

THE HEURISTICS IN READING ONE PAGE OF CHRIS WARE'S *ACME NOVELTY LIBRARY*

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Abstract: In this text, I approached one page of Chris Ware's *Acme Novelty Library*. I kept only one into focus because this single page is already intense in theoretical intertext and demanding of reading skills. Theoretical approaches by Gestalt theory, comics reading, and by Wolfgang Iser on the act of reading will be present, as well as on effect of texts. Another theoretical consideration involves the ambiguous classification under *metapatterns*, as conceived by the cyberneticist Gregory Bateson and catalogued by Tyler Volk in an eponymous book. Complementarily, since the aesthetic object is in a comic strip format, some semiotic and intersemiotic considerations must be attended.

Keywords: Comics. Reading. Heuristics.

PANELS AND ARROWS, STICKS AND STONES

■ Chris Ware has become a great name in comics when it is to be regarded as a mature art form today. The recent works about his art and themes tell about this aspect (see RAEBURN, 2004; BALL; KUHLMANN, 2014). Many reasons can be presented as to why it is so. In this text, I am going to try and find reasons as to how some aesthetic features of his work play with the readers' expectations, in order to frustrate them and thus engage emotional responses. To address this feature, I will analyze but one single page¹. In Ware's work, it is not a special page; on the contrary, the narrative and gestalt devices used are present in most, if not all, pages of Ware's work. In this regard, we can take it as a small sample of a highly crafted art, dealing with emotional issues

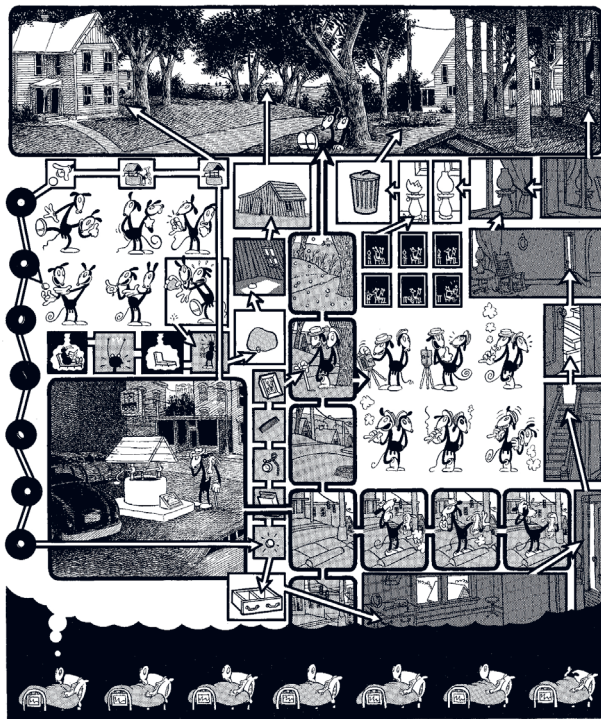
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¹ A distinction regarding the use of pronouns: whenever the author uses the word *I*, the focus will be on the author's considerations and scopes, and also on strategies used and applied. Using *us*, or *we*, on the other hand, implies the reader's presence and acquiescence, as an invitation to follow the reading guidelines presented.

that resonate intensely in reading. Also, his art easily serves as topic to discuss many theoretical standpoints that work towards enriching our reading experience. I will attempt to have a dialogue that involves Wolfgang Iser's reception aesthetics, Gregory Bateson and Tyler Volk's *metapatterns*, and some basic tenants of Gestalt theory (though not Gestalt psychology).

The page to which I refer is the page 6 of *Acme Novelty Library #2*, which is dedicated to Quimby the Mouse, a character created by Chris Ware, initially for *The Daily Texan* student newspaper. From a first glance, one can see many arrows and repetitions, and so may think in advance that this reading will be somewhat repetitive or patronizing. In comics, arrows are conventionally used to guide the reader in order to avoid taking his/her eye to unintended directions. But a second thinking about it leads us to doubt: if arrows are needed to guide our eye, and thus our reading, how hard is it to read that so many arrows are needed? Also, panel distribution is far from regular, the images do not always follow from each other if read from left to right, as is usual in western comics, or the contrary, from right to left. What is the meaning of this page?

Figure 1 – Page 6 of *Acme Novelty Library # 2*. Quimbies the Mouse



In a short but concentrated article that deals exactly with arrows and panel shapes and forms in comics, Joseph Witek (2009, p. 152) says that directional arrows “seem at first glance to highlight a problem or an artistic misstep in the overall construction of the page”, working as “emergency signs which lead readers onto a detour off the high road of the standard reading path”. According to him, “the technique of varying the size of the comics panel to fit the action

contained within it is one of the fundamental gestures of the comics medium”, and arrows are used as a directing device that counterbalances panel configuration on the page, working on the imbalance provoked by panel *Gestalten* that direct the reader’s attention (WITEK, 2009, p. 152). The main point, or the underlying factor, is that “panels on the page always create narrative meaning both as sequences and as spatial arrangements” (WITEK, 2009, p. 153). Since this meaning is not stable by itself, and in fact can present features that confound any reading, he presents ways about how panels can be distributed on a page (in the case of comic books, which take longer than three panels to deliver narratives, instead of comic strips, which are shorter in form), to then talk about the role of arrows between them. He presents, loosely, five types of panel distribution. I will use his terms here:

1. *absolutely regular grid structure*, that is, panels of identical shape and size are arranged in even tiers across the page;
2. *vary the size of the panels slightly*: “Like slight variations in poetic meter and rhyme, even this relatively small change in the regularity of the grid mitigates the visual sing-song effect of identically shaped and sized panels”;
3. *“high baroque” style*: a variety of “technical gestures, including wavy or jagged lines for panel borders, circular, triangular, or other unusually shaped panels, blackout panels, extreme close-ups” etc.;
4. *“gestalt” layout*, an extreme variation of baroque style, in which panel distribution takes on meaningful shapes for the narrative; Witek presents the example of a sequence where action takes place on a plane, and whose panels are drawn to form an airplane fuselage;
5. *a configuration that combines simple variations of panel size with some of the graphic flourishes of the baroque*, which is self-explanatory (WITEK, 2009, p. 153-154).

According to him, types 3, 4 and 5 tend to present a higher number of arrows, because of the narrative puzzle that is often posed between panels. Witek (2009, p. 155) mentions Chris Ware briefly, at the end of the article, saying that arrows can be used, “in the hands of someone like Chris Ware, as part of the construction of complex page designs which ultimately serve as infernal machines”. This is indeed the initial feeling when one looks at the quoted page and tries to follow standard reading comics procedures. The main issue here is the difficulty of letting meaning emerge from the interaction between the whole and the parts. This interaction has been a formal issue, in many scientific fields, for almost a century. In a 1924 article, Max Wertheimer talked about the assumptions one has when considering scientific thought. Conveying these assumptions will serve our purpose as well, in order to deal with a functional investigation of our object. Wertheimer (1999, p. 5) says:

The fundamental question can be very simply stated: Are the parts of a given whole determined by the inner structure of that whole, or are the events such that, as independent, piecemeal, fortuitous and blind the total activity is a sum of the part-activities?

By “events”, we can assume here the objects studied, and so pose the question for page 6: are its parts (panels and arrows) determined by the inner structure of the whole (the page), or are they independent, piecemeal, fortuitous and blind, so that the page is a sum of the parts? Can such questioning help us making sense of it?

HEURISTICS IN READING: READING AND (IN)DETERMINATION

To study how meaning emerges from this page, and what meaningful layers are conveyed, let us use some theoretical devices from reception aesthetics and text effects. Wolfgang Iser uses an important word, exactly when he starts focusing on how reading and text effects come into place. “Every textual model involves certain heuristic decisions” (ISER, 1980, p. 53). Many studies, especially in the realm of psychology, have tried to point out specific traits and types of heuristics (see EYSENCK; GROOME, 2015, for instance), but I consider the general and more imprecise concept to be more relevant, exactly because of its adaptability: the principle of correcting one’s own interpretation as it is performed.

[T]he reader’s communication with the text is a dynamic process of self-correction, as he formulates signifieds which he must then continually modify. It is cybernetic in nature as it involves a feedback of effects and information throughout a sequence of changing situational frames; smaller units progressively merge into bigger ones, so that meaning gathers meaning in a kind of snowballing process (ISER, 1980, p. 67).

Based on the quote above, I will attempt to follow a heuristic strategy, stating a self-correcting path of reading the page, in order to convey doubt, uncertainty, and context-dependent features that contribute for meaning emergence in reading it. From this heuristic principle, another one can be highlighted: the cybernetic nature of self-correction that takes place in reading. Although the word “cybernetics” is usually used in contexts of technological advance and reminds one of robots and computers, it is in fact a principle of how to explain chains of events when there are many possible causes and effects at stake. Gregory Bateson’s (1987, p. 407) definition will serve as a guide:

Causal explanation is usually positive. We say that billiard ball B moved in such and such a direction because billiard ball A hit it at such and such an angle. In contrast to this, cybernetic explanation is always negative. We consider what alternative possibilities could conceivably have occurred and then ask why many of the alternatives were not followed, so that the particular event was one of those few which could, in fact, occur.

Such apophatic thinking steps (without the theological burden, though) give us the ability to consider multiple causes on any event we study, and then disregard the ones that do not work for the emergence of meaningful events, as we read them. This is useful when we do not have a clear sequence between causes and effects, and specially, as in the case of the page studied, when it is not clear what is cause and what is effect. When we consider reading, we have already some patterns in mind, and the author Chris Ware, in this case, complexifies them on purpose. Which panel is the first one to be read? Where is it? Is it the top panel? Or the bottom one? Is it in the middle of the page? We have no place

to really start, so we tend to start from cliché. We see a wide top panel that occupies the width of the page, showing the front porch of a house in a countryside environment, full of trees. On the left, a second house facade appears and, in the middle of the image, a surreal humanoid form is sitting: it is Quimby the Mouse, now transformed in Quimbies, a two-headed version.

However, the arrows that appear on the top panel point towards it, not away from it. Since arrows usually point to the next step on a page, the contradiction of having five arrows using the top panel as target forces us to see it as the end of the page, the destination of the narrative process it schematizes. Also, since there are five arrows arriving at the panel instead of one, we are forced to follow them step by step, separately, in order to find where the narrative causation comes from, what is the meaning – or at least *some* meaning. Following clues linearly, one arrow at a time, is a cognitive structural limitation that Reuven Tsur (1998, p. 55) calls “limited channel capacity”: the capacity to save mental processing space whenever complexities arise. “In this respect, ‘simplicity’ and ‘articulation’ – in the final account ‘mental economy’ – are the key terms”. Having five arrows pointing to a panel works against this capacity, since they work against the simplicity we are bound to look for. Thus, frustration in finding simple reading continuation leads us to abandon the first panel as an initial reading stage and ultimate meaning. Off we go to the rest of the page.

However, trying to find meaning by scanning the page makes reading even more confusing. It is easy to follow the vertical panels on the left, which show a coin that spins (apparently) down. From that panel, we arrive at the bottom one, where one of Quimbies’ head is white and sleeping and the other, black and white, is awoken and thinking. His thought balloon encompasses all of the panels above, the entire page. Young Quimby Head thinks, looks to the sides, face dismayed, and lies down to sleep again, we presume. Its face looks worried, so we attribute it to their thinking. In a previous page, Left Head became old and Right Head remained young, so now Right Head must be thinking about what went wrong so that its other half could change so much. Left Head could be dying. Still worrying, Right Head tries to sleep again.

Being in bed and alone with his/her thoughts. How often do we see ourselves in similar situations? How many nights have we spent like this? It is easy to infer and then project what we know about restlessness and wondering. In this case: what could have gone wrong? What happened for Left Head to be like this, to look this old? From the frame that top and bottom panels build within the big frame (the page), the center shows Right Head’s dislocated thoughts, disorganized memories of events when s/he was rude, violent or careless towards Left Head. But how do we get to this meaning (carelessness, guilt)? As we can see, though, the reading I made above about the bottom panel is not the only one possible. Lying in bed without sleeping is not a type of action that has definite body positions. So the bottom panel can be read either from left to right or from right to left. Other Quimby one-page stories support this assumption (WARE, 2003, p. 59, for instance). A second feature to be taken into consideration when regarding this heuristic step is: what is the cybernetic path we need to follow in order to reach the conclusion that RH feels guilty? What are the causation steps for this conclusion? Let me anticipate the use of the word closure, as used by Scott McCloud (1993, p. 62-63) to point to the strategy every reader makes when reading comics.

All of us perceive the world as a whole through the experience of our senses. Yet our senses can only reveal a world that is fragmented and incomplete. Even the most widely travelled mind can only see so much of the world in the course of a life. Our perception of reality is an act of faith, based on mere fragments. [...] This phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole has a name. It's called closure. In our daily lives, we often commit closure, mentally completing that which is incomplete based on past experience.

Thus, considering the bottom panel as a moment of reflection on guilt can only be claimed once we read the center portion of the page, stopping on the main image clusters to infer meaning from them. However, because panel distribution is so complex, learning one meaningful aspect from them already tells us that there is more to it. So we go back to the center of the page, from the bottom panel. Between the two large panels, the center is messy and convoluted. Directions shift, as the reader tries to guess where panels go, where they point to. To analyze them, it is important to consider not only the text and the images themselves, but also the blanks between them. It is true that, according to Rafael Duarte (2009, p. 40, italics are mine), following Iser's thinking,

[t]he idea of blanks that an artistic object has is found in comics in different levels, that refer to their formative parts: in the linguistic text, in drawings, between text and drawings in each panel, and between each panel, thus making comics a vehicle that is full of projective blanks. The textual blanks lead to the idea of segment: in a literary text that is entirely made of language, they will have quite a broad definition, comprising chapters, paragraphs, sentences and phrases; in comics, they will be visible in most cases, through their segmentation in isolated panels, but also between their constitutive parts, which are also recognizable separately.

There is an old joke that says: some kinds of cheese have holes, so the more cheese you have, the less cheese you have. Blanks are constitutive of all parts of the comics form: in their words, between words, in panels and between panels. On the page we are focusing now, the projective blanks between all parts work to create meaning, but, at the same time, they make it hard for the reader to stabilize meaningful directions. Instead, what appears is a mixture of times and situations, where one panel does not lead to another with apparent cause. Using Scott McCloud terms, we have an apparent *non sequitur* (MCLOUD, 1993, p. 72). At once, this non sequitur is true and apparent, real and false.

The central section of the page has three distinguished scenes. From top to bottom: 1. Quimbies plays with a coin; 2. Quimbies smokes a cigarette and coughs; 3. Quimbies stares at a well. Around them, a sequence of small panels depicts objects that at first appear random or of little significance. The very complexity of the page leads us to focus on them, hoping that following the arrows lead to meaningful experiences. After a while, we see that the arrow direction is deceiving: it may be easier to read (to find meaning) by following the path from the end of the arrows (top panel) backwards. In following the arrows on the top panel, we stop a little to admire the level of detail and minutiae that it has, and that are expanded on the panels below (some cartoonist friends told me that it is easy to get mad and envious at Ware, about the level of detail and the discretion that make you get closer and closer to the page). Arrow 1 (from left to right)

points to the water well next to the house on the left. Arrow 2 points to a small ink blot in the center of the panel, which we find out to be an old wood cabin in the distance. Arrow 3 points out to Quimbies, who are sitting on a tree, at the center. Arrow 4 points to another ink blot behind Quimbies, which turns out to be a trash can with a broken lamp or vase inside (learned from panel paths). Arrow 5 points to a window where half a lamp/vase is showing. This arrow will form a loop between the lamp and the trash can. It is fine in one panel, and broken on the next. The arrow that points towards it depicts, in a tiny narrative (this one a standard frame), Right Head breaking it on Left Head's head. Has it happened already, or is it just Right Head's imagination? Has s/he done it, or merely imagines it?

From the narratives spots on the page, we infer that Right Head is impulsive and mean, and Left Head always stops him from doing something, or poses as dead weight. All in all, Right Head's meanness is displayed with striking examples, and his/her faces on the bottom panel give a striking contrast with the actions from above: serious looks of perhaps concern, guilt, and surprise, devoid of anger or excitement. The blank between the faces on the panel and ones above is not located as a gutter (usually a white space between panels, in terminology; MCCLOUD, 1993, p. 66). In this case, the gutter is the distance between the faces in the central portion of the page and the faces at bottom. But, in contrast to using schemes such as single directions to imply time passage (MCCLOUD, 1993, p. 100-107), it is consequent that scrambling panels out of the ordinary sequence complexifies time perception and projection as well. Are those only memories, or future projections?

Besides reading the text, we can use meaningful statements from the author himself. When talking about *Gasoline Alley*, a comic strip by Frank King, Ware (*apud* RAEBURN, 2004, p. 13, italics are mine) says that:

Gasoline Alley changed a lot of my thinking about comics. It made me realize that the mood of a comic strip did not have to come from the drawing or the words. You got the mood not from looking at the strip, or from reading the words, but from the act of reading it. The emotion came from the way the story itself was structured.

As Daniel Raeburn quotes, Chris Ware worries mainly about emotions, rather than form. But he is aware that emotions come from the way stories are assembled, rather than from themes alone. "I rarely ever did a comic just for the sake of experimentation", says Ware (*apud* RAEBURN, 2004, p. 11). "Even when I did, I was always trying to get at some kind of feeling", following these two pieces of information, that is, that experimentation is secondary for Ware's comics, and that emotion comes from how one reads based on the way a story is structured, we infer that the apparent mess on the page works to convey the mess of thoughts and memories that are so common when we lie in bed without being able to sleep, and that such thoughts are usually carried with deep meaning and emotional weight, though not with clarity. The bottom panel, whose meaning emerges as a late night meditation, helps to further expand the feelings of dream-like experiences that blur time sequences when memory accesses them – this panel can easily be read from right to left, contrary to standard reading direction. The whole page can be read now as a blurred recollection of events, without disregarding it as the bottom panel of Quimbies's future projection, at the same

time. This leads us to speculate about how time is worked out in Ware's comics, considering it not as a meaningful layer in Ware's comics *per se*, but rather as an effect on the reader.

BREAKING TIME APART AND PULLING IT TOGETHER

Georgiana Batina, in a chapter about Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth*, focuses partly on studying how the author deals with time, how his comics stretches and how he slows it down. She says that "the formal grammar of Ware's comics renders time conspicuous, inscribing forms of temporal progression (or speed) in its graphic representation" (BALL; KUHMAN, 2014, p. 177). Although her findings regard mostly Jimmy Corrigan's story, she quotes and refers to some features of Quimby's stories. Also, many features of Jimmy Corrigan can be addressed to Quimby's stories as well:

Many of these silent panels are almost identical, reinforcing the idea of a past that recurs with obsessive persistence. The constant replay of memories, often encapsulated in iconographical detail, epitomizes the concept of difference through repetition suggested by Gilles Deleuze. Drawing on Freud, Deleuze claims that with repetition comes not only difference – understood within the repetitive pattern in which it is concealed – but also remembering. These two features aptly describe the circular movements in many of Ware's narrative and repetitive (in- and out-zooming) panels. Often the narrative events seem to emerge from a pool of unconscious links and memories, very much in keeping with Deleuze's description of repetition as "the unconscious of representation". [...] The composition of the panels on the page also mimics an act of collecting by creating an imaginary present in which the narrative levels communicate one to one rather than in progression, all characters following the slow script of a fictive contemporaneity, in which they interact like so many recycled childhood icons (BATINA in BALL; KUHMAN, 2014, p. 182).

Her description refers to a high level of meaning, already emerged from the heuristics process of guessing and using context to progress from one low level reading to another, then up to abstraction. For the present context, it is important to regard the foundation of memory on repetition, and we can find repetition on two instances, one on the page, on the many equal/similar panels and figures, and another one on the act of reading the page, on the very action of moving back and forth among panels, and among portions of the page. Let us dive into one of the portions and describe a possible reading path.

Below the top panel, on the left, there appears a sequence in which Quimbies plays with a coin. The panel sequence on the very left of the page, that portrays moments of a coin, can now be seen as mirror to the bi-directionality of the bottom panel and of the arrows themselves: the coin goes upwards and downwards at once. On one end, it travels from and to a drawer; on the other, it is produced from RH Quimby, an action that relates to arrow 1 and to the well it points out. From the sequence, LH Quimby displays gestures of having a positive idea. Perhaps, it was considering the well as a wishing well, and so it would need a coin to make a wish. So far, we have been following the usual western reading directionality for comics, and it is working, in terms of us reaching out mea-

ning and narrative flow. This very flow is kind of broken up between poses four and five of the sequence: RH holds a coin in the right hand, apparently tossing it up, and LH stretches the left hand, perhaps asking for it, perhaps stressing its presence. Quimbies' left hand keeps more or less the same position, with some changes that account for the surprise of shifting between panels: the coin is now an ink blot, which we are asked to see as an ant, which was in its house and was called out. The switch panel of the sequence (if we keep the directionality) presents RH holding a stone over the ant, while LH tries to stop him/her. The arrows now are more comfortably read in traditional directionality: the ant was smashed by the stone, the stone was inside a small cabin, which barely appears as a distant object on top panel – I once showed this page to a group of students in class, on a 49-inch screen, and it still had us squinting our eyes, trying to find out what it was, and guessing it only from context on the panels underneath. Still regarding the subject of time passing, how can this episode help us?

A point to consider here is that “[n]ot only does Ware express slowness by encoding it into the composition of his comic strips, but he uses these narrative breaking points to deliberately provoke reader anxiety in order to reveal the underlying causes for this stress” (BATINA in BALL; KUHMAN, 2014, p. 187). Perhaps a more exact expression would be to make readers aware of anxiety by displaying it on panels, as well as using panel breakdowns, gutters and emptiness between panels to let readers inquire: where are the missing puzzles? In a piece that shows so much, how come some essential pieces seem to be missing? How come a coin turned into an ant? Why did the ant leave its hole/home? The fact that such minute mysteries are not solved help maintain suspense. So, side by side, anxiety and wonder can emerge from this reading path. Also, time here is not only slowed down or sped up, but panel distribution makes it move back and forth: they display actions that can be read left-to-right or right-to-left, upwards and downwards, at once. Again, they mirror the time stall that RH has in mind during late hours, recalling his/her wrongs.

To the left of the coin and well cluster, a frame of panels is around another six-piece image that shows Quimbies wearing hats. Reading in standard fashion, RH fools around with a camera while LH's hands are in the pocket – his/her expression can be read as one of concern, which leads us to connect it to a possible coin that should be on the left pocket, but is now missing. RH then lights up a cigar and, as s/he smokes it, LH starts coughing more and more, feeling sick, while RH is completely lost to his/her other half's discomfort. Around this sequence, a cluster of panels is sequenced in order to tell many different stories that maybe surround this moment. I will select two of them, to account for the time play and for the theme of guilt and sorrow.

First is the micro-story of the vase, and of how it was broken. Panel distribution here fully guides the reader's knowledge of narrative, so that, even when all narrative elements are distributed at plain sight on the page, as it is the case, one needs to decelerate and stop on panels, dealing with the amount of information not necessarily in them, but between them, to build a narrative arc that ends up in meaning; in this case, a second element that helps calling attention to starting points, that is, the shadow scales used in and between panels. As an eye-catcher, two framing panels display two separate moments of a vase, one broken, the other intact. As I mentioned earlier, the story of how it is broken can then be approached. It is a tiny story, in length, but an intense and telling one.

In it, RH breaks the vase on LH's head. This is the first of a series of small narrative arcs that, when combined, can be read as a time paradox, since they contain a degree of incongruence about what facts happened first and what next. This situation of not being able to stabilize a sequence of events happens because of the objects pointed out in top panel arrows 4 and 5 (as before, taken in sequence from left to right). Arrow 4 points to a garbage can among the bushes in the background; arrow 5 points to a window that shows a tiny portion of what we conclude to be a vase, the very vase that RH broke on LH's head – our process of closure works this out. It is broken at a certain point, and so its destination is the garbage can on the top panel. However, it is also depicted on the same panel, and pointed out by closure in arrow 5. Could it be in two places at once? Is the vase on arrow 5 a different one? Or, instead, is the top panel a portrait of a previous scene? Taking it as the earliest step causes the second cluster of images to provide an adequate timeline, indeed a very traditional one: Quimbies do take the picture displayed on top panel; time passes (i.e., the snowflakes that fall next to the trunk), and they take another picture, this time wearing hats; time passes again (the trunk is cut, the slope appears and more houses are built), then LH appears old, whereas RH looks sideways, implying expressions such as “where can I go?”, and “what should I do?”

Both instances – the regular timeline of events Quimbies go through, and the time bubble that encapsulates what happens to the vase – depend on how one considers the arrows and “believe” in them. For, in order to have the paradox of having a vase intact and inside a garbage can at the same time, one must believe that the can contains the broken vase, and must also follow the directionality of the arrow heads; whereas, in order to develop the timeline described above for Quimbies, it is necessary to go *against* the head directionality of arrow 4. This decision may come to an inquiring reader at any given time during reading (but specially in re-reading, as I could check when asking my friends to read the page, a gesture which ended up in mesmerized faces trying to decipher frame after frame, relation after relation).

Before a proper conclusion, I would like to discuss briefly how panel distribution on a page can influence reading, by discussing a theoretical aspect relative to two terms presented by Tyler Volk that reflect complex organization and patterns of patterns.

METAPATTERNS OF ORGANIZATION AND COMPLEXITY: HOLONS AND CLONONS

In a 1995 book, Tyler Volk presents a summary of meta-patterns he collected and organized from working with the cyberneticist and polymath Gregory Bateson, who approached many fields of knowledge in order to study how processes and things work in harmony and organize themselves dynamically. According to Volk, Bateson suggests that we should abandon scales of magnitude in favor of patterns, shapes, and relations. In doing that, we lose track of scale, but gain knowledge about how objects work, and how their connections are made (VOLK, 1995, p. vii). These connections can be described in *patterns of patterns* that are studied in physics, and also in biology, sociology and psychology, and that correlate in all fields because of how humans perceive and build knowledge – another way of saying that knowledge is limited by human structuring structures.

Their names evoke their function and form: binaries, borders, tubes, cycles, layers, sheets. These are forms and functions that can be seen all over, and that imply our own human limitation. When dealing with the metapattern of layers, Volk writes that the Egyptians have left us with the word/image of the pyramid, the most notorious example of *hierarchy*, a word which shares root with *hieroglyphs*, where *hieros* means sacred. Whilst “hieroglyphs” means “sacred writing”, hierarchy indicates “sacred government”, that is, a system that rules from above and creates top-to-bottom structures of power that are non-contained (VOLK, 1995, p. 128). But he sees another pattern of organizing structures, in nature of elsewhere. Structures that do not depend on control from above, but where layers contain other layers that work interdependently, that is, unable to work on their own, but able to be differentiated and to operate without ruling.

Let's keep hierarchy for the non-contained variety, the common pyramid of generals and their troops. But the contained form of layered system – the very kind that refuses the great mysteries of emergence – deserves its own label. Making it simply another form of hierarchy would burden it with the baggage of (usually negative) connotations attached to ecclesiastic, governmental, and corporate bureaucracies. [...] Using a word coined by [Arthur] Koestler, let the nested pattern of parts in wholes that are in turn parts of still greater wholes be called a holarchy. Its image is not the pyramid, but the concentric spheres (VOLK, 1995, p. 130).

Volk (1995, p. 130) differentiates hierarchies from holarchies by how simple the latter ones are to be delimited, which leads to their great generality, and also gives them a profound ambiguity. “Holarchies evoke those magic words: emergence, *holism*. They are the links between atoms, galaxies, and minds”. The author then asks: “How does the whole connect to the parts?”. When I was preparing for this article, that question would appear over and over. Volk answers it by saying that connection happens with function (VOLK, 1995, p. 131), and then proceeds to investigate how to distinguish holarchies. They do not operate hierarchically, that is, presenting differentiating structures that one can analyze and sum up to create wholes; instead, we find them easily in forms and processes that are not easily broken down or analyzed. When they are, we see they are comprised of copies of it, or of the same components. Then, Volk offers two names to deal with how holarchies operate: *holons* and *clonons*.

The idea of clonons is easy, and relates to that of *numerical identity*: identical external copies that do not contain each other: bricks, cells, human bodies, personalities, droplets. They usually have a high number of copies. Whereas many hierarchies have parts that work in isolation, and are even detached (an accounting department in a company, which can easily work as an independent office), holons, on the other hand, appear in handfuls, are comprised of clonons, and cannot be easily decomposed without perishing: walls, organs, societies, relationships, clouds. The trick is that holons present clonons, but do not rule them. A second feature is that they are nested: one brick functions as a holon, which cannot survive its breaking into the clonons of sand and clay; many bricks work out as clonons, their copies used to form another holon, a wall, which cannot be broken without ceasing to exist.

Concerning this text, we can use the concept of holarchy to regard the page as a whole (not only in the present case, though), in which there are various relations between holons and clonons. In the present page, the holon of the page contains several clonons (panels), frames that contain information. Many panels contain information which is not identical, but needs time and attention to extract differences, as in the bottom panel or in the vase micro-story. They thus work as formal clonons (frames) that contain holons which (formed by clonons of black ink on white paper), on their turn, convey information and blanks of information that work as controlling devices for reading (ISER, 1980, p. 170).

Following this path, the third large panel on the left becomes now loaded with meaning. After reading between top and bottom panels, checking on episodes of RH's cruelty and immaturity, and considering the coin that was once called upon to be thrown at the bottom of the wishing well, but is not present inside the panel, we can interpret LH's dismayed face and understand it as the result of a whole life of frustration, punishment, carelessness. RH, on his/her turn, just looks amazed and confused at the well, perhaps thinking of a coin, perhaps wondering how it is possible that the well was still there. This episode, contracted into one panel, works as a clonon of the carelessness RH displays all over the page, and as a holon of a more present time: a clue of time change is in RH's hat, changed from a typical straw boater 1920s hat into a type of 1960s felt hat. It is the third explanatory moment of the page, this time as a summary: panels around display elements from different episodes, and elements inside the panel recover them as well: the well, the changing landscape, the cane. Without exercising self-similarity, we cannot help but wonder at how concentrated meaning is, how every (visual or meaningful) clonon reflects each other so that it is not possible to escape.

AS CLOSURE

Again, in Ball and Kuhmann, Benjamin Widis presents Quimby stories and links them to Chris Ware's autobiography. Quimby's stories have two great arcs, one being the two-head stories, the other a series that involves Sparky the Cat, a cat's head that serves as target for Quimby's cruelty. According to Widis, Ware confirms that

the first set of comics was drawn in Texas in the latter part of 1990 as his beloved grandmother died, the second over the following six months as he envisioned and then embarked on the move to Chicago, "leaving behind [...] a relationship which [Ware] had completely ruined through selfish, egocentric behavior (BALL; KUHMANN, 2014, p. 162-163).

This revelation, of a biographical content behind the highly sophisticated form, implies that "the senescent second Quimby head represents Ware's grandmother: a notional twin until her age suddenly imposed itself" (BALL; KUHMANN, 2014, p. 164). This piece of information puts into perspective all of the traits listed so far: the recollection of episodes that deal with guilt, of someone asking him/herself "what have I done so that things went wrong?"; the concern of seeing someone so close aging and dying, the fear of death, the uncertainty about the future, the reversibility of time as a final hope, that the bottom panel of concern becomes once again the top panel of spring and simplicity.

However, although this piece of information greatly clarifies and supports the page's heuristic reading, it should not be used as an essential device to read it, nor should stop one from reading and extracting the most human meaning out of this difficult and beautiful piece. Reading it heuristically, that is, by exposing doubts and uncertainties that take place in the process of reading itself, helps us become aware of both how far we can go and how limited our concerns and processes are. At the same time, it dispenses with the need of knowing first principles or primary causes to extract meaning out of reading; reading backwards (cybernetics) is also a valid direction, as long as we are comfortable with time travel and alternate realities, which can be a broken heart, a dying loved one or a two-headed cat. All of which are human, eventually.

AS HEURÍSTICAS NA LEITURA DE UMA PÁGINA DE *ACME NOVELTY LIBRARY* DE CHRIS WARE

Resumo: Neste texto, abordo uma página de *Acme Novelty Library*, de Chris Ware. Mantenho somente uma em foco, pois ela já apresenta bastante volume de intertextos teóricos e de exigências de leitura. Abordo a teoria da *Gestalt*, da leitura de quadrinhos, bem como as teorias de Wolfgang Iser sobre o ato da leitura e dos efeitos do texto no leitor. Outra teoria envolve a classificação dos *metapadrões*, conforme concebidos por Gregory Bateson e classificadas por Tyler Volk no livro *Metapatterns*.

Palavras-chave: Histórias em quadrinhos. Leitura. Heurística.

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