



TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

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Comics into Adversary: A consideration of how comics thinking can inform the representational challenges of post-crisis creative writing

Abstract:

What can formalist comics studies contribute to creative writing practice? This consideration of an experience in unconsciously applying comics thinking to creative writing shows how notions familiar to comics studies can enrich creative writing. The essay articulates the challenges of writing contemporary gay male “post-crisis” fiction, which troubles the foundations of many representational strategies familiar to creative writers, raising questions about the relationship between what can be shown and what can be known. In comics, where spatialised relationships are foregrounded and help guide representational strategies such as focalisation and description, these foundations become decentred and malleable. Yet, rather than using comics thinking to resolve problems in creative writing – the temptation of applied practice – this paper shows how looking at representational strategies across media can allow challenges to constitute a piece of creative writing and therefore stop being problems to be “solved” but rather to be negotiated within a particular work. The discussion contributes to comics studies and creative writing through highlighting echoes and distortions between the two linked disciplines; theory and method from one creative discipline may be formally applied to another, but the benefits of using cognate disciplines to “think through” problems can also be indirect and discursive.

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Keywords:

Comics, creative writing, HIV, post-crisis, applied practice

“Everyone knows that the concept of form has outlived its usefulness,” wrote W. J. T. Mitchell in “The Commitment to Form; or, Still Crazy after All These Years” (2003, p. 321). In the essay, Mitchell set out how views of creative media that centred on “an organic form governed by inner necessities” seemed increasingly outweighed by “the question of scholarly commitment, the dedication of the critic or researcher to a higher ethical or political purpose” (p. 322). The essay, though, argued that purpose and form were linked; commitment (or purpose) too could be viewed as something “not made but found, not constructed voluntarily but discovered as something we were already committed to without being aware of it” (p. 323). Although ways of reading media had moved away from form and towards frameworks that might seem more conducive to commitment or purpose, for Mitchell a commitment to form was

also finally a commitment to emancipatory, progressive political practices united with a scrupulous attention to ethical means. Insofar as formalism insists on paying attention to a way of being in the path rather than to where the path leads, it seems to me central to any notion of right action. (Mitchell, 2003, p. 324)

Although the modernist moment of form may have been behind us, Mitchell pointed out this meant a new notion of form, and thus formalism, was ahead of us, and that “[t]his will be a formalism we will have already been committed to for some time without knowing” (2003, p. 324).

In this paper, my aim is to trace an experience of form that I undertook for some time without knowing and which ended up informing a piece of creative writing. I am a novelist, not a maker of comics, whose scholarly research in narrative theory led me to formalist comics studies. As well as a unique medium with its own formal properties, comics can be understood as a kind of creative writing, since: it is taught and researched within creative writing programs; since significant practitioners (including artist-theorists) work across both fields (in Australia alone, accomplished theorist-maker-writers include Eloise Grills, Leonie Brialey, and Safdar Ahmed); because comics and writing both borrow from and contribute to fields like self-publishing/zines, cinema/film, magazine publishing, and journalism; and because of their shared concerns with time, space, materiality, medium, form, genre, characters, symbols, metaphors, pacing and dialogue, among other things. Considering comics in the context of creative writing opens the possibility that we might “change and refresh our perception of narrative making, reading and analysing” (MacFarlane et al., 2018). It also changes and

refreshes our perception of the functions and possibilities of comics, how a medium that has those unique formal properties can be directly and indirectly applied to other disciplines.

When creative writing knowledges have been “applied” to social enterprise, the researchers found they “borrowed the worldview suggested by the ... project, and allowed the terms of the project” such as its ethos and material practices to “extend to their own creative practices” (Rendle-Short, et al., 2017, p. 3). And in comics studies, where it’s easy to see how scholarship borrowed from other forms can hamper the reading of comics-as-they-are – for example, a reading that equates comics to storyboards in film and therefore insists on their uniformity and sequentiality – it’s nevertheless true that cross-application can yield insights into comics and other mediums. For example, when outlining the appropriateness of comics to graphic medicine, Williams (2012) considered everything from its cultural tendency towards savage humour (p. 23) to its relationship to the brain (p. 22) to essentially mysterious properties and tendencies of form:

There is something about the juxtaposition of drawings and handwritten text in comics that subverts the normal rules about what can be depicted, how it can be described, what one should think of that description and the subtle meanings and counter meanings that can be read into it. (Williams, 2012, p. 25)

I work in the narrow stricture of first-person, past tense narrative prose that is mostly realist, can be published commercially and can be classed as literary fiction. During the time under consideration in this essay, I was writing a novel about gay men and its topics included a set of interests that I felt emerged naturally through plotting, drafting, qualitative research (reading and interviews) and experimentation between late 2013 up to its publication in 2020. The novel told the story of two protagonists, one HIV-negative and one HIV-positive, and although their serodiscord was not what determined their relationship, it influenced and delimited a space of difference in which their relationship was staged. The HIV-negative character was the narrator of the novel, which was published as *The Adversary* (Scott, 2020). As such, the novel’s specific set of formal concerns ended up being about representation, focalisation, description/verbalisation, generic expectation and conventional narrative structure through the lens of contemporary gay male fiction-writing in the post-HIV-crisis era (Kagan, 2018).

This essay considers how a practice in comics studies was “applied” to a creative writing project with that particular set of topical challenges and not others. What this essay *doesn’t* do is: show how I wrote a visual novel, since the novel remained a novel; show how I solved problems posed by my themes and topics, since creative writers work with problems, they don’t solve them – creative writing is itself a problem; make an argument for things comics can do that other mediums can’t, since most creative mediums seem to be able to do most things, regardless of how they engage with materials, time and space. Instead, this essay introduces and outlines the problems I faced working in post-crisis fiction and shows how comics thinking ended up influencing my approach to those problems, which is how this instance of transmedial thinking functioned for me in the wild. It was not always conscious – returning to Mitchell’s contention that commitments to form (and the commitments *of* form) can be enacted

unknowingly over time and nevertheless shape material outcomes. As such, it forms a case study of creative practice that articulates tacit knowledge, though it's also more interested in the operation of the knowledge than the influence of the knowledge (in the outcomes themselves). Rather than an attempt to map comics onto creative writing 1:1, the act of articulating one kind of thinking and doing through another reveals productive contradictions, resonances and differences. Because creative challenges don't emerge and aren't resolved on non-specific terms or a general basis, the value of an essay that traces how (1) a formalist understanding of comics, influenced (2) practice-based creative writing research, that was (3) working out how to tell a story about gay male friendship in the post-crisis era, thereby (4) encountering ethical and political challenges that required purpose and commitment to resolve, is that it shows how disciplines draw from each other and add to each other "in the wild", in the material space of a particular practice.

I began the work in 2013 by writing fictional pieces that were linked by the loose theme of gay male sexuality. Between that year and publication six years later, I sought feedback from peers; engaged with different professional readers, including an agent, structural editor, copyeditor and two sensitivity readers; experimented with methods such as qualitative interviews on subject areas loosely related to the novel in order to inform character, challenge my ideas and perspectives, and influence choices of word and phrase; and essentially wrote according to a set of accidents and methods. There were sometimes "complete" drafts but I mostly worked in and through a living document that expanded and shrank in the range of forty thousand to seventy thousand words, which moved constantly between Scrivener, a Word document and a printout.

Clearly, "comics thinking" and "creative writing thinking" are informed by their medial differences. The fluid quality of narrative text, in which space itself is "a superstructure of a substance whose basic structure is in time" (Zoran, 1984, p. 312), is one of the reasons it differs from comics space, which has a closer relationship to what Zoran identifies as the concerns of physical space, with its "concepts such as volume, extension, and three-dimensionality" (p. 312). This is not to do with realism, or the text-reader agreement that a page of comics or narrative text conveys a storyworld that can be metaphorically figured as separate to, behind, or even "through" a narrative plane, but to do with how the mediums are actually worked in. If you want to change the setting in a piece of fiction, there are "specific textual expressions" (Ronen, 1986, p. 435) or "surface (linguistic) manifestations" (p. 421) that, once changed, then infuse the narrative that follows, as it's taken to proceed along a temporal line.

By contrast, although a comics-maker might draw a background in detail one time and thereafter indicate it through a smaller number of marks (Lefèvre, 2009), there are other elements – often objects or characters – that are figured again and again; one "instance" on a narrative plane is not enough to keep them "active", in part because an image exists in a permanent present. For Genette, a descriptive pause is a temporal state of absolute slowness, "where some section of narrative discourse corresponds to a nonexistent diegetic duration" (1980, pp. 93–94). For Groensteen, comics "are not apt to produce ... an equivalent of the operation known in the literary domain as description" (2007, p. 124); conferral of detail "does

not bear witness to a descriptive intention” (p. 123) but is rather a base condition by which the comic takes place.

Yet these processual differences belie the reality that representational challenges, which are always in some way “about” the work of representation, also come into a medium with specific problematics that need to be worked out conditionally and materially. In the case of my project, I had always had the basic idea of a best friendship between two gay men that I wanted to explore. After experimenting with the shape of this friendship, the point-of-view of the story, the events and how they would impact the characters’ lives, I realised that one of my two characters should be HIV-positive, which had been very far from my mind when I started writing the story. I became interested in HIV for several reasons, many of which could be formulated in terms of the representational challenges they presented.

First, PrEP, or pre-exposure prophylaxis medication for prevention of HIV, was becoming widespread in Australia, due to changes in cost and access (AFAO, n.d.; PrEPWatch, 2020; Winsor, 2016), which was accompanied by a substantive shift in both the language (for example, “safer sex” became “sex with condoms”) and imagery of gay sex, with the blue pills instantly recognised and deployed for their iconicity (Wade, 2015). Second, although after the advent of antiretrovirals in 1996, HIV/AIDS among wealthy, white populations that drive mainstream Western media “gradually became a setting, not an emphasis” (Herkt, 2015, p. 299), TV, film, novels, and documentaries were showing unprecedented interest in revisiting the 1980s and 1990s AIDS crisis, through both mainstream and niche entertainment. Kagan (2017), a theorist who has documented representations of PLHIV in media in what he terms the post-crisis era, has suggested this is both “a way of putting it behind us, really clearly demarcating it as the past” (Kagan, as cited in Scott, 2018) and the claiming of a communal, coalitional queer history and present that differed from the often-read-as-specifically-gay history of the Wilde trials or Stonewall. Third, during and around the 2017 Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey and the rise of the Safe Schools program, discussions of gay and queer issues were more public and prominent, both in media and in private life. For example, with the Safe Schools program itself, an LGBTIQI-focused anti-bullying resource, being covered in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper in over ninety thousand words of invective (Law, as cited in Russell, 2017). As well as being about assimilationist politics versus radical politics and discourses, and about the realities of mental health and suicide, this was about belonging, visibility and power. HIV seemed an appropriate site to discuss these vectors within my characters’ milieu as white, cisgender, able-bodied, urban protagonists in their twenties; the oversized posters in the PrEP access campaign (“YOU CAN F*CK RAW”) had appeared on the suburb where the protagonists lived. They were distributed by an activist network called SeeItClearly2020.

According to Mazzoni, representation in fiction is “an act charged with meaning: it signifies a belief that particular actions, people, or things, whether real or possible, deserve to be isolated from the limitless expanse of equivalent entities” (2017, p. 37). In this sense, the act or choice could be read as existential or even moral, a distinction between “what deserves to be brought back into the present and what does not” (p. 37). Although this comment is toned towards an

impression that art necessarily reconstructs or represents the extra-textual world, it encompasses both how representative marks determine or conjure an artwork's space and time and how this act has something to do with the piece's meaning, purpose or worldview. When Hall writes that popular culture is

one of the sites where the struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is the stake to be won or lost in that struggle ... it is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured (Hall, 2010, p. 79),

it's also the case that the form of the site has an impact on the terms of the struggle.

As Saleses notes, "to engage in craft is always to engage in a hierarchy of symbolization (and not to recognise a hierarchy is to hide it)" (2021, p. 24) and "to wield craft morally is not to pretend that those expectations can be met innocently or artfully without ideology, but to engage with the problems ideology presents and creates" (p. 29). Here, to wield craft morally meant engaging further with the idea of representation than on the level of addressing stereotype. On the one hand, there are questions about whether HIV-positive characters are represented "well" in fiction (which has its own complex dynamics; indeed, Kagan's 2018 book *Positive Images* is partly about the power differentials at play in the representational politics of the positive body). On the other hand, my topic demanded that I engage with questions already embedded in and implied by my form, such as the fact that in the logic of my first-person novel, the positive body was subject to mediation and interpretation – focalisation – by a narrator.

If part of Mitchell's (2003) essay is an invocation to look differently and openly at the relationship between political purpose and form, we might ask how the affordances and limitations of form guide the politics of representation. In comics, the politics of depicting, looking, describing, representing and experiencing are different because the mechanics are different. We understand a different relationship between the artist, the narrator and the focaliser, as well as notions like style. If a figure appears in a comic, it can appear as a flattened version of how it might appear in three-dimensional space, which means its correspondence to a referent differs from the same operation in text (because it's rare that a word will physically resemble the topic it's talking about). At the same time, this basic proximity between sign and referent misdirects the reader or viewer from a basic disjuncture between the what and the how of the sign, which is not a two-dimensional rendering but a product of style, style that in hand-drawn comics have more to do with the movement of an artist's body in time than it does with the subject of the movement/illustration. As Chute points out:

[comics] is largely a hand-drawn form that registers the subjective bodily mark on the page; its marks are an index of the body, and its form lends its pages the intimacy of a diary. Comics works are literally manuscripts: they are written by hand. (Chute, 2011, p. 112)

On its face, the act of drawing/figuration/monstration seems more literally related to an extra-textual space, and more straightforwardly representational (if there is such a thing), than text, a verbal medium that is indirect, roundabout, can critique, equivocate, celebrate at the same time as it shows. But the question of “what is being represented” is always complicated. It always has more than one answer.

Partly through recognising this comics thinking that had been happening for some time, I decided, too, to recognise my first-person narrator as a useful complication, rather than a limitation. The aim was to let go of the idea of a storyworld that “existed” to be narrated or focalised, supposed by the text and recovered by the reader – an operation that’s presumed to stand behind many instances of narrative, but is oddly perhaps most visible in narrative text, which never pretends to be a “window” to a shorthand for three-dimensional space but more often seems to textually/temporally encode it. I didn’t want to suggest that my text offered an access point to a recoverable view or understanding of the HIV-positive character. I aimed to lean into style and bias, and present parts of the character that would be most relevant to the narrator, with the idea that the more “uneven” a representation might be, the more likely a reader might be to see it as contingent, as filtered, as fantasy (and here, too, the overwhelming impression of a hand-drawn comic is intimacy with the artist, not a clear vision of a world outside).

For Brecht, as times change, “new problems flare up” (as cited in Childs, 2000, p. 44) for the linked projects of representation and realism “and demand new techniques. Reality alters; to represent it the means for representation must alter too” (p. 44). From using comics thinking to change my approach to representing character, seeing focalisation less as a means for showing or describing and more as a complicating and structuring force with its own ethical value, it was hard not to see that the issue of representation in a “post-crisis novel” extended beyond character and into the wider net of relations within the narrative text, the fluid and changeable space that so differs from the space of comics-as-they-are-executed. Particularly in the post-crisis era, whereby a virus that was once exceedingly visible – in a “plague of discourse” (Edelman, 1994) or “epidemic of signification” (Treichler, 1987, p. 269) – transforms into what Race has termed the “undetectable crisis” (2001, p. 178), Kagan notes that concepts such as the undetectable viral load pose a challenge to visual culture (and I would include verbal narrative cultures too): “if the ‘dread signs’ of AIDS are no longer detectable, how do you represent the body positive?” (2018, p. 109).

Even without focusing directly on HIV, visibility – decipherability – is a complex prospect for LGBTQI+ lives, which can complicate ideas such as describing or showing. Halperin argues that “one of the demands that our society makes on homosexuality is that it be – if not visible – at least legible, that it always reveals itself to careful, expert scrutiny” (2012, p. 59); it must “produce ... decipherable signs of its difference” (p. 59). As such, decipherability also bears a close relationship with palatability, and in so doing, reveals a power differential that is reflected by the operations of narrative, where there is an assumption that the narratee exists in a state of equilibrium that is piqued or interrupted by the act of narration. The assumption reflects deeply embedded ideas about what needs to be told and what is normal, which is consequential.

In some Australian states, failure to disclose a positive HIV status to a sexual partner can result in criminal charges of negligently, recklessly or deliberately transmitting or even exposing an HIV-negative person to HIV (AFAO, 2020). Further revealing a relationship between visualisation, decipherability, power, and knowing, the anonymously-authored Canadian protest document *HOW TO HAVE SEX IN A POLICE STATE*, quoted by Schulman (2016), notes that “today, in order to prevent intervention from the criminal justice system and public health officials it could technically be in your best interest not to *know* [emphasis added] your HIV status” (p. 129). In the same document, we also see the relationship between knowing and being: “The risk of being labelled a criminal is now biologically marked – we are infected with criminal potential” (p. 129).

Here, if one is considering the ability of comics thinking to illuminate formal problems presented by post-crisis creative writing, one might first note that it’s interesting when a visual medium seems, in light of the previous points, to be less overdetermined (or overdeterminable?) than post-crisis prose. Then, one might remember that the gutter in comics – either a strip of solid or page-coloured space, or simply the relationship between markings – is so overdetermined that Groensteen (2007) has accused comics scholars of possessing and advancing a kind of fetish (p. 112). Nevertheless, comics is formally dependent on an open system of signs that includes variously blank space and nothing, intended to guide not just order and sequence – to separate “event states” (Cohn, 2007) – but to directly influence meaning, including thematic resonances and hierarchies. Comics readers are asked to combine and recombine ideas and images at various stages of a reading, that is, in some ways, a gutter cancels out a previous panel, while in other senses, it introduces a new set of terms that the reader can hold together in a field of vision and reconsider in some order. An underlying worldview of the medium, then, is not only that gaps, spaces and silences can be active and meaningful – a gutter is sometimes “a positive presence: a deliberate artistic effect and an interstice of the page, empty or full or overflowing excessive” (Eklund, 2009, p. 39), for instance with a five millimetre gutter representing ten seconds elided (Genette, 1980) in storyworld time – but that relationships between spatial constituents are themselves meaningful. In cases where gutters are simply read as the relationship between panels, a relationship that itself has no graphic indication but which can open up any number of combinatorial possibilities between themes, colours, characters, tones, discrete instances of space or time, the meaning is contextual and depends on a reading that includes both the citation of generic convention (panels, gutters) and a comic’s particular content. While the elements that are being newly considered are present on the page, the meaning is drawn from a play of relations that technically takes place nowhere, at least as representation and figuration are concerned.

Given the overdetermination of the visual in post-crisis media, and in LGBTQI+ lives and storytelling more generally, it was appealing to consider “nothing” not only as an element that could be strategic or meaningful within the broadest idea of a narrative, including its context and its reading – of course it can – but as something that functioned on the same ontological level as anything else on the narrative plane, in the same way as citing (as if calling) a character’s name brought the character into being in a length of text. I wondered if silence

could work in the same way in my novel as *text* works in comics, where, for Cohn, word balloons “distribute animacy to anything they attach to” (2007, p. 48), causing, for Groensteen, each speaker to live “at the moment of his balloon” (2007, p. 77).

Here, in terms of respect for silence, I think of the “pregnant moment” that comics borrow from visual art histories, while also reserving the power to deploy in medially specific ways (that is, if a comic has a single panel that is nevertheless loaded with time, the reader’s freedom to read the work as comics without literally seeing the next panel has a reading that is precisely meaningful in a form that conventionally articulates its narrative through panels that are demonstrated or shown). I decided that my novel wouldn’t include either coming-out narratives or narratives of acquiring HIV, an absence that never felt “right” to me or stopped calling attention to itself. Within post-crisis narratives, notions of telling, knowing, and being are closely interlinked; within narrative more generally, notions of becoming are linked to understandings of character. As expressed through first-person, mostly realist narrative text, these absences were referred away from HIV and into the primary friendship. How, in the absence of being another person, can the relationship between a pair of consciousnesses possibly be known? In comics, an avowedly visual form, relationships are constantly negotiated into a knowable state through aspects such as proximity and thematic or visual resonance.

A spatial turn in studies of narrative, which is driven by novelist-theorists who include Salesses (2021) and Jane Alison (author of *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative*, 2019), can be complemented and extended through consideration of the functions of comics, where the temporal sequence always takes its place in a web of relations that is already spatialised; it loses its foregrounding power, as do notions of cause, effect and consequence, and becomes one of many relations, including those of proximity, allusion, juxtaposition, scale, enclosure, and others, that takes place in the material and conceptual structures of the comics page. Here I think again of Cohn’s term “event state” (2007), a variant term for the area conventionally called the panel which defines it by its property of grouping constituents in time, not necessarily as a static space that can only be understood when put into relations with other panels which are themselves static; a panel or “event state” already contains many times, which themselves are put into dialogue with spatialised relations *within* the event state. According to Kagan, HIV after antiretrovirals “wasn’t an exciting story anymore for popular culture” (as cited in Scott, 2018), which is one reason, in Kagan’s view, that the then-current moment in post-crisis storytelling was focused on historical crisis, where the narratives “are much more dramatic and fascinating and the stakes are life and death” (2018). This has consequences for the way that HIV is understood in the present; the historicisation is tactical, as though AIDS/HIV is something that took place solely in the past. Salesses (2021) points to the deep relationship between event and feeling when he writes that “what leads to success or ruin [in a narrative], and the [character or nature of the] success or ruin itself, often does a lot to establish tone” (p. 51). In HIV/AIDS narratives, these mechanics are often enacted through notions of responsibility and infection that position the positive body as subordinate in value to the negative body. To focus on transmission, including through criminalisation, is to assume

“that society itself is negative, and that the threat to society is positive” (Schulman, 2016, p. 134).

In my work, I aimed to leave relations open. Using the instrument of my narrator/stylised focaliser, I allowed events and their meanings to be speculative, sometimes contradictory, and sometimes not to quite line up or square with each other. The story still had a shape, but I tried to make that shape slow down when it approached an event that might create an appreciable consequence, and swerve around that consequence when it approached an idea that might lead to a character’s choice or judgement. Of course, it is still a novel, and events still take place. But rather than seeing narrative, as Barthes (1977) does, as the confusion of consecution and consequence (p. 94), what happens to both the content and the context of a narrative when it’s viewed as a relational space that contains – is not defined by – causality and the sequence? Attempts to define comics in terms of narrative – here we can cite first Eisner (1985) and then McCloud’s (1993) proto-definitions of comics as “sequential art” and later its famous and more elaborated version – only reveal the partial nature of our understandings of narrative as they unfold in other media, including narrative text, where the sequence is not like Santoro’s (2011) “medial limitation” but instead an optional conceptual structure.

To what extent does the preceding discussion come through in the novel itself? While we should be deeply mistrustful of writers who claim to know with any certainty how their books are read, I am pretty sure that very little of this would come through in most readings, which is, in a way, the reason this paper is positioned as an essay (a consideration, a discussion) rather than a case study. It is not a model you can visit and draw knowledge out of in order to inform a project, whether that be in comics or prose fiction or a different piece of work in post-crisis media. One idea I hope is demonstrated in the above, though, is that what’s “in” and “out” in fiction – what’s represented on the narrative plane – is most meaningfully considered on the same level of significance as other styles of being and relationality, which is a contention that comics reading makes manifest but which is certainly embedded in narrative prose. In discussions of HIV and its many meanings, I want to acknowledge the risk in flattening an infectious disease and a lived reality into metaphor, which is not itself a flat category of being, but can still flatten others. I hope I have shown, though, that in thinking through the resonances and differences between the treatment of constituents in verbal and visual narrative media, concepts such as HIV remain complicated and open, and usefully complicate their contexts – their forms.

I have also hoped to show that comics and creative writing can be positioned in multiple ways – as a representational art, as a way of knowing or investigating, and as a dialectic between form and content that each time resolves uniquely on its own terms as well as in conversation with its context and history. According to the essay-novel-short-story-writer-poet-critic Josephine Rowe,

awareness of interdependency often figures in integrative, interdisciplinary frameworks. Stories are told – and carried, sustained, exchanged – through more ways than simply the written, the spoken, or even the sung word; more ways than the human-

made mark or image. Appreciating this, when working within the confines of text, of language, certain formal boundaries come to seem counterproductive, inhibitive, even disingenuous. (Rowe, 2020, pp. 41–42)

Comics and novels are both consistent dispossessors of formal boundaries, because in working to represent an idea or object, the artist is forced to ask an initial question of the tools of representation, the object at hand, and their own ability to know it, or anything about it. They create a new boundary as they work. Taking comics and writing together puts up new boundaries that shape and challenge our ideas about the world, even as we explore them without wholly knowing it; and even as they're inevitably pulled down.

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