Breaking Panels, Breaking Time:
Examples of the Connection Between Panel Construction and Narrative Time

by Mikayla J. Laird | in Articles | Wed, 9 January 2019

In Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics,* he makes the comment, "To kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths". An incredibly evocative piece of language, and very poetic in itself. But what McCloud is referring to is how time works in the comic book medium. The space between panels and how we perceive time working within that space. How the space between panels does not have a fixed time frame. A panel can be separated by something as small as milliseconds, all the way up to thousands of years and beyond. Depending on the story being depicted, panels could even take place at the same time.

The why and how of this is a major source of discussion for academics such as Cohn and McCloud. Even famed media theorist Marshall McLuhan wrote about the space between panels in the 1960s. Most noticeably in 1964s *Understanding Media.* Stating; "The viewer, or reader, is compelled to participate in completing and interpreting the few hints provided by the bounding lines". Our only hint to the time between the spaces, are the panels themselves. Even then, unless a specific caption or clock is show, it's still all best guess. Hints and clues to give the allusion of moving time.

Through the years, artists and writers have developed methods of playing with this. Playing with the very structure and make-up of the panel border in order to distort space time within their own story. Demonstrating different ways in which time itself can be broken in a visual medium.

Dissolving the boundary – Zero Hour: Crisis in Time:

As the title implies, *Zero Hour: Crisis in time*, plays around with the idea of time. How creative. The story works as a sort of sequel to 1985/86s *Crisis on Infinite Earths.* The issues countdown to #0 rather than going up. Parallax's plan involves compressing and re-writing time in order to start a new big bang. This in itself did effect DCs overall sense of time and history. If only in minor aspects. As the story nears its final act, in the last two issues. Parallax succeeds in his plans, and time momentarily blips out of existence. Leaving nothing but a white page. As the final issue begins, that same white page stares back at us. But as the next few pages proceed, we see panels slowly begin to fade back into existence.

As time begins to start again in the DC universe, panels begin to appear once more. Here we have a very direct and powerful connection between the disappearance of time, and their connection with the missing panels. It's the panel borders that we first see. Not characters, not scenes, the borders themselves signifying time restarting. Noticeably, they don't fade back in as you would expect. They slowly come back into existence in patches of green light. No sense of order to how this happens, or why. But time is erratic as it begins to reorder itself. Much as the panels do. *Zero Hour: Crisis in Time* lives up to its name by giving us time itself, and consequentially the panels, having their own crisis as they reform.

Out running the boundary – The Flash by Joshua Williamson:

With a character like the Flash, time works a little differently. The speed in which he moves drastically alters his perception of time. Meaning that smaller details of the world, things we might not see, are far more prominent to him. Assuming he notices them at all. But this is rarely reflected in how we view the comic. Speed lines of blurring effects might be added, but the Flash's perspective is rarely perceived in panel lay outs. Unless used to emphasis those little details of the world, such as something falling. In the Rebirth era of DC Comics, The Flash is written by Joshua Williamson with art by Carmine Di Giandomenico. As a team, the pair implement an interesting effect into their panelling. It's as though the panels themselves are struggling to keep up in the scenes in which Flash, or any other speedster, are running. This correlation between how the Flash perceives time, is directly correlated by how we perceive the panelling. This gives us some form of understanding as to how time works for him. It's interesting to see that this effect is somewhat carried over into the Flash/Batman, *The Button* storyline. Though less prominently. But the panels are stretched, and skewed as though time itself is racing to catch up to him. Bursting with the same electrical energy the Flash himself gives off.

Obliterating the boundary – Unbelievable Gwenpool:

The character of Gwenpool is one made to break the fourth wall. A girl from the real world, fully aware of being in a comic book. Able to make jokes about it, and know everything about the characters. With the obvious drawback of being a normal human in that world. Her knowledge can only get her so far. However, this knowledge that there are panels in place, that the world she is in is being presented to someone as a comic, does allow her to play around with the format. Midway through her original series, Gwen starts to break down these boarders. Literally. Physically pulling the panels apart and erasing them like they were just lines on a page. The problem is, is that she is seeing this in a 3 dimensional, perhaps even 4 dimensional, space. As she does this, time itself begins to appear before her. She looks in one direct, she sees her immediate future. The panel's yet to come. While if she looks to the other, she can see her immediate past. She is even able to hand her future self a pencil through the panel borders. Through this, we are able to see how border dissolves would look to the characters themselves. Going back to the *Zero Hour: Crisis in Time* example, we see the borders disappear and then reappear as time is rebooted. But we never see how the characters themselves perceive that. Does the world itself dissolve the same as the panel borders do? Does it come back in patchy, the same way the borders do? With *Gwenpool,* as the perspective shifts, we see a three dimensional breaking of the panels. Or at least what would be three dimensional to them. An erased panel border to us, shows as a fracture in time and space to Gwen. A crack in the space in front of her, where she is able to see the future 'panels' repeated before her eyes.

The connection between panel borders and time is deeply complicated. Especially when taken into the digital space. But seeing how creators play with this connection in story, strictly in the printed media, is a fascinating way to explore this paradigm. The connection between time and panel structure has been analysed by many theorists, including not only Scott McCloud, but also Neil Cohn and Hannah Moidrag. The field warrants further research, as there is still a plethora of information on form and function as well as semiotics to explore. This goes double for comics expanding to a digital and soon to be virtual landscape. But through just a handful of examples, we can see how this correlation between time and panels can be used to tremendous effect.

Tagged comics studies, Gwenpool, The Flash, visual literacy. Bookmark the permalink.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Holding a BA and MA in Digital Media, Mikayla J. Laird acts as a Visiting Lecturer at the University of Hertfordshire. She is currently working on and planning a PhD in semiotics and digital comics. She uses both Comic Books and Film to help students understand the importance of media history when looking towards the future. She frequently blogs about film, comics, and random thoughts brought about through research.

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3 Comments

Matthew Kirshenblatt says:
10 January 2019 at 8:26pm

This is an excellent article.

The way you describe the panel work and narrative structure, dissolution, and — literal — reconstruction, reminds me of the work done in Alan Moore, J.H. Williams III, and Mick Gray's Promethea: especially as the mythological heroine descends and ascends through different aspects of the Kabbalah, or Tree of Life.

What is also fascinating is, after reading your analysis of Gwenpool with regards to Space-Time, Spiderman: Into the Spiderverse also seems to play with the concept of reality as a comics lenses. Whereas Deadpool, She-Hulk, and — well — Gwenpool seem to see all of the narrative and their panel structures as reality, the Spidermen seem to perceive their reality through something close to a comics panel aesthetic: probably a mirror of the way a spider's multifaceted gaze would take in existence itself. Perhaps, as McCloud says, they make different connections between events that we might see as invisible because of our consciousnesses and perceptions, while they might see and come to different fundamental conclusions altogether?

But with meta-narrative and metafictional considerations aside, which are always fun, I'm just curious to look at Grant Morrison's Animal Man, or again Promethea with these considerations of space-time and its perceptions with regards to panel play. Also, have you read Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas? He is a Haida visual artist and scholar that examines the "comics gutter" with relation to the white space between panels with its colonial connotations. I haven't read his work extensively, but after a preliminary glance it really had a strong resonance with some of the works I've examined.

Once again, an excellent work, and welcome to the site. :)

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Mikayla J. Laird says:
11 January 2019 at 2:06pm

Hi! Thank you, though I still think I could do a lot better. We all have room to grow, am I right?

I haven't read anything by Yahgulanaas yet, but he's on my list of people to look at. Always looking for good research material. I really do need to read Promethea, from what you've said, it would be fascinating to look at from a time and panel perspective. The ever growing reading stack will never get smaller it seems.

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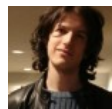
Matthew Kirshenblatt says:
11 January 2019 at 4:47pm

I agree with you in that we all have room to grow for sure. But you have something good as a foundation, and you have an idea as to what it is, and possibly where you can even go from there.

Promethea is something of a challenging read, though for me its challenge was more out of keeping my interest more than anything else. Alan Moore has even stated that out of all his works, Promethea is the more … didactic one. Basically, he made an occultic text in the form of the comics medium, or maybe if you'd like a sequential illuminated mystic manuscript. It is fascinating to see how he built up to that point in his other works. Personally, again, I like it when he focuses on the actual *story* in Promethea, though there is an academic interest in the art and panel layout and how it relates to the contents of what he is writing as well.

And my stack is … not shrinking any time soon. I just need to find that sweet spot between reading, writing, watching … and a personal life with sleep again.

I look forward to more of your work. Thank you for posting it, and replying as well, Mikayla.
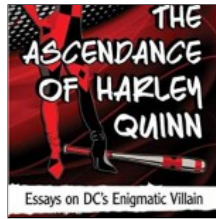
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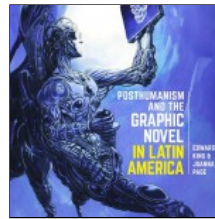24 Feb 2019

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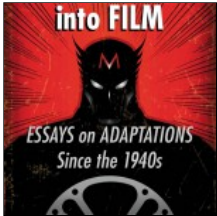4 Sep 2018

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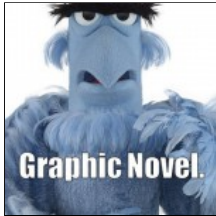9 Jan 2018

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