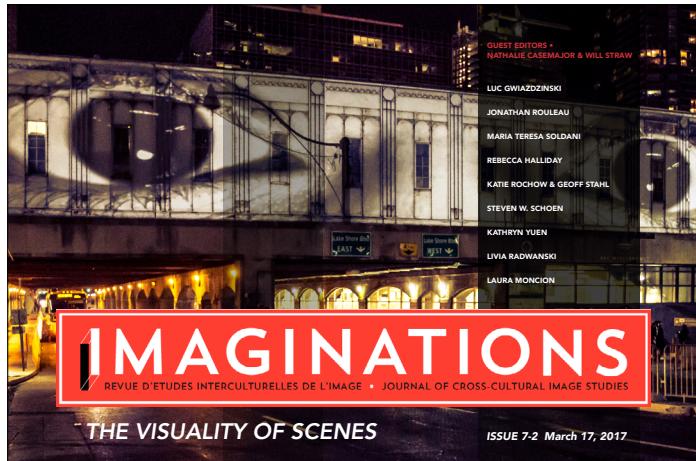


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TIME FRAMES: GRAPHIC NARRATIVE AND HISTORIOGRAPHY IN RICHARD MCGUIRE'S *HERE*

LAURA MONCION



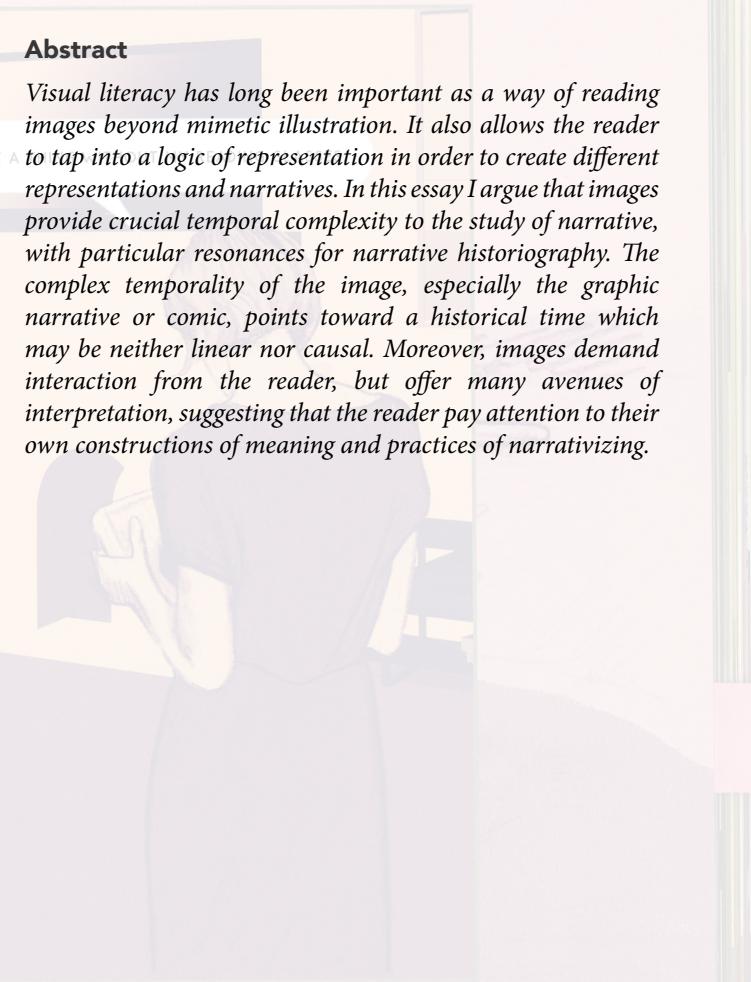
Résumé

La littéracie visuelle a longtemps été importante comme façon de lire les images hors de simple illustration mimétique. Elle permet aussi le lecteur d'entrer dans une logique de représentation pour créer des différentes représentations et des différentes narrations. Dans cet essai, je soutiens que les images fournissent une cruciale complexité temporelle pour l'étude des narrations, avec valence particulière pour l'historiographie narrative. La temporalité complexe de l'image, surtout la narration graphique ou bande dessinée, indique une temporalité historique qui sera peut-être ni linéaire, ni causative. Par ailleurs, les images exigent l'interaction du lecteur, et au même temps ils offrent plusieurs avenues d'interprétation, ce qui attire l'attention du lecteur à ses propres habitudes de lecture et à ses propres narrations construits.

2014

Abstract

Visual literacy has long been important as a way of reading images beyond mimetic illustration. It also allows the reader to tap into a logic of representation in order to create different representations and narratives. In this essay I argue that images provide crucial temporal complexity to the study of narrative, with particular resonances for narrative historiography. The complex temporality of the image, especially the graphic narrative or comic, points toward a historical time which may be neither linear nor causal. Moreover, images demand interaction from the reader, but offer many avenues of interpretation, suggesting that the reader pay attention to their own constructions of meaning and practices of narrativizing.



Images do not tell stories as freely as their immediate emotional intensity would suggest. Rather, images invite us to transform ourselves from passersby into active readers engaging with the image and with our own perception of it. In order to engage with these stories, a certain kind of literacy is required. Anne Carson's *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986) builds a poetic-historical case for the claim that literacy engenders a shift from oral/aural to visual epistemology and thus a shift in human self-consciousness. Literacy in *Eros* refers specifically to the verbal—the literacy of reading and writing. Carson argues that the advent of ancient Greek literacy led to the idea of eros: the separation of sounds into visible parts created a fertile ground for the desire to unite what is divided. Put differently, reading and, specifically, writing sharpen the realization that people and words are separate: "words have edges. So do you" (Carson 35). On the other hand, the visual now tends to connote image or

icon, something perceived by the eye other than the words on a page, such that the term *visual literacy* tends to indicate a type of perception or analysis that is distinct from reading and writing alphabetically. Visual literacy is generally defined as something like Ralph Wileman's "ability to 'read,' interpret, and understand information presented in pictorial or graphic images" (Duchak 43). For the purposes of this paper, I stay close to Wileman's definition, adding that the key to visual literacy lies in the ability for an observer to switch into a system of visual language such that they can then create an image. Visual literacy, then, is in close proximity to semiotics, when defined as the ability to tap into what Norman Bryson calls "the richly textured semiotic discourse of the image" (Bryson et al. xviii). Visual literacy provides the tools to delve further into a logic of representation, rather than take an image as a mere mimetic illustration.

The visual literacy images demand can and often does complicate conceptions of linear historicist time and thus opens up alternate ways of viewing history: the adjustment of form necessarily adjusts content. While the discipline of art history concerns itself primarily with images, conventional history has been slow to accept nonverbal texts as historical sources, perhaps because the perceived subjectivity of an analysis of an art object might still rattle some historians who are more wedded to a "scientific" (objectivity-seeking) aspect of history (White "Burden of History" 113). Even within art history, a semiotic approach still seems to sit uneasily with materialist, historicist interpretations—though it seems perfectly appropriate for works of art to admit to and in fact require both perspectives. A work of art is both a product of a particular historical moment and something that, in the words of Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood:

points away from that moment, backwards to a remote ancestral origin, perhaps, or to a prior artifact, or to an origin outside of time, in divinity. At the same time it points forward to all its future recipients... [T]he work of art is a message whose sender and destination are constantly shifting. (9)

The kinds of visual storytelling I examine in this paper are primarily comic-style graphic narratives (with nods to Poussin and Caravaggio along the way). The narratives that paintings, drawings, art books, and comics suggest to viewers offer possibilities for open-ended, multidirectional historiographies that may be obscured or precluded by written language. This is not to say that one is better than the other, that written language is always oppressive and images are always liberatory, or that linear historiography is bad and multidirectional temporalities are good.¹ Each representational form structures the backbone for various narrativizations of history. For historians, images and nonlinear historiographies offer critical alternatives to the dominant Western paradigm of linear written history and ways to enrich our ideas of what history is or might become.

To this end I argue that images provide crucial temporal complexity to the study of narrative, with particular resonances for narrative historiography. The complex temporality of the image, particularly in the graphic narrative, points toward a historical time that may be neither linear nor causal. Moreover, images demand interaction from the reader but offer many avenues of interpretation, suggesting that the reader pay attention to their own constructions of meaning and practices of narrativizing.

Temporal complexity and reader engagement are entwined in Richard McGuire's graphic narrative *Here*, originally published as a strip in *RAW Magazine* (1989) and recently expanded into a book (2014).²

Here constitutes an intervention into some of the conventions of graphic narrative and stands as the apotheosis of others. Each page is itself a dated panel representing a moment in time with further differently dated panels overlapping it. Sequencing is unconventional. There is little to no recognizable plot. It toys with the spatial grammar expected of a graphic novel and relies on the resonances of braiding to suggest relationships between images, characters, and themes beyond a linear sequence of events. *Here* is a graphic narrative that does not so much tell a story as it invites the reader to confront their own processes of reading. It forces the viewer to consider what might be left out and to examine their own narrativizing impulses in a bid to synthesize and comprehend a multivalent text. In this way, *Here* is an important book not only for graphic narrative studies, but also for the study of history. Not only does it complicate linear time, it also demonstrates the historian's impulse to narrativize, to clean up and organize a messy and sometimes overdetermined reality.

Before turning our attention to *Here*, it is important to establish the theoretical playing field. This paper begins with an overview of scholarly approaches to the study of graphic narrative in general, followed by approaches to panels and sequences—elements that are particularly important in signalling narrative and temporality in graphic story-worlds. Subsequently I undertake a short analysis of *Here* itself and argue its importance to the study of narrative historiography. In closing, I suggest that *Here* and other graphic narratives offer potentially fruitful ways of figuring

historical narratives as multivalent and of highlighting the reader's role in making historical meaning.

From Comics to Caravaggio: Graphic Form, Narrative, and Temporality

Graphic narratives offer a multifaceted perspective on time, through both their mixing verbal and visual media as well as their use of panels and spacing of images across pages.³ The common use of both images and text in graphic narratives provides two narrative planes that can contrast different ways of thinking about and experiencing time, as linear and nonlinear. Furthermore, the placement of panels on the page and throughout the narrative can also contribute to readers' perceptions of temporal simultaneity, connections across time, or the feeling of time as a back-and-forth or circular movement rather than a headlong linear progression.

First of all: how to approach graphic narrative? Mainstream narratology supplies several toolkits and approaches for analyzing narratives, including those that mix words and images. Common approaches include contextual and cognitive narratology—concentrating on relating narratives to specific cultural and historical contexts of production and the intellectual and emotional processing of narrative in the reader, respectively—although *the living handbook of narratology* lists many more, from “diachronic” to “unnatural” (see Hühn). Most of these approaches assume a written, prosaic narrative as the object of

analysis—the novel, for example, is the quintessential subject of narratology. However, narratives come in all shapes and sizes, including in graphic form. In their introduction to the recent collection, *Narratologia: From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative* (2013), editors Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon take their lead from Marie-Laure Ryan to introduce the idea of graphic narrative as requiring a *transmedial* narratology sensitive to the composition of graphic narratives as narratives that might not be primarily constructed through words, although words may be present and may be important. Indeed, the term transmedial suggests a narrative that is constructed of at least two different media and does not essentially reside wholly in either of them but rather in the relationship between them. A transmedial narratology mediates between the different media of text and image in order to open up a more multifaceted and theoretically sound view of the construction of graphic narratives. Stein and Thon situate transmedial narratology about halfway between narratology and comics studies, as hybrid scholarship befitting a deeply hybrid object of study: the “co-mix” of graphic narrative.

To be more specific, Stein and Thon posit transmedial narratology as an umbrella approach under which the various papers in their edited collection pursue more precise analyses (Stein & Thon 2). Silke Horstkotte’s chapter expands on Stein and Thon’s introduction by examining the multiple ways in which graphic narratives can create and draw the reader into story-worlds; she makes the more tendentious claim that

graphic narratives are particularly multiple, more so than other narrative media such as film or writing (Horstkotte 27). Horstkotte’s attention to panels and internal textual elements of the graphic narrative place her closer to traditional structural narratology, tracking textual features such as narration, plot, and character, while also being sensitive to their limits and subversions. Karin Kukkonen leans more in the direction of cognitive narratology with her embodied approach to graphic narrative. Kukkonen’s approach focuses more on the reader than text, on the cognitive process of constructing a narrative. She posits that we read graphic narrative not just with our eyes, but with our entire bodies—our perceptions of movement in graphic narrative are influenced by our perceptions of movement in the three-dimensional world, and time and space in graphic narrative emerge through “immediate physical resonances of drawn bodies” (Kukkonen 49). Both Horstkotte and Kukkonen refer to the work of Thierry Groensteen, one of the pioneers of comics studies, who locates his own work “on the fringes” of semiotics because of his focus on narrative and signifiers strung together over isolated signs (Groensteen, *System* 2). Groensteen comes closest to achieving—and intending to achieve—a comprehensive theory of graphic narrative or comics studies, attempting to “approach from on high, from the level of grand articulations,” and come up with the titular *System of Comics* (5). Of these various approaches to taking apart graphic narratives, concepts developed as part of Groensteen’s project, marginal to semiotics but central to comics studies, will be most useful in analyzing Here.

While Groensteen retains the systematizing impulse of structuralist forms of narratology, he also critiques previous systems of narratology that privileged the novel and the written word. He opposes the logocentrism of conventional narratology and, with Paul Ricoeur, identifies not only one overarching narrative genre but also several narrative species, such as novels, photographs, and indeed comics (8). Despite this depriving of written media, Groensteen seems to sidestep the question of how writing and images might convey information differently than just images or writing alone. He simply equivocates, rejecting the idea of comics as a “site of confrontation between verbal and iconic,” on the basis that a series of images can convey narrative just as well as a series of words (9). The trouble is that images and words are read differently, and that difference becomes especially crisp when considering temporality as a factor in reading. While an image in a comic strip or graphic narrative presents itself all at once as a representation of a moment in time—a snapshot, a glance—words extend in space and time. Reading an image requires looking all at once at a discrete space, but reading a sentence such as this one requires movement of the eyes along a string of words, each its own moment strung together in linear temporal sequence.⁴ Although the composition of images leads the eye to certain focal points, it is not as predictable as the linear motion of reading a line of text. Kukkonen points this out and offers a cognitive account through her embodied approach: specifically, that multiple temporalities can be accounted for in a reader’s mind (55). While this cognitive approach certainly adds a dimension to the

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study of reading images, it is not strictly necessary to locate multiple temporalities primarily in the reader's experience; rather, these temporal possibilities already exist in texts and images.

In a graphic narrative multiple temporalities come into play, especially with the organization of images on a page. The subject of panels comes up repeatedly in discussions of time in graphic narrative. The conventional way of reading seems to be that "each panel argues for the existence of a single, discrete, nondivisible instance of time, held within the borders of the panel (a time frame, of sorts)" (Kruger 361). As representations of moments in time, panels are similar to paintings. A brief detour into Western art history will open up a few ways for images to suggest alternative theories of time. Louis Marin describes a painting as a "snapshot of representation... a neutral moment, or rather, a neutralization of time. It is neither life nor death. It is the unthinkable moment of resurrection, the site that cannot be occupied, the no-where of the cogito of my own death" (Marin 168). At first this seems quite similar to Kruger's definition of the panel, quoted above. The panel represents a snapshot in relation to other panels in sequence. The painting—or even an isolated panel—also represents a snapshot, but without a sequence of other images to give it narrative meaning. Instead, the painting reaches out to the viewer or brings the viewer into a relation with it. The neutralization of time signals a time outside of the represented moment of the painting—the time of the viewer's perception of the painting. Marin argues that Caravaggio, rather than offering a

historical painting in the vein of his contemporaries, instead paints singular, sudden moments. Whereas paintings such as Poussin's *Israelites Gathering Manna* (1637-9) use light to tell a narrative, each perspectival plane reading as a historical moment leading up to the 'main' action in the foreground, Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro obliterates all but one or two planes, thus failing to tell a story and destroying (narrative) painting (152). While Poussin posits, puts forward a particular story, Caravaggio both posits and suppresses, asserts and negates potential narratives simultaneously. This double move of positing and suppressing is what Marin calls the "negation of enunciation" (143). For him, it is the condition of all representation: even "historical" paintings such as Poussin's obviously leave something out, "leave something to be desired," and fall short of their initial goal to represent a coherent, closed historical narrative (4).

Marin uses Caravaggio's *Head of Medusa* (1570) to illuminate both his theory of time and his theory of representation. The painting shows Medusa's head just as Perseus beheads her, in the moment that her glimpse of herself in his mirror shield turns her into a statue. It captures an infinitesimal moment of time in a timeless painting, representing a shift in temporality "from the moving, linear time of life and history to the time of representation with its immobility and permanence" (136). Temporalities are in fact multiple: the linear time of history, the static moment of the painting's "represented utterance," and all future times of the painting's reception (136). The Medusa's severed head also points toward the negation of enunciation:

the representation is implicated in the story of Perseus and Medusa, but is nonetheless severed from that story as a stand-alone painting. The painting shows "representation as a cut, a cutting blade severing the story from the subject who tells it while also severing the scene from those who look at it and produce it as a scene" (143). Representation always posits an object, but it suppresses that object by positing it as something static. Through memory, life is killed. Thus, the Medusa Head "presents without presenting a model of the temporality of representation in its most powerful form" (139).

The negation of enunciation that Marin locates in Caravaggio has implications for how we read images, including those in graphic narratives. It implies that an image can never be entirely pinned down, since its meaning is represented and erased simultaneously. Furthermore, it implies the participation of the viewer in the construction of an image's meaning, and in so doing implies at least three moments in time: that of the story, the representation, and the reception. Just as the suddenness of Caravaggio's chiaroscuro thrusts the viewers into the painting and momentarily out of their respective temporalities, graphic narratives pull us into their story-worlds.

In graphic narrative, each panel is a moment but is also strung together into a narrative, much like words in a sentence: time is laid out spatially as a progression from one image to the next. While one can read some graphic narratives in this manner—eyes jumping from one image to the next, eagerly consuming a fast-

moving plot—the panel as a part of a linear narrative progression is only part of the story, which furthermore does not apply to all graphic narratives, as Richard McGuire's *Here* attests. Liam Kruger's notes how Art Spiegelman's influential *Maus*, deeply enmeshed as it is in questions of time, memory, and history, figures time as nonlinear. Present-day panels showing Artie's interactions with his father, Auschwitz survivor Vladek Spiegelman, intersect with panels depicting Vladek's memories of the Holocaust. For example, a series of panels showing Auschwitz prisoners receiving tattoos is intersected by present-day Vladek rolling up the sleeve of his own tattooed arm (Spiegelman 26). The temporal switch between Vladek's memories of 1940s Poland and his current retelling of those events in New York happens several times in *Maus*. The interspersing of Vladek's memories with present-day characters demonstrates not only the present retelling of the past, but also the continuous presence of the past, in the form of memories, tattoos, and trauma (Kruger 362).

Sequences of panels are thus important to the way in which graphic narratives figure time. Aside from the linear, discursive, language-based way of reading panels outlined above, panels can convey simultaneity and complex temporal structures. Horstkotte recommends reading the panel on three levels: on the level of story, as the panel advances plot as part of a sequence; on its own, as the panel is a picture, isolating the image from the story; and as part of a larger structure or a metanarrative “function that refers the panel to the narrative structure in its entirety” (41). For the latter, she gives an example from Charles Burns’

Black Hole to illustrate “repetition with a difference” (42). Relatively early in the book, a character's suicide fantasy culminates in a panel in which her head rests on wavy lines (which could be hair or water) within a wavy frame (indicating her dreaming state), eyes closed; the panel is later repeated with the character's eyes open, indicating her decision not to kill herself (41). The two scenes clearly echo each other and indicate a progression in narrative development—however, more than that, Horstkotte argues that “even though the repetition with a difference thus signals an important change in [the character's] evaluation of herself, her life... the close visual echoes between the two sequences also highlight that this is just one of two possible endings, and therefore not a necessary outcome... suicide remains an option” (42). Panels that refer back to earlier panels can indicate a temporal change or a continued temporal instability.

Horstkotte's call for “a more layered account than a linear understanding of sequentiality is able to provide” owes much to Groensteen's idea of braiding (*tressage*) and indeed she cites Groensteen several times (44). The idea of braiding refers specifically to the way that graphic narrative “puts every panel in a potential, if not actual, relation with every other” (41). Effectively, braiding is a way of thinking about how we make connections between—and narratives from—information that is out of chronological sequence. For Groensteen, graphic narrative offers a particularly rich field for nonlinear narratives. He specifies:

[C]omics is a genre founded on reticence. Not only do the silent and immobile images lack the illusionist power of the filmic image, but their connections, far from producing a continuity that mimics reality, offer the reader a story that is full of holes, which appear as gaps in the meaning. (10)

For comics and graphic narratives, reader participation is crucial. The reticence of the visual form, a result of the cut of representation, along with the expectation of a connected narrative, constructs the viewer as an active participant in making meaning. The immersive experience of reading a graphic narrative comes precisely from “a world that is portrayed as consistent,” but which is in fact importantly constructed by the reader themselves (11). The reader has to negotiate potentially nonlinear temporalities in the graphic narrative, which do not “produce a continuity” but offer “a story that is full of holes,” temporal as well as spatial. The reader's experience of the graphic narrative is very much open to temporal asynchrony: panels such as the repeated wavy panels in *Black Hole* suggest that the reader go back and re-read that fantasy sequence. Braiding is the textual technique that triggers that kind of reading.

Braiding relies on what Groensteen calls the “spatio-topia”: the spatial organization of graphic narrative that in fact precedes the writing of a graphic narrative. It is the spatio-topia one taps into when immersed in a graphic novel, when one starts to think in panels and speech bubbles. The spatio-topia connects images and concepts across the pages of a graphic novel, so that

"comics is not only an art of fragments, of scattering, of distribution; it is also an art of conjunction, of repetition, of linking together" (22). It is, of course, an element of Groensteen's systematizing project, identifying a way of managing and reading space that is specific to comics and relevant to graphic narrative, paintings, and other visual media. More to the point of this paper, the relations between images in the spatio-topia—what Groensteen calls the "arthrology"—are assumed to be chronological wild cards within Groensteen's otherwise fairly neat system. He uses the term "restricted arthrology" to indicate relations that serve linear plot progression, as opposed to "general arthrology" to indicate "a more elaborated level of integration between the narrative flux... and the spatio-topical operation" (22). These terms suggest that the relation between images in a graphic narrative is likely to be elaborate, nonlinear, multifaceted, and anachronic; the graphic narrative holds at least as much if not more potential for exploration of complex temporalities than a staid reinforcement of linear progression of historicist time.

**Watch, Wallet, Keys:
Braiding and History in Richard McGuire's *Here***

Panels, sequences, and braiding are all visual cues that help the reader of a conventional graphic novel keep up with (or perhaps challenge and question) the characters and plot of the story. Richard McGuire's *Here* has no internal plot. Instead, the book's consistency comes from its use and subversion of the visual conventions

of graphic narrative. *Here* is entirely comprised of overlapping panels, with some identifiable sequences but largely held together by the suggestion of braiding. Each panel is labelled with the year in which the panel's action is supposed to be taking place, representing a historical cut placed in a potential relation with all other panels, regardless of temporal difference. The reader must rely on this potential braiding relation in order to read *Here*, which thus nudges the reader to reflect on their own reading and mental organization of the text.

Neither unity of time nor action is the governing logic of *Here*: rather, it is unity of space. In both the 1989 comic and 2014 book, the temporal palimpsest of panels is anchored in space—specifically, in the corner of an American living room. The first page of the book *Here* establishes the specifics of the space. The corner of the room in question aligns with the book's gutter—the two pages are the two walls, each anchored by an architectural feature, a window on the left-hand page and a fireplace on the right. The room never feels like blank space, even if there are no people or furniture in it, and the page is never empty even if the room is not represented. The space has its own presence and personality, its own material existence through time.

Groensteen remarks of the early *Here* that "cet histoire est l'histoire d'un lieu" ("this story is the history of a place") (Groensteen, "Les lieux superposés" 98).⁵ The extreme variation in time presented in *Here* is anchored in space—space is a constant but time changes. It is worth noting that this is a neat inversion of the linear

progression assumed of most comics, in which time assumes a linear plot of beginning-middle-end and the spaces between panels are organized to convey linear movement and change. This inversion contradicts expectations and inhibits the reader from locating the axes of temporal and logical consequence. What comes before does not necessarily cause what comes after; sometimes it is the other way around: one two-page spread shows a dog barking at the doorbell in 1986 while a character in an armchair appears to comment on the event in 1954. The narrative aspects of *Here* are nestled in a landscape of shifting and overlapping time, even more destabilized by the layering of panels on top of one another so that the reader is unsure of where to look or how to read the process of narrativization.

Groensteen's 1991 article on the original comic *Here* is infused with his obvious glee at attempts to crack the code of this opaque graphic narrative. He outlines two possible approaches: one, to try to put the temporalities in order, solve the puzzle, and emerge with a totalized story within a tidy linear temporality; and two, to disregard narrative assumptions, assume that the dearth of narrative is compensated by some other wealth, and look for a method of reading that will uncover that wealth (Groensteen 97). In pursuit of the first approach, Groensteen apparently photocopied each page, cut out each panel, and bricolaged the comic into chronological order, from 500 957 406 073 BCE to 2033, only to find that all of the sequential action that could be construed as a conventional narrative is exceedingly banal—domestic scenes of toppled glasses, vacuous exchanges between characters, and

the like (98). He remarks that “certainement, tout cela ne valait pas la peine d’être conte” (“certainly, none of this was worth being told”) (98). In response to this apparent poverty of narrative, Groensteen shifts to the second approach: rather than look for chronologically correct stories, he finds millions of micro-dialogues in an ecology of braiding (100). He concludes that, rather than lay out a linear narrative scheme for the reader, *Here* requires an active reader to pay attention to small details, to construct and modify hypotheses and generally engage in the interpretation game. The drawn story thus becomes an access point through which the reader not only can explore the story-world but also explore the very act of reading (102).

The book version of *Here* presents temporal multiplicity and engages the reader in the process of reading on a larger scale—with 280 pages instead of six, there is much more room to play. The book deals in memory and is framed by memory: the fifth two-page spread shows the first human figure, a woman in 1957, traversing a living room and saying to herself, “HMM... NOW WHY DID I COME IN HERE AGAIN?” (7-8) A book about time and space begins with a lapse in memory that is at once banal and, because represented, potentially significant. The likelihood of significance is further heightened by the fact that the woman reappears at the end of the book, walking back into the same 1957 room over six panels in six two-page spreads. The penultimate page of the book shows her picking up a golden book and saying, “...NOW I REMEMBER.” (279-280) *Here* is peppered with memory, memorialization, and lapses in memory: characters ask each other questions such



Fig. 1.

as “WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE REMEMBERED FOR?” (39) and make statements such as “YOU’RE GOING TO REMEMBER THIS DAY FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE.” (38) The braiding in *Here* is thematic as well as visual.

Despite the obvious references to memory, *Here* is also seemingly quite ambivalent on the question of human history. As mentioned by Groensteen, there are plenty of banal occurrences in *Here*: broken glasses, a child’s handstand, a cat walking through the room. On closer inspection, however, the book goes deeper into

probing the worth or interest of human endeavour. One two-page spread shows a man in 1960 scraping off two layers of wallpaper, one purple and one yellow-green, while on the opposite page a man in 1949 covers the yellow-green wallpaper with the purple, presumably brand new and fashionable at the time. The full-page panel shows an elderly woman in 1986 standing between the two smaller panels, staring down at a vacuum cleaner and musing, “THE OLDER I GET THE LESS I KNOW.” (55-56)

2III

TIME FRAMES:
GRAPHIC NARRATIVE AND HISTORIOGRAPHY IN RICHARD McGuIRE'S HERE

1955

WEIRDO.

1957

SQUARE.

1950

NERD.

1950

KOOK.

1960

DOOFUS.

1961

SHITHEAD.



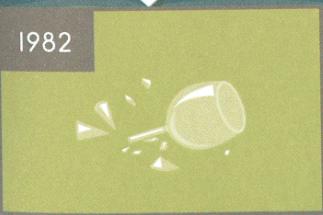
1943



1963



1982



DIPSHIT.

1967

DIRT BAG.

1965

KLUTZ.

1968

DWEEB.

1977

WACKO.

1984

GEEK.

Fig. 2.

Individually, these panels show three banal activities; put together, however, they suggest a certain fundamental futility to human action, or at least a deep impermanence. Wallpaper can be chipped off as easily as it is put up; knowledge can be lost as easily as it is gained. However, there is another way of reading this image: while the left-hand page shows that loss over time is inevitable or likely, emphasizing decay or removal, the right-hand page, with the man affixing the new wallpaper, emphasizes repair, novelty, construction, and perhaps some optimism.

The iteration of unremarkable human activity is definitely a main theme of *Here*. There are several two-page panels that show characters in smaller panels engaged in similar activities across time—mothers holding babies, girls dancing with youthful abandon, parties, hugs, and a sequence in which a woman makes sure her husband has got “watch, wallet, keys” before he leaves for work (61, 77, 78). For the North American middle-class reader, many of the activities depicted will seem comfortingly familiar, even nostalgic. Other instances of common human activity are more uncomfortable: one two-page panel depicts a room in 1949 where the mirror is broken or in the process of breaking, falling from its place above the mantelpiece to the floor and shattering (131-132).

There are 17 small panels dotted across the page, 13 of which show speech bubbles with insults in them; the other four each portray a broken glass or a broken plate. A large panel dated 2111 takes up much of the left-hand page, showing the window broken open by a torrent of water. While the rest of the panels show the room in daylight, this last one is in darkness.

The small size of the insult panels visually represents the smallness of human moments in relation to a larger environmental catastrophe. Even if the repetition of human activities could be comforting or even self-affirming, there is a foreboding nature to the passage of time in *Here*: the mortality that weighs on human minds and lives, for one, but also a destruction of the space to which we, as readers, have become accustomed.

Over the next few pages, McGuire’s framing time scale becomes epic. A sequence of two-page panels dated 500 000 BCE, 50 000 BCE, 110 000 BCE, and 2113 show indistinct, uninhabited spaces (other than a wooly mammoth) (135-136, 137-138, 139-140, 141-142). Smaller panels superposed onto this background maintain the same colour scheme so that they seem to blend into each other or force an association between framing panels and smaller panels. The smaller panels are braided thematically as well as through their shared colour schemes—each represents a person expressing a loss: lost wallet, lost umbrella, lost earring, and people losing eyesight and hearing.

Like the previous two panels, this one opens itself up to various interpretations. Are these human tragedies small and insignificant against the backdrop of geological time? Are they the stubborn and unconscious efforts of humans to make a mark on the hugeness of existence? Are the minutiae of human history being celebrated, mocked, or both? Page spreads such as these, with their multiple readings, are typical of the spatio-temporal ambivalence in *Here*: the smallness of human accidents and accomplishments is sandwiched between a vast, unknowable past and a precarious, environmentally catastrophic future.

In some ways, Groensteen’s unimpressed remark that the action of the early comic strip *Here* was “not worth being told” could apply to the book as well (98). The text does not have much of a plot, moral, or any extraordinary events—in fact, all of the action is stubbornly ordinary. What is extraordinary about *Here* is not the content, but rather the way the images are laid across the pages and the temporal and spatial framing. The content is deeply banal; the form, however, upends our expectations of comics panels arranged in a linear chronology, and thus complicates our ideas of how the text should be read. *Here* presents itself as non-narrative in order to get the reader involved and reflecting on their own process of reading. It is not just about what happens on the page; it is about how that page expects to be read and how that expectation works on the reader.

TIME FRAMES:
GRAPHIC NARRATIVE AND HISTORIOGRAPHY IN RICHARD MCGUIRE'S *HERE*



Fig. 3.

Although McGuire includes a note at the beginning of *Here* describing it as fiction, there is a historical and even biographical element to the work—the room is his parents' sitting room, and the first full two-page panel shows a crib in 1957, McGuire's birth year (1-2). There are sequences that deal with recognizable historical figures, such as a visit of Benjamin Franklin to his son's home, which was apparently near McGuire's (109-126). One sequence shows a doorbell ringing in 1986 that is heard by an Indigenous man in 1609 who tells his companion "I heard something." (89-91) The next few full-page panels reveal that the doorbell ringers are a group of archaeologists studying the history of the site, and they mention that they "have reason to believe" that the area is important for "the study of Native American culture." (91-98) 1986 and 1609 are brought into relation, then distanced again as one is deemed historical—that is, an object of professional historical study lifted out of the relational flux of time and fixed along a linear historicist timeline.

Hard Winter. Duke Gottfried Died: Narrativizing History through Annals and Images

The question of narrative in historical work is fraught with anxieties about historical methods. When dealing with fragments and snippets of a variety of human experiences across time, a reader's first impulse is to find some sort of narrative coherence—or, more likely and more unconsciously, to create it. Hayden White has written extensively on the narrativizing of history and on the various forms that non-narrative history can take. He argues that narrative is a basic, even universal "metacode" that humans use to understand their messy, piecemeal realities (White, "Value of Narrativity" 6). "Narrativizing," which he elsewhere calls "emplotment" (21), is the process by which we construct narratives, big and small, in order to understand and communicate. We do this not only to history but also in our daily lives, as Nancy Partner elaborates:

[E]ven though we can expose the deus ex machinery of truth-claiming narrative, we cannot resist narrative. We can't even get through one day without secretly narrating ("narrativizing," in characteristic Hayden White diction) to ourselves the latest plot developments in the story of "my life," brushing aside insignificant background noise, connecting new elements in the ongoing motifs of our own secret plot. (166)

The process of creating narratives is woven so tightly into our way of understanding the world that we often narrativize unconsciously. As I type these words, I am not thinking so much about the form—subject, verb, object; incorrect use of semi-colon—as the content. Narratives allow us to navigate our lives and communicate our experiences meaningfully, but as we do so, the method of narrativizing slips past our view. In conveying information, the method of doing so becomes so easily naturalized that losing sight of our own narrative machinations becomes a daily occurrence—even banal.

TIME FRAMES:
GRAPHIC NARRATIVE AND HISTORIOGRAPHY IN RICHARD MCGUIRE'S *HERE*

McGuire's spatial reconfiguration of everyday events in *Here* is similar to some forms of medieval history-writing, which White analyses in "The Value of Narrativity." He argues that the medieval genres of annals and chronicles are not imperfect histories, as opposed to coherent narrative histories, but rather that they are "particular products of possible conceptions of historical reality, conceptions that are alternatives to, rather than failed anticipations of, the fully realized historical discourse that the modern history form is supposed to embody" (White 10). Annals and chronicles are not just sources for narrative history; they are forms of history in and of themselves. White pulls the following section from the *Annals of Saint Gall*, a yearly record kept in 8th-10th century Gaul:

- 709. Hard winter. Duke Gottfried died.
- 710. Hard year and deficient in crops.
- 711.
- 712. Flood everywhere.
- 713.
- 714. Pippin, Mayor of the Palace, died.
- 715. 716. 717.
- 718. Charles devastated the Saxon with great destruction.
- 719.
- 720. Charles fought against the Saxons.
- 721. Theudo drove the Saracens out of Aquitaine.
- 722. Great crops.
- 723.
- 724.
- 725. Saracens came for the first time.
- 726.
- 727.
- 728. (White 11)

These lines possess none of the usual attributes of a story: no protagonist, no narrative voice (unlike chronicles), and ostensibly no plot development. Although these are ostensibly true events that happened in history, they do not seem much like historical events either, lacking any importance aside from the fact that they were recorded. Like the action in *Here*, these events seem almost "not worth being told." Unlike *Here*, however, the annals are in chronological order, but I would argue that the endless, mundane plodding of years down the page produces the same perception of time as *Here*—that is, time as something greater than and potentially destructive to human activities. It is not, White notes, kairotic time emplotted with the medieval Christian salvation narrative, but rather "time as it is humanly experienced," without "high points and low points," indifferent to human activities, continuing ad infinitum (White 12).

How does the historian, then, make sense of this document? Attempts to narrativize can only get so far with this dearth of information. The kind of plot that White locates in this annal is suitably flexible in definition: "a structure of relationships by which the events contained in the account are endowed with a meaning by being identified as parts of an integrated whole" (13). For example, there is a sort of narrative in the annal's tracking of the yearly harvest: it progresses through "deficient," un-noted, and "great." There are internal relationships between elements in the annals, just not the conventional story we expect. The annals mirror the distinction between story and plot which

E.M. Forster makes when he asserts that “‘The king died and then the queen died’ is a story. ‘The king died and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot.” (Forster 87) An emplotted narrative, its conventional form, implies causality and coherence, while the annals present listed events in chronological order with little to no explanation. Reading an early medieval annal is actually quite similar to reading *Here*: there is no conventional plot or narrator, the relationships between events represented are not immediately obvious, time functions as a foil to human action, and the human claim to space is central. Both challenge the reader and require participation: *Here* through making the familiar strange and the annal through asking the reader to make the strange familiar. It is interesting to note how similar, too, White’s pared-down plot is to Groensteen’s idea of braiding: looking for a structure of relationships within an integrated whole relies on each element being in a potential relation with every other. There are many possible plots to be constructed in both annal and graphic narrative forms.

The annal, however, is not a generally accepted historiographical form in the current literature, though White’s 1980 article argued for its inclusion in that category. Partner picks out White’s emphasis on the stark recordings of the *Annals of St Gall* and calls it his best joke, a serious joke “about writing history without the multiple artifices of form. As if!” (166). White’s determined and somewhat desperate plea for the annal and chronicle to be recognized as historical forms stems from the conclusion of “The Value of Narrativity,” which argues that every narrative is

inescapably moralizing and therefore always, somehow, some way, oppressive; the value of narrativity is the false coherence that it lends to a historical account, the chimera of a controlled experience, and the illusion of closure (White 27). White, in other words, is deeply suspicious of narrative and its pervasiveness. The joke is, in part, on White: he has to narrativize the *Annals of St Gall* in order to demonstrate that they are suitably historical, and then argue that their use in historiography is to subvert the historical through their non-narrative form. Yet the joke is also on us: if writing history means having to squeeze it into certain rigid forms of narrativity, how many other complex, open-ended, intersectional stories might we be missing? Partner summarizes White’s fear:

The fact that history, as a complex linguistic form, always in the end consummates its irresistible attraction to coherence, connection, and meaning is what imprisons history in the arms of law, political and social authority, the legitimate state of which the subjects of history are citizen subjects. (167)

The narrative form of history affects what kind of content it recognizes as historical. The naturalization of narrative as a way of telling history occludes all the many and varied ways that we experience history and life as ungainly, piecemeal, fragmented.

White suggests adding non-narrative linguistic structures to trouble assumptions of historical narrative; I would argue that non-narrative visual structures can contribute just as much to the conversation.

Here is one such historical document that invites the reader to examine their own role in constructing a narrative. Drawing, painting, photography, and other visual art forms have the potential to add numerous dimensions to historiography as historical methods as well as historical sources. McGuire’s *Here* is a particularly terse, practically theoretical example, and as such opens itself up to multiple widely variant readings, suggesting that narratives are never static but constantly in flux. *Here* may be an idiosyncratic work, but the basic principles of analysis (reader engagement and multidirectional temporalities) apply to more conventional examples. Furthermore, there are increasing numbers of graphic narratives with something to say about history. Canadian history in particular is currently undergoing a visual re-write. Chester Brown’s *Louis Riel: a Comic Strip Biography* (2003), Michael Yahgulanaas’ *Red: A Haida Manga* (2009), Kate Beaton’s *Hark! a Vagrant* book (2011) and webcomic, and the recent webcomic *Conversations in the Dark* (2015) could also prove fruitful for future historiographic study.⁶ It may even be that written prose history is not considered an appropriate medium for some histories. It is no coincidence, then, that three of these—*Louis Riel*, *Red*, and *Conversations in the Dark*—deal specifically with the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada, populations whose histories have often been suppressed or ossified as objects of professional historical or archaeological study. For theoretical and practical reasons both, it seems important to teach historians to consider visual media not only as historical sources but also as ways of rewriting history.

Through different methods, different stories can be told. One important story is that of how narratives themselves are constructed and out of which materials. The open-endedness of images and the multivalence of graphic narrative require visual literacy in order to interpret them. Not only do words have edges, but so do images. Strings of images read in sequence are no less emplotted than words. Images, in their suddenness and reticence, demand the viewer's participation and thus can encourage them to examine their own processes of reading and narrativizing. The temporal multiplicity of graphic narratives, particularly highlighted in *Here*, foregrounds both reader interpretation and a potential intervention that graphic narratives might make into prose historiography and linear historicist time. By examining graphic narratives and promoting visual literacy, historians, scholars, and all readers can become more aware of their embeddedness in visual narratives, as well as their power to produce, change, and create them.

Notes

¹ See Carolyn Dinshaw, "Response Time: Linear, Nonlinear, Queer" 40.

² The original is available online via Wayback Machine (http://wayback.archive.org/web/20110212063003/http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~jbass/courses/402/402_mcguire_here.htm) Accessed 9 October 2015) and also in Ivan Brunetti, *An Anthology of Graphic Fiction, Cartoons, and True Stories* (New Haven: 2006) [you can clean this up and provide complete bibliographic info in the works cited] I'm unsure what you mean by "clean this up." Feel free to reformat these citations if necessary?

³ I follow Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon in using the term "graphic narratives" rather than "comics," in order both to focus on the medium's specifically narrative aspect (as they do) and to keep my category of analysis as broad as possible. Further, they argue that "comics" often come with an expectation of linear narrative sequentiality, which I want to argue that "graphic narratives" importantly subvert. I do not, however, include standalone paintings in the term "graphic narrative"—not because I think they are exempt from narrative concerns, but in order to limit the term "graphic narrative" to static images in sequence.

⁴ Augustine of Hippo also explores this problem with speech and time in Book XI of his *Confessions*—see for example *Confessions*, trans. ed. Henry Chadwick (1991) BkXI xxvi (33) 240.

⁵ My translation.

⁶ See Kate Beaton, "Hark! a Vagrant" (<http://www.harkavagrant.com/>) Accessed 4 December 2015 and Frankie Noone, "Conversations in the Dark," in *GUTS: Canadian Feminist Magazine* (<http://gutsmagazine.ca/featured/conversations-in-the-dark>) Accessed 4 December 2015; also Chester Brown, *Louis Riel: a Comic Strip Biography* (Montréal: 2003) and Michael Yahgulanaas, *Red: a Haida Manga* (Vancouver: 2009).

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