioning*. Then, he divides the positioning into two areas – *restricted arthology* and *general arthology*. The *spatio-topical system* looks at the framing of the comic, for the frames of a sequence create the smallest units of meaning, and the frame insures the integrity of the contents. The frame, and the order of the frames, acts as a continuum for the narrative, but it also controls the reader as each frame must be read for the meaning to be gleaned. Skipping a frame, or having too much change in the narrative between frames, will frustrate a reader. With the image of the Trinity, each roundel acts as a frame, and there are frames within frames as seen with the sequence of the apostles. The frame around the apostles acts as a signifier, and each roundel around the apostles also is a signifier, offering meanings within meanings. I could keep going, and follow what most systematic studies do when they approach what Roland Barthes calls the "obtuse meaning" of the comic: examining the pages' "larger and larger utterances: the panel, then the page, finally the entirety of the story."⁵⁰ Instead, I intend to pursue further studies of the paintings by following Groensteen's theories about not

...disassociate[ing] these multistage units, but to separately analyze their different levels of interaction, that being the spatial level in the first place, and, second, the syntagmatic level of discourse, or the story (which admits in turn two degrees of relations: linear and translinear.⁵¹

The medieval mind, I believe, would not separate out the elements of what he or she was seeing, but follow a train of thought that we today identify as not abstract thinking, but allegorical thinking – where different levels of interaction occur at the same time, weaving together a spatial

⁵⁰ Groensteen, *System*, 27.

⁵¹ Ibid.

understanding along with a linear and translinear understanding of what he was seeing.

The *restricted arthology* is the relationship between the sequence of syntagms, or one might say, the writing as it functions as narration. The middle tier of the fresco is the only place where speculation has put any writing, and as of this point (in the archeological uncovering of the wall paintings) we don't have any writing available for analysis, so this aspect will have to wait for further research. Restricted or restrained arthology will be of less value in analyzing medieval wall paintings because of the lack of narration or dialogue.

The *general arthology* covers all other relationships in the spatial positioning on the page. It reflects the integration between the narrative and the spatio-topical operation, or what is called the "multiframe."⁵² Every page of comics is subject to the need for a synchronic aspect, or the sequential panels on the surface of each page, and a diachronic aspect, or the knowledge that a reader must go through the series in order to create meaning, building recollection upon recollection and each echoing the previous recollection. The page is concrete, but the reader is not, and therefore neither is the reading. This creates a tension that ends not in conflict but in enrichment and densification of the text of the comic – or of the fresco on a wall. An easier way to handle this experience is to think of it as "braiding," a term introduced by Groensteen in 1990. When approached from this view, the images within the painting become more than likenesses, instead moving closer to what we might call or describe as having the quality of a place: for "what is a place other than a habituated space that we can cross, visit, invest in, a space where relations are made and unmade?"⁵³ If all the elements of a sequence are spatial sites, then the braiding of meaning is what constructs them as places. The relationship between the places is what gives rise to the dialogue: a direct exchange between the images as they co-exist under the

⁵² Ibid., 22.

⁵³ Ibid., 148.

gaze of a reader. The reading does not require the images to be viewed simultaneously. Each panel has a privileged relationship with another, whether that panel exists spatially next to the first, or is across the church, or even in the rafters of a cathedral two hundred meters away.

A Potential System

This article only scratches the surface of this powerful semantic network, and I am often astonished at how well the parallels work between comic studies theory and medieval visual theory. When the question of iconic solidarity is tested, the dynamic between the two *does* appear to reveal constant associations that might be called a network, and possibly someday, a system. To establish a system, however, we need to understand how and what strategies work: some are clearly applicable and others do not seem to apply; the latter we can put aside for future analysis as it does not pay to eliminate all angles too early. Modern comics, for example, have *modes* that are often radically different from each other; medieval art, however, does not have the same pliability between visual presentation and narrative as the clerical tradition encouraged uniformity.⁵⁴ Historian and comic studies scholar Joseph Witek offers an analysis of the different types of modes, described as *cartoon* versus *naturalistic*:

The first grows out of caricature, with its basic principles of simplification and exaggeration, while the other derives from the recreation of physical appearances in realistic illustration. Each of these visual styles also has come to carry with it a characteristic set of narrative tendencies and an orientation toward its themes and subject matter that... make up what I will call a comic's "mode."⁵⁵

Witek offers a comparative definition between "cartoon" and "naturalistic" that is an association that works for our purpose:

⁵⁴ See Durand of Mende's thesis.

⁵⁵ See Joseph Witek, "Comics Modes: Caricature and Illustration in the Crumb Family's *Dirty Laundry*," *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*. Ed. Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan (New York: Routledge, 2012) 27-42. The struggle for definition within the medium/genre continues, as pointed out above.

Visually, the cartoon mode is marked by simplified and exaggerated characters which are created primarily by line and contour. Panel backgrounds and physical settings are often minimally represented. Little attempt is made to create a sustained illusion of three-dimensional space by such means as shading or the use of linear perspective.⁵⁶

Compare the cartoon mode to the naturalistic mode, where

... the rendering of figures and objects adheres to... the artistic conventions for creating the illusion of physical forms existing in three-dimensional space. A significant effort is made to create that plausible physical world using shading, consistent lighting sources, texture, and linear perspective. Backgrounds are rendered in detail, especially in establishing shots, and that background tends to be depicted relatively fully from panel to panel.⁵⁷

Witek connects the visual style of the naturalistic mode to realism and its conventions in visual arts and photography, and links the narrative style to the conventions of cinema and the filmic techniques of jump-cuts, montages, and close-ups, creating “page layouts [that are] fluid and highly complex.”⁵⁸ The cartoon mode and its strategies are much more suitable, however, for analyzing medieval images than the naturalistic mode, as most medieval art does not aim towards creating physical or psychological verisimilitude. As the ideas and creative modes of the Renaissance crept into art, the cartoon mode faded and the naturalistic mode rose, giving viewers and readers a clearer idea of the complex psychological landscape within the human mind. My concern here, however, is pre-Renaissance, and that means the most useful mode is the cartoon.

Line and contour, minimal backgrounds and settings, low interest in three-dimensional space, panels based on a regular, predictable grid – this description matches the cartoon mode with almost every medieval illustration or wall painting. Characters are all generally the same size from scene to scene or page-to-page and visible in full length, and their bodies are either facing front or in a three-quarter view. Witek notes that “these compositional strategies lend

⁵⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 31.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 32.

themselves to plots built on pairs or small groups of characters exchanging dialogue,”⁵⁹ or in the case of many medieval illustrations, no dialogue at all except for the occasional phylactery, or “emanata”: the banners or scrolls that wave above a character’s head, seen in moments such as the Annunciation where Gabriel speaks to Mary, (**Figure 5**) “*Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui Iesus.*”



Figure 5 Miniature of the Annunciation, with two donors praying, with an inscription on the Virgin’s desk reading ‘*Omnia levia sunt amanti si quis amat non laborat / de daer*’. (England, S. E. (London) and Netherlands, S. (Bruges). After 1401, before 1415): London, British Library, MS Royal 2 A XVIII f. 23v. Photo: British Library.

In cartoon mode, the emanata will swirl and dance along with the text within the thought bubble, giving the speech a stylized nature of its own, whereas in naturalistic mode the emanata are often the result of clear, consistent, almost typewritten text. The physical reality of the cartoon mode is likewise mutable, for within one page we may have the birth, life, and death of a single

⁵⁹ Ibid., 29.

character: this concurs with medieval illustration where the narrative follows associative logic rather than the laws of perspective or physics. Witek argues that “the affinity of the cartoon mode for physical metamorphosis and non-linear logic has made it the most common vehicle for stories set in fantastical landscapes,”⁶⁰ which explains why it is linked to humor and fantasy, as the narrative is more important than the setting. We see the same in medieval illustrations, which (aside from historical depictions) are most often biblical narratives where the message is primary, and any attempt at being realistic is secondary.

That medieval illustrations do not have substantial amounts of dialogue (except for the rare emanata) is not a stumbling point in establishing a system: the key is that the narrative is a form of sequential art. D.A. Beronă, in his essay “Wordless Comics,” analyzes *The System* by Peter Kuper, a wordless comic that was compiled into a graphic novel in 1997: he notes that obviously, “Without dialogue, the images bear a heavier load for the understanding of context and narrative structure” and yet the result “eliminated language barriers and forced the reader to interact with the characters and connect the dots,”⁶¹ a point that returns us to Durand’s belief that pictures have primacy over texts. Beronă divides his reading into five elements of analysis: “characters and objects, image functions, stereotypes, word images, and line meanings, which are essential elements in any comic, but deserve particular attention in the wordless comic.”⁶² He believes that without word balloons, these elements are required to “assure the legitimacy of characters and objects” and so body posture and gesture doubly assert their primacy in the understanding of the narrative. Medieval art has an advantage in this area because the artist could

⁶⁰ Ibid., 30.

⁶¹ See David A. Beronă, “Wordless Comics: The Imaginative Appeal of Peter Kuper’s *The System*,” *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*, eds. Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan (New York: Routledge, 2012), 17-26.

⁶² Ibid., 19.

not assume literacy in his reader or viewer, but he could assume the common cultural understanding of Biblical history and characters, or at least that the viewer was developing this cultural understanding as he or she was being converted. Like Greek or Russian icons, where each position, gesture, color and object have a specific meaning, medieval illustrations can rely on what we would today call stereotypes (rarely challenged) in order to establish meaning and ensure the sequence of the narrative is understood.

Charles Hatfield, a respected comics-studies scholar, suspects that the issue in determining meaning may not be “a matter of playing words against pictures; it may be a matter of playing symbols against other symbols.”⁶³ If so, this idea adds to the strength of using comic studies theories to analyze medieval art, as medieval illustrations have heavy use of allegory within a culture that depends on allegorical thinking (as discussed above). Hatfield divides the symbol play as being between diegetic and non-diegetic, or

... symbols that “show” and symbols that “tell”. More precisely, we may say that *symbols that show* are symbols that purport to depict, in a literal way, figures and objects in the imagined world of the comic, while *symbols that tell* are those that offer a kind of diacritical commentary on the images, or (to use another rough metaphor) a “soundtrack” for the images. At its broadest level, then, what we call visual/verbal tension may be characterized as the clash and collaboration of different codes of signification, whether or not written words are used. Again, the deployment of such devices assumes a knowing reader.⁶⁴

His last remark, that of assuming a “knowing reader,” increases the argument for the feasibility of a system: medieval audiences are for the most part “knowing readers” whether they are viewing a manuscript or a wall painting. The known Biblical allegory can be considered the non-diegetic element of the narrative, and because the stories engage in a time sequence, the allegory compliments the diegetic visual element. Even when facing a single panel such as the

⁶³ Hatfield, *Tension*, 134.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

Annunciation, (**Figure 5**) we see a sequence in time: Mary is reading, and has been reading for a while since she is in the middle of the book; she turns with an iconic expression of surprise with her hand across her bosom and her head tilted modestly, her eyes on the ground. The emanata of Gabriel gets in the way of her gaze: the angel's legs are in a running position, implying that he has just arrived in the room and is in the process of unfurling the emanata to deliver his message. His face is below hers as he is in the process of kneeling, but the emanata, too, is in the way of his gaze and so they never quite connect as characters. Indeed, Mary could be looking at the book that is in the doorway outside the scene more than at Gabriel himself! The medieval reader's knowledge of what Gabriel is saying is demonstrated in the emanata: it does not contain all of the words of the Ave Maria, but skips *gratia*, splits *Dominus* into two words, and is missing the ending. While this confuses the modern reader, for medieval eyes it was more than enough; they knew what it was supposed to say, and could supply the missing ending themselves.⁶⁵

Hatfield's argument discusses the complexity of comic book form by addressing the mixed messages that modern readers, even the most experienced, must decode in order to establish meaning. For the modern reader, these tensions are a fundamental aspect to the art form: as a "hybrid text" the words in comics can have an appearance that is very elaborate and weighted with meaning, or the images in comics can be so simple to the point of functioning independently as a language, and the result can create a difficult reading experience. Medieval art is not static: of course, there are many medieval manuscripts, wall paintings and other

⁶⁵ Critics who follow McCloud's definition of a cartoon versus a comic might see a single-panel such as the annunciation as fitting within the definition of a *cartoon*, because "there's no such thing as a sequence of one," 20. The Annunciation, however, has a time sequence inherent in its depiction and therefore is a narrative, which means its approach is closer to a multi-image motion picture (the touchstone that McCloud uses to separate sequential from non-sequential art). The annunciation, in particular, exists not only within an external narrative of biblical events, but it also shows an internal narrative of sequences; it is, therefore, a *comic*.

illustrations that involve a sense of play, social comment and irony, humor and general bawdiness where the surface image appears to have one meaning, but the final image (seen after a reader follows the sequence) can ultimately mean something very different.⁶⁶ What seems alien or difficult to read for us was probably quite plain to the medieval reader.

The aim of this essay is admittedly not to look for conflict between comic studies' theory and medieval visual narrative theory, but to find a system whereby we can use the similarities to examine the nature of the art, the medium, and the genre itself. W.J.T. Mitchell, a scholar who specializes in the theory of images, states in his essay "Beyond Comparison":

The real question to ask when confronted with these kinds of image-text relations is not "what is the difference (or similarity) between the words and the images?" but "what difference do the differences (and similarities) make?" That is, why does it matter how words and images are juxtaposed, blended, or separated?⁶⁷

Mitchell uses the work of William Blake to illustrate the range in image-text from "absolutely disjunctive... illustrations that have no textual reference... to the absolutely synthetic identification of verbal and visual codes... mark[ing] the collapse... between writing and drawing", in order to illustrate the "flexible, experimental, and "high-tension" relation between words and images.⁶⁸ The image/text parallel implies a comparison, which sets up an artificial antagonism between image and text. Bringing us back around to the quote by Hilary Chute on the problem of the field of comics' inquiry, Mitchell describes the typical comic strip where "word is to image as speech is to action and bodies" and notes in parentheses:

(In the pre-Cartesian world of the medieval illuminated manuscript, by contrast, speech

⁶⁶ Gertsman and Stevenson's collection explores the thresholds of the "ruptures and margins" that make up the "cultural matrix" of the Middle Ages, providing solid evidence that "Medieval images are no longer viewed as static pieces of evidence that generate singular meanings and thus disclose irrefutable truths about the past. Instead, scholars now recognize these objects as phenomena whose meanings and functions change with each encounter, thereby revealing many competing narratives." See Elina Gertsman, and Jill Stevenson, eds., "Introduction: Limning the Field," *Thresholds of Medieval Visual Culture: Liminal Spaces* (Rochester: The Boydell Press, 2012), 1-7.

⁶⁷ W. J. T. Mitchell, "Beyond Comparison." *A Comics Studies Reader*, eds. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 116-123.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

tends to be represented as a scroll rather than a cloud or bubble, and it emanates from the gesturing hand of the speaker rather than the mouth; language seems to co-exist in the same pictive/scriptive space – handwriting emanating from hand-gesture – instead of being depicted as a ghostly emanation from an invisible interior.)⁶⁹

Here we have another offhand connection between the medieval and the modern, used to add a small amount of color to an essay, when it would be so very easy to take the connection and expand upon it. I would have liked to see Mitchell ask (although this was beyond the thesis of his essay) what it *means* for the language to co-exist in the same pictive/scriptive space? Are there modern comics that have this quality, and how was it achieved? What difference does this make for the narrative and for the sequence of the art? In turn, is there any medieval art that depicts language as “a ghostly emanation from an invisible interior”? How was it achieved, and what difference does this make?

I would like to see this line of questioning be considered with medieval art: noting the differences and similarities between modern and medieval art is a moot point, well considered by many art historians, but the question of how a medieval manuscript can be viewed through the lenses of comic studies theory is a very high-tension site of exploration. Could we be more flexible and open in our consideration of the message, seeing elements beyond the traditional interpretation and coming at the image from beyond the margin? In order for comic studies to grasp “it’s object or properly pose its project” these questions of history, semiotics, and grammar must be answered. We *can* read comics using medieval visual narrative theory, and we can also read medieval illuminated manuscripts using comic studies theory; in doing so, we open up both fields to being able to read the entire message of the narrative within sequential art. 🐼

⁶⁹ Ibid., 117.