Frame, Sequence, Medium: Comics in Plurimedial and Transnational Perspective

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What is the transcultural work of comics, and upon what basis is this labor possible?[1] In the following pages, I shall attempt to answer these questions in terms of the triad of concepts named in my title – frame, sequence, and medium. I will place the transnational work of comics in close relation to a certain set of dynamics, which are themselves inherent to the medium, but which explode the medium's confines and place comics in a robustly plurimedial field. The transnational exchanges that take place in and around comics, and the plurimedial relations in which they are implicated, will in turn be connected through 'seriality' as it pertains simultaneously to the following: a) certain 'intra-medial' formal dynamics; b) practices of production and consumption or 'uses of the medium'; c) the 'extra-medial' constitution of transnational 'imagined communities' around comics and comic-book series.[2] As a preliminary approach to the question of the meaning, possibility, and implications of the transnational work of comics and as a means of framing the links between the plurimedial and the transnational that I take to obtain in the nexus of these three levels of seriality, I begin by looking at several examples of comic-book heroes crossing medial and national borders.

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[1] This question, which I pursue here from a media-theoretical perspective, framed the conference panel from which this paper originated: "The Transcultural Work of Comics and Graphic Narratives," chaired by Christina Meyer and Daniel Stein, whom I thank for their valuable comments. I also thank fellow panel members Alexander Starre, Lukas Etter, Jochen Ecke, Iris Laemmerhirt, and Frank Erik Pointner for their discussions.

[2] With respect to the concept of seriality as it is used in this paper, my thinking is greatly indebted to the members of the DFG Research Unit "Popular Seriality – Aesthetics and Practice," in particular Frank Kelleter (speaker for the group), Ruth Mayer (with whom I collaborate on the sub-project "Serial Figures and Media Change"), Daniel Stein ("Authorization Practices of Serial Narration," with Frank Kelleter), and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann ("The Dynamics of Serial Outbidding (*Überbietung*)," also with Frank Kelleter).

Heroes Out of Bounds

Today, perhaps more than ever, comics and other forms of graphic narratives are involved in complex networks of transnational and transcultural interactions that complicate any simple ascription of national character or identity to these works and the figures that inhabit them. This is particularly clear in the case of superheroes, many of whom traditionally embodied a moralistically exaggerated but somehow archetypal version of 'Americanness,' but who have been transformed through their involvements in rapidly changing global media industries marked both by trajectories of medial convergence and by a precarious dialectics of global (mass) distribution and narrower niche appeals.[3] Superman foreshadows many of these developments. An iconic American hero with extraterrestrial origins, Superman unites rural America (Smallville, U.S.A.) with the globally connected big city (Metropolis: mass media hub and home of the *Daily Planet*) – a combination that, despite or precisely because of the rather narrow vision of diversity it embodies, proves to be the ultimate weapon against villains bent on world domination (and who are thus, of necessity, opposed to the American way of life and its moral grounding in the culturally homogenous, harmonious milieu of the small town). Superman, in other words, embodies an ideologically loaded fulcrum point between a number of "imagined communities,"[4] cultures, and geographies – rural / urban, national / planetary, human / extraterrestrial – each of which is articulated across various medial channels and the environments they envision.[5]

Significantly, Superman performs this go-between function on diegetic and extradiegetic levels alike. Within the narrative world, Superman's alter-ego Clark Kent works as a journalist, thus occupying a node in the networks of mass communication that connect the spaces and identities listed above. In the 'real world,' our world, on the other hand, this duality of identity extends to the figure's ability to straddle numerous medial divides, as Superman proliferates in comic books, newspaper strips, radio serials, animated cartoons, live action film serials, TV series, and big budget films. This history of plurimedial proliferation, which witnesses the all-American hero's advance from national to international and global channels of dissemination, necessarily involves Superman in tradeoffs between his

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[3] Henry Jenkins's *Convergence Culture* details many of the dynamics that are reshaping popular culture and explores some of the social and cultural effects of contemporary media reorganizations.

[4] The term originates with Benedict Anderson, who accords to modern media a central role in the construction of the idea of nation. See Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, as well as *The Spectre of Comparisons*.

[5] A classic view of Superman's ideological functions, which relates them to narrative techniques and serial forms of the sort that interest me as well, can be found in Umberto Eco's "The Myth of Superman." My focus here, however, is on the changes that have ensued since the time of his writing, changes in the overall landscape of our media cultures, above all, which have left a lasting imprint on a figure like Superman.

Americanness and the global scope of his iconicity. For example, Warner Brothers' globally marketed Superman films of the late 1970s and 1980s, starring Christopher Reeve in the title role, trace a trajectory of internationalization where ultimately global, planetary threats are initially focused in the U.S. (*Superman*, 1978) before they spread to Europe (*Superman II*, 1980, which places the iconic figure at the equally iconic setting of the Eiffel Tower). The perils are then diffused through global computer networks (*Superman III*, 1983, where the already double identity of the superhero is split again, producing an evil version who creates havoc around the world – and plays photo-op pranks like straightening the leaning tower of Pisa). Finally, the Earth's endangerment is framed by a late-Cold War scenario of near nuclear catastrophe, wherein Superman transcends his American identity to appeal to the United Nations and attempt global nuclear disarmament (in the epic flop of *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace*, 1987).

Superman's trajectory of plurimedial internationalization is just the tip of the iceberg, though. Other superheroes, such as Batman and Spider-Man, have been subject to what appear to be much more radical transformations when they have been reimagined from the perspectives of other national traditions and appropriated as genuinely transnational figures. Recently, for example, a collection of Japanese "Bat-Manga" from the years 1966-1967 has been re-released in an English translation: *Bat-Manga! The Secret History of Batman in Japan*, edited by Chip Kidd, reprints stories written and illustrated by Jiro Kuwata. In these comics, originally serialized in the weekly manga magazine *Shonen King* following the successful import of the American television series starring Adam West and Burt Ward (1966-1968), Batman is transplanted into a foreign cultural setting – one marked, on the diegetic level, by the occasional appearance of stereotypically 'Japanese' villains (e.g. mutant insects, robots gone berserk, or menacing reptiles) in addition to staple enemies from the American comics. On a non-diegetic level, Batman's border-crossing is marked by the different representational conventions and basic material configurations typical of manga, including matters ranging from drawings' visual style to the overall layout of panels and pages, which assumes a right-to-left reading order. As a response to Batman's televisual staging, Bat-Manga demonstrates the mutual influence of intermedial and international transfer that we saw at work in Superman. Though more radical than Superman's transformation in (Hollywood) cinema, Batman's reimagining in Japanese manga nevertheless shares with it and expands upon a common structure. Again we find plurimedial and serial proliferations of a popular character, who also maintains a dual identity, at work in the cultural reframing of comics. And if this confluence of diegetic, medial, and cultural factors was instrumental in shaping the original

manga series in the 1960s, it plays just as significant a role in the comics' rediscovery and 2008 republication as a bound volume in English translation. This publication would be virtually unthinkable without the rise of Internet-based fan communities specializing in the accumulation and dissemination of obscure comics-related information, without the increasing popularity in the West of manga itself, and without the rise of the graphic novel, which the volume *Bat-Manga!* emulates in form.

Meanwhile, Batman's brief Japanese foray has been reabsorbed into a comics mainstream that itself has become a transmedial and transnational crossroads. Since 2010, Scottish-born comics auteur Grant Morrison, along with Canadian artist Yanick Paquette, have taken up the idea of the transnational proliferation of the serial figure Batman, turning it into the basic premise of DC Comics' series *Batman Incorporated*. Here, Bruce Wayne, the 'original' Batman, goes public with his identity and promotes the idea of establishing an international franchise of local 'Batmen' – including British, French-Muslim, African, and South American representatives, as well as Mr. Unknown, the Batman of Tokyo. The latter pays homage to his 1960s manga forebear as he battles a villain who originated in the pages of the *Shonen King* adaptation: Lord Death Man, a skeletal character adapted from the figure Death Man who had appeared shortly before in the American *Batman* #180 (May 1966), but was transformed into a very different being in the process of his transpacific leap. In an interview conducted prior to *Batman Incorporated*'s debut, Morrison muses:

> [Lord Death Man was] so perfect a villain. And the fact that they called him Lord Death Man and not just Death Man elevated him to this new kind of metric. But yeah, why not just incorporate all of that stuff into this legend of Batman so that we can kind of draw on every aspect of the character's 70 year history, and the actual publishing history as well. This story is going to be about how the Batman of the Bat-Manga comics gets his job, and it's Batman himself who recruits him. (Hudson n.pag.)

However, even more significant than the retrospective continuity that Morrison promises for the Japanese Batman, is his awareness of the important role played by a productive tension between diegetic continuity ("the character's 70 year history") and the discontinuous history of non-diegetic mediality ("the actual publishing history"). It is precisely this duality, folded into the diegesis in the superhero's maintenance of a secret identity, that keeps serial figures in motion and capable of reinventing themselves in a wide variety of media, able to 'reboot' when moving between comics and film, television and radio, traditional print media and digital formats – and, moreover, to miraculously maintain a recognizable identity in the process. Despite discrepancies between the serial continuities of comics and the diegetic universes outlined on film, for example, Superman onscreen remains, for all intents and

purposes, the same Superman portrayed on four-color printed pages, and the Batman of TV is the same, in essence, as the Batman of film, comics, and video games. Yet, significant margins of difference exist, and it is the ability to simultaneously acknowledge these differences and to ignore them, i.e. to recognize 'different versions' of 'the same' character, that fuels the continued proliferation of these figures across medial boundaries. The medium of comics is predestined, it would seem, to give birth to plurimedially serialized figures, as a tension between diegetic continuities and non-diegetic mediality is endemic to the format of the long-running, open-ended, multi-authored serial stories that have been the norm of comics production for most of its history (including, but not limited to, the superhero genre). These inevitable tensions are what allow for comics' elaborate multiverse constructions and their many explorations of counterfactual what-if scenarios, and they are, of course, the motivating force behind the technique of retcon – so central to comics – which Morrison playfully alludes to in his reference to Kuwata's Japanese Batman and the backstory he imagines *Batman Incorporated* providing for the figure. But whereas retcon aims to streamline and to resolve discrepancies, it is precisely the continued presence of those discrepancies, as I have been suggesting, that form one of the enabling conditions for the plurimedial and transnational proliferation of comic-book figures.

Today, it might seem, these productive tensions are threatened as never before. In the age of online databases and the pooling of specialized knowledge that they enable, the plurimedial explosion of comics' characters has not slowed. Rather, the productive tension between various media's diegetically non-continuous expressions is compromised by a cataloging impulse of exhaustive 'versioning,' or by our convergence culture's increased power to distinguish between different versions of a character and to construct an overarching continuity. Delineating a single, dominant universe like Marvel's Earth-616 that defines the 'true' version of events in opposition to hierarchically subordinated alternative realities, non-standard and alternative-media articulations of long-running serial figures are relegated to separate compartments, hence severing the ties they maintain to canonical expressions. Instead of different versions of 'the same' figure, we are left merely with 'different versions' – the flexible, unifying locus that formerly united them dissolves in the grid of the database. Alas, however, the threat would seem to be more theoretical than practical, as only the most hardcore of fans will be versed in the minutiae encoded in the database. For the rest of us, figures like Batman and Superman remain amorphously inconsistent bundles of identities and differences, continually stretching the limits of consistency as they are reincarnated in various diegetic settings and medial packages. And it is a good thing, too, for without this supple

malleability, I contend, a good deal of what makes superheroes such interesting and fecund sites of transnational exchange would wither, leaving very little room for non-standard forms of appropriation that might resist being reduced to the status of inferior copy or being incorporated back into the homogenizing scheme of a global empire.

However, perhaps the threat is not altogether imaginary, after all. For there is a sense in which the 'versioning' impulse referenced above gets enacted in popular culture in a way that brings together political correctness, exploitation, and racial profiling in an uneasy mix. Think of Black Barbie or, closer to the present topic, Spider-Man India. In this respect, Morrison's *Batman Incorporated* might be seen as posing the central question of comics' transnational future. Given the convergence of media in the digital realm, as well as the internationalization of the comics industry, is it possible today to imagine the transnationality of comics as more than a simple commissioning of local versions by a global franchise? As we have seen, Morrison's series enacts the scenario both diegetically – with Bruce Wayne recruiting local representatives of the Batman 'brand' – and extradiegetically – by absorbing Kuwata's *Shonen King* stories into DC Comics' mainstream narrative continuity. Marvel Comics' real-world commissioning of the series *Spider-Man: India* provides what might be seen as an even more overt expression of this franchising logic. The four-issue mini-series, published in 2004 by Indian-based Gotham Entertainment Group in cooperation with Marvel Comics, moved the story from New York City to Mumbai, reimagined Peter Parker as Pavitr Prabhakar, and even pictured Spider-Man in a dhoti – but it did not, or so it would seem, pose a challenge in any real sense to the supposed 'Americanness' of the canonical version of Spider-Man. The Indian Spider-Man remains just that: the 'Indian' Spider-Man, a sort of short-lived ethnic novelty that remains separate from his American counterpart. At best, the series signaled Marvel's acknowledgement of cultural difference among its readers around the world, but it might, at worst, also be seen as part of the exploitative expansionism of a particularly American form of media globalization.[6]

"Even superheroes aren't safe from job outsourcing anymore" – thus reads the problematic opening line of a 2004 *Newsweek* article on "the first ethnic adaptation of the popular comic-book series" (Overdorf n.pag.). The tongue-in-cheek statement is problematic because it conjures racist and anti-immigrant sentiments, as if Peter Parker's night job were really endangered, while fully aware of the context of global capital which frames such

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[6] Marvel Comics, now known as Marvel Worldwide, Inc., is owned by Marvel Entertainment, a subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company.

"outsourcing." "It's a blending of cultures that Marvel Comics sees as natural – and profitable," according to the article, which goes on to quote Marvel's president of publishing at the time, Gui Karyo: "India is very rich in graphical mythology, and that plays well to the superhero ethos" (qtd. in Overdorf n.pag.). This cooptation of an exoticized 'ethnos' by the (inherently capitalist and nationalist-ethnocentric?) 'ethos' of American superheroes represents one of the inevitable realities of the transnational multimedia networks in which comics are caught up today. Yet, is a more robust, less one-sided – and less ethnocentric – sort of transnationalism possible in the world of contemporary comics?

The traditional way out of this dilemma, deriving from cultural studies, would be to look towards media consumers' (subversive) practices of appropriation – how they read, use, and integrate texts and artifacts into their lives in unforeseen ways, essentially at odds with the products' implied ideologies and the exploitative networks from which they emerge. And while I think that it remains useful to approach the transnational work of comics in this way, I wish to take a different tack in the following. I will argue that non-exploitative transnational exchanges are not only possible, but that they are a more or less natural extension of the very medium of comics. Seen from this angle, the (positive) transnational work of comics – comics' conduciveness to non-unilateral transnational negotiations, their potential for reimaginings that are not simply imposed on ethnic others or offered as tokens of political correctness, and thus perhaps the very basis for transnational popular subversion *à la* cultural studies – is anchored deeper in the medium than at the level of narrative contents, ideological messages, or commercial or artistic agendas. There is a formal anchoring that pertains to the emergent seriality that takes root between the frames of comics' individual panels, that joins the resulting sequences into larger units (pages, books, series), and that explodes the bounds of the medium as it spills over into the 'imagined communities' of fans and readerships. I return, thus, to the triad of concepts mentioned in my title – frame, sequence, and medium – which together lay the groundwork for a more intimate connection between the plurimedial expression and the transnational circulation and negotiation of comics' serial formations.

Transnational Multistability and the Work of the Medium

I have explored various ways in which superheroes are framed and reframed, i.e. taken out of their original contexts of American comic books and reimagined in cross-medial, plurimedial, and / or transmedial as well as international, multinational, transnational, or transcultural

settings. I suggest that these acts of reframing are higher-order framings that cannot be separated from the basic low-level framings (visual, material, and narrative) that structure the medium of comics at root. Ignoring these connections makes it easy to believe that plurimedial and transnational appropriations are more or less accidental, whereas focusing on comics' low-level framing structures and the readerly experience of engaging with and navigating them reveals the higher-level reimaginings as more or less natural (though perhaps not necessary) extensions of an essential tendency of the medium. Similarly, an exclusive focus on high-level medial and national / cultural crossovers is what underwrites the impression that all such moves, especially if made by American superheroes, are doomed to result in conservative, ethnocentric expressions that echo and reinforce the American exceptionalism and the essentially neo-imperialist, capitalist, and martial tendencies that animate these figures.[7] It is by re-connecting high-level and low-level framings, I contend, that an alternative appraisal becomes possible.

There is a complex web of economic, political, social, and cultural interactions involved in all the cases I have considered so far, and this would be true for any case of transnational exchange related to the global circulation and appropriation of American comics, Japanese manga, Franco-Belgian *bande dessiné*, or any other comics tradition. As such, the transnational work of comics has to be seen in the context of the historically and geographically specific situations in which comics artists and fans, but also publishers, marketers, critics, social reformers, and legislators, among others, interact directly or indirectly with one another. In no way do I wish to deny the significance of such interactions, or to suggest, almost in a sort of media-deterministic vein, that they are mere epiphenomena of the material medium of comics. At first glance, the rather formalist, media-theoretical perspective that I wish to bring to bear on comics as a site of transnational interaction may seem indeed to be a backwards approach. I emphasize that my approach is not meant to supplant investigations of the economic factors, social interests, and cultural exchanges involved, but that it instead aims to provide them with greater depth by connecting them to a material and experiential domain that is all too often ignored in such higher-level analyses. In the following, I relate questions of the transnational work of comics to a set of formal-

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[7] Cultural geographer Jason Dittmer, in "The Tyranny of the Serial: Popular Geopolitics, the Nation, and Comic Book Discourse," leans towards this pessimistic type of view. Interestingly, Dittmer's pessimism is explicitly related to the formal seriality of mainstream comics, which he sees as reinforcing conservative geopolitical ideologies. I contend, however, that the serial production practices and narrative continuities at stake in Dittmer's argument need to be reconnected to their emergence from lower-level formal properties of the medium, which will eventually point the way to inherent instabilities in their high-level ideological consequences. The serial, in effect, proves to be far less 'tyrannical' than Dittmer believes.

phenomenological properties according to which comics can be identified as 'the medium of the multistable frame.'

My claim is not that transnational processes are determined by the formal properties of comics. These properties are certainly not a sufficient condition but at most a necessary condition – and at least a contributing cause or 'catalyst' – for the transnational exchanges that take place around comics. Even if those exchanges are ultimately sociocultural phenomena demanding sociocultural explanations, it would be wrong to reduce the medium in which they occur to a neutral channel. Thus, we have to consider what makes 'comics in particular' conducive to transnational appropriations and negotiations, which means also considering the specific contribution – or the 'work' – of the medium itself. Comics, to apply Bruno Latour's terminology, must be treated not as passive 'intermediaries' between human subjects but as active 'mediators,' materially vibrant and integral to the constitution of the transnational networks or communities that take shape around them.[8]

I return, then, to my title terms: 'frame,' 'sequence,' and 'medium.' At the center of my argument are certain properties and propensities of the 'medium' itself, conceived not as an ahistorical, fixed essence but as something that has taken on a certain shape, which is negotiable, non-absolute, but also not wholly arbitrary.[9] It may or may not be possible to rigorously define the medium, i.e. to provide a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions,[10] nevertheless 'sequentiality,' as identified in Will Eisner's and Scott McCloud's seminal attempts at definition, designates a property that is central to comics in virtually all of the medium's commonly acknowledged forms.[11] And the sequentiality in question refers to the serial arrangement and / or experience of elements – units typically combining words and pictures – that are demarcated and distinguished from one another by means of 'frames.' Centrally, these include the frame of the panel, but also intra-panel frames

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[8] See Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern*, where he distinguishes these terms as follows: "An intermediary – although recognized as necessary – simply transports, transfers, transmits energy [...]. It is void in itself and can only be less faithful or more or less opaque. A mediator, however, is an original event and creates what it translates as well as the entities between which it plays the mediating role" (77-78). Conceiving comics as 'mediators,' then, means removing them from the traditional paradigm of communications studies, in which media serve as channels of communication between human subjects, and instead according them an agency of their own, one which reconfigures human agencies and identities through its institution of new agential networks.

[9] The most systematic treatment to date of the medium as such, i.e. of the basic formal properties that characterize comics, must surely be Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics*. Though Groensteen's approach is broadly semiotic, my own phenomenologically oriented approach accords quite well with his findings.

[10] Aaron Meskin, in "Defining Comics?," argues that all available definitions are fatally flawed and suggests, in conclusion, that we should simply abandon the "definitional project" altogether (376).

[11] See Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* and McCloud's *Understanding Comics*.

such as the speech bubble and supra-panel frames such as the page itself.[12] If sequentiality is central to the medium of comics, then framing, in turn, is necessary for sequentiality. Without the individuation of elements provided by the frame, there could be no sequence as the movement from one element to the next. But the individuation of elements is negotiable, temporary, and relative. The frame marks a non-absolute, shifting boundary. On the one hand, the ostensibly central unit of the panel can be decomposed into smaller units or frames including captions, speech and thought bubbles, and also the implicit frames that demarcate moments of a temporal progression within the single panel. On the other hand, the panel can be absorbed into the higher-level frame of the page and into the progressions between scenes, pages, or even whole comic books and comic book series.

The negotiability of the frame, its non-absolute or situational character, is well known from the writings of Gregory Bateson and Erving Goffman,[13] while perhaps the most general treatment of its logic is provided by Jacques Derrida in *The Truth in Painting*. Whereas Derrida's exploration of the so-called *parergon* goes far afield of the framings at stake in comics, it's worth considering an observation he makes about the frames around paintings. On the one hand, frames select, present, and thus help define the painting as a coherent figure; on the other hand, if the frame serves as a background for the painting, it can also be absorbed into the figure when seen against the larger background of the wall.[14] The frame is therefore reversible, or multistable, flickering phenomenally between figure and ground.[15] Of course, this applies to all visual media, and perhaps to all media, which involve some type of

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[12] On the central importance of framing, it is instructive to consider that Eisner devotes the longest chapter of his book to "The Frame," where he treats a wide variety of sorts and scales of frames. Crucial sections of McCloud's study are also devoted to frames and framing, and Groensteen's analysis turns on concepts such as the 'multi-frame' and the means by which panels are articulated and positioned with respect to higher-level and lower-level frames.

[13] See, for example, Bateson's "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," where framing is used as a metacommunicative concept, and Goffman's *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. For applications to literature and media, see also the collection of essays, *Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media*, edited by Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart.

[14] Derrida's concern, of course, is not limited to painting or the visual arts. Neither, for that matter, is mine. But the role played by banal, physical framings such as the frames around paintings or comic-book panels in destabilizing experience, agency, and therefore sociocultural identifications and interactions is meant quite sincerely. Derrida's observation on the frame's unstable place between painting and wall can be found on page 61 of *The Truth in Painting*.

[15] The notion of 'multistability,' which derives from Gestalt psychology, plays an important role in Don Ihde's phenomenological philosophy of technology, according to which there is a "structured but essential ambiguity of technology" (144). It is Ihde's work, which I adapt from his focus on 'mediating technologies' to media of various sorts (here comics), which most directly informs my usage of the term. See also my *Postnaturalism: Frankenstein, Film, and the Anthropotechnical Interface* for application to film.

framing.[16] Comics are thus not unique in this respect but can be considered 'the medium of the multistable frame' because framing is so apparently central to the medium, while multistability is essential to the experience of reading comics.

Comics' manifold framings are more obtrusively apparent than in many media, and they are diverse in character and in scale. Christina Meyer, in her article "Putting it into boxes," demonstrates nicely the overlapping multiplicity of frames, which are physically material, discursive, cognitive, experiential, and narrative. They include panels, speech balloons, story frames, splash pages, and even the outer covers of a book. As Meyer argues in her reading of *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Art Spiegelman exploits a variety of framing possibilities to make the very framing of perception perceivable (481-88). He makes the reader aware of the work of construction that is involved both in our everyday experience, in our relations through media to the world of breaking news and terrorist threats, and in our reading of comics, which here functions as the framing medium in which framing becomes an issue. Implicit in Meyer's reading, importantly, is a recognition that Spiegelman is exploiting an essential property of comics for his purposes, viz. the multistability of framing that both structures comics' visual and narrative expression and destabilizes those expressions, opening them to a variety of perspectives through figure / ground reversals and related dynamics. In other words, though Spiegelman's graphic novel undoubtedly marks an outstanding aesthetic (and perhaps political) achievement, the unsettling of frames by means of the multistable seam or border that all frames mark is an inherent and centrally defining potential of the medium of comics itself.

Recognizing this fact helps explain some of the radically divergent assessments of comics in general. Jochen Ecke, in his review of the essay collection *Comics: Zur Geschichte und Theorie eines populärkulturellen Mediums*, points out what he takes to be a "fundamental" (36) contradiction between two of the volume's essays, one of which follows Scott McCloud in his claim that simplified, cartoon-like drawing styles allow readers to identify closely with comic-book characters, while the other claims that a lack of realistic detail leads to estrangement or a "quasi-modernistic distance to the reader" (Ecke 36; my translation). What is at stake here is a difference between transparency and opacity, subjective absorption versus objective distance – precisely the alternatives that frames define and unite as reversible

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[16] At the right level of abstraction, multistable framing might even be offered as a definition of mediality itself. I will not pursue this thought here but merely indicate that it could be developed with recourse to Niklas Luhmann's theory of media, defined as the relation between a given medial substrate and the forms it can assume, and inspired by Fritz Heider's *Ding und Medium*. See Chapter 3 (165-214) of Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft*, as well as Chapter 2 (190-412) of *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*.

potentials. In fact, both alternatives, transparency and opacity, are live possibilities in comics; neither can be claimed as the primary type of formal or experiential structure, and this is due to the multistability that attaches to frames and framings at every level of comics' expressive articulations.

At a relatively low level, for example, the speech balloon exemplifies the dynamics of non-reducible oscillation and reversibility. David Carrier claims that "[t]he speech balloon is a defining element of the comic because it establishes a word / image unity that distinguishes comics from pictures [merely] illustrating a text" (4). Thanks to the speech balloon, according to Carrier, "[c]omics […] are essentially a composite art: […] they have verbal and visual elements seamlessly combined" (4). In his more detailed analysis of the speech balloon, however, Carrier paints a very different picture. The integration of words and images effected by the speech balloon is not seamless but precisely 'seamful,' in that the frame of the speech balloon, like the seam on a piece of clothing, both joins pieces into an integral unit but continues to mark a place of intersection and difference. Speech balloons, as Carrier puts it, "are visible to the reader but do not lie within the picture space containing the depicted characters" (4). The words inside the balloons "are neither entirely within the picture space nor outside it […] We treat the balloons neither purely as holes in the picture nor as things depicted" (29). The speech balloon not only integrates words and images but also marks a volatile distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic forms and spaces, where the balloon itself has a non-diegetic visuality that frames representations of diegetic sounds and dialogues. This distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic spaces, which does not amount to the separability or independence of those spaces, is precisely a seamful distinction. 'Seamfulness' defines the frame as multistable, such that it marks an ineliminable, but also volatile and reversible, boundary. The seam is essential to the integrity of one's pants, for example, and yet it marks a point of intersection between distinguishable parts (left and right, front and back, etc.). The seam is functional, and can be hidden and made unobtrusive, but it can also be made the object of fashion, made to mark a break with convention or the object of an emerging convention. The variability of the seam is what allows for aesthetic experimentation with the form and function, the obtrusiveness or invisibility, apparent negligibility or central role of the speech balloon, the panel, the material page-as-panel, or any other number of frames and framings at work in comics.

However obtrusive or unobtrusive it may be, the seamfulness or multistability of the frame is essential to the emergence of sequentiality – essential to the very ability to cross the

boundaries between panels and perceive them as sequences. "How, from discrete images, do we generate a continuous narrative?" (Carrier 50). Following Scott McCloud, who speaks of 'closure' as the inferential activity of the reader who supplies a causal link between panels, Carrier claims that the gutter, the space between panels, is "not always a mere background, [but] may become an active part of the image" (51). One step further, the gutter may be seen as never a 'mere' background, as it is always caught up in the flickering of the frame between ground and figure and thus constantly alternating between passive and active functions. The panel border must be permeable, the site of functional reversals between, on the one hand, defining and focusing a certain view of the diegetic world and, on the other hand, being absorbed into the panel-as-figure so that it can stand side by side with another panel or set of panels against a larger background, constituted by a higher-level frame. The sequence takes shape in this oscillation of views between looking 'through' the panel frame into the story world, then seeing a set of framed units, before zooming back into the next frame and so on. An 'emergent seriality' takes root as these oscillations continue at the level of pages and at the level of books. In each case, a gap between discrete units is bridged or made passable, 'closed' by means of an alternation between a view of the unit in isolation and its reframing as part of a group, apprehended as a series. The passage from one issue of a comic-book series to the next depends, therefore, on the same dynamics of 'framing, unframing, reframing' that drives the passage from one panel to the next.[17]

Especially at higher levels of serialized framings, where it is no longer possible to survey a complete set of units in a single view, discrepancies inevitably arise as a result of the recursive nestings of frames and the multi-level multistabilities at work. Various frames and frame levels conflict with one another and fail to mesh, especially in long-running and multiple-author series; the technique of retcon, which retrofits the series with continuity by means of a revisionary view of past events, provides an answer to this problem that itself depends on the non-absolute, negotiable character of multistable frames. The proliferation of frames goes in the other direction as well, as alternative universes and what-if scenarios reframe characters in several diegetic realms, several slices of the multiverse at once. Significantly, many comic-book characters are themselves designed as multistable frames in their own right; the superhero, in particular, as pointed out in the introductory look at Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man, follows a long-established pattern of serialized narrative

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[17] With the phrase "framing, unframing, reframing," I allude to Roland Barthes's characterization of the reading as an act of "naming, unnaming, renaming": "To read is to find meanings, and to find meanings is to name them; but these named meanings are swept toward other names: I name, I unname, I rename: so the text passes: it is a nomination in the course of becoming, a tireless approximation, a metonymic labor" (*S/Z* 11).

forms by endowing the central figure with an alter-ego that brokers traffic between otherwise separated, disparate times and spaces, e.g. between a criminal underground or a world of mythical powers on the one hand and the world of normal, law-abiding citizens on the other. Such figures therefore constitute a thematic embodiment of the medium's formal dynamics of the multistable frame, but they also mirror the structural logic at work in the consumption of serialized media such as comic books. Such serial forms are medially mobile forms, discretely packaged and consumed in a variety of times and spaces consumed episodically but synthesized into overarching spatiotemporal continuities or diegetic universes which, however, regularly defer completion and resist coherence as a result of the seamfulness of their framing. Serialized characters with liminal, hybrid, double, or secret identities therefore embody a relatively high-level frame that repeats the low-level oscillations between discontinuous framings and continuous sequences.

Figures of this kind provide the link that will finally put all of these observations back into contact with the plurimedial and transnational perspective from which I initially set out. As we have seen, comics' serial figures, which already occupy the threshold between various diegetic and non-diegetic realms, migrate easily from comics to a variety of other media, including radio, television, film, and video games. If each of these media can be regarded as a discrete frame, then the serial figure is what ties them together and provides the means for closing the gaps between them – never totally, though, as continuity between media is both enabled and thwarted by the seamfulness of the framing figure. The serial figure is a locus of intersection between various medialities, each framing their own serial progressions that alternately mesh and fail to mesh with one another, articulating diegetic universes that respect, fail to respect, or marginally respect the framing boundaries of diegetic continuity. This plurimedial expression, which continues to resonate with the low-level multistabilites of the frames and sequences that structure the medium of comics, serves in turn as a catalyst for the even higher-level acts of 'framing, unframing, and reframing' that constitute the transnational negotiations of imagined communities around comic-book series and characters.

The social question of the dynamics of comics' transnational reception, which involves superheroes and other comic figures in both global and local contexts, in internationally standardized forms and national or regional adaptations, cannot legitimately be divorced from formal questions concerning the means and modes by which serially and plurimedially instantiated figures negotiate the relations between diegetically open and closed serialities. These resonate with comics fans' transnational renegotiations of the boundaries at stake in the

imagination of 'nation,' which Benedict Anderson has linked to a competition between 'bound' and 'unbound' serialities – between the totalizing closure of a territory and numbering of its occupants as effected by a national census, as opposed to the categorically open and ongoing iterability and reproducibility of events as modeled in the media of newspapers and photography.[18] Comics, which are closer to the latter – in Anderson's view more democratic – media of unbound seriality, probe the bounds of national, ethnic, and cultural difference in transnational appropriations such as Bat-Manga and Spider-Man India. As we have seen, though, such appropriations are inherently ambivalent, never clearly empowering but always also potentially at the service of ethnocentric nationalisms and the neo-imperialist tendencies of globalized capital. In this regard, comics' transnational relations attest to the inseparability of bound and unbound serialities, as put forward by Partha Chatterjee against Anderson's one-sided championing of the latter.[19] What we see here, in effect, is a sort of transnational multistability – a flickering of the border frames of nations as imagined communities, a multivalent dynamic by which national borders are both questioned and reinforced, alternately and unceasingly, in the exchanges between real and imagined geographies as they take shape in and around the medium of comics.

Crisis on Infinite Earths: Or, the Unsettled Nature and Politics of Transnational Comics

Superheroes and other comic-book figures are not doomed by nature to embody an exploitative sort of neo-imperialism when they go transnational, nor are they inherently innocent of ethnocentrism's taint either. Rather than seeing this ambivalence or indetermination wholly as a question of what people do with comics, though, and thereby reducing these figures to passive 'intermediaries' in communicative interchanges, my strategy has been to position figures such as the Japanese Batman or Spider-Man India as 'mediators' in a robust sense and to link their socio-political ambiguities to the inherent seamfulness and emergent seriality that characterize comics as a medium. As we have seen, these dynamics of multistability ensure that comics' plurimedial proliferations and their transnational work are linked in close embrace. These higher-order reframings are inseparable from the low-level structures of framing and sequentiality, always open to revision, that constitute the medium of graphic narration. The political significance of transnational comics is thus indeterminate not merely because these texts, like all texts, are open to interpretation (including subversive

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[18] See *The Spectre of Comparisons*, Chapter 1.
[19] See Chatterjee, "Anderson's Utopia."

readings), but because they are marked by multistability at every level. Clearly, more detailed analysis of concrete cases is called for, but I hope to have demonstrated, that it would be wrong to disregard the formal properties of comics in any consideration of their transnational work; I have argued that this labor is founded upon, and made possible by, the shifting and reversible seams that mark the frames, sequences, and media of popular culture and that link comics' plurimedial relations and their transnational imaginings through seriality as a locus of ambiguous intersection and border-crossing.

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