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Teeth, Sticks, and Bricks: Calligraphy, Graphic Focalization, and Narrative Braiding in Eddie Campbell's Alec

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No Abstract

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In this era of the graphic novel, we are used to seeing comic books—that is, comic magazines—migrate to the bookshelf in the form of bound collections. Yet do these collections cohere as books? Do they exhibit the cohesiveness, the formal and thematic unity that we have come to expect of, say, the novel or the memoir, a unity that the tag “graphic novel” seems to promise? How may a serial comic in collected form become more than a mere artifact of its serialization? How may it achieve book-ness? Given the dominance of serial publication in comics, addressing such questions is crucial to theorizing graphic narrative.

Artist Eddie Campbell’s most imposing artifact, and arguably his most aesthetically accomplished work to date, is *Alec: “The Years Have Pants”* (2009), a 640-page omnibus that brings together in a single book most of the autobiographical stories written and drawn by Campbell over a span of thirty years. *The Years Have Pants* represents a remarkable achievement for many reasons, and in this essay we will discuss one of these reasons in particular: how the omnibus stands as a unified and complex whole—a “tight weave,” as Campbell characterizes his aesthetic (Depey 68)—despite three decades of on-and-off production and the project’s roots in fragmentary serial publication.

We begin with a short chronicle of Campbell’s life and an overview of *Alec*. We then use three concepts—the calligraphic line, graphic focalization, and narrative braiding—to reveal how *The Years Have Pants* achieves narrative coherence. By calligraphy we mean the spontaneous quality of Campbell’s line; by graphic focalization, we mean Campbell’s tendency to draw in a style flexible enough to encompass both sketchy impressionism and detailed realism, and how this flexibility allows Campbell to present simultaneously both the events of his past and subjective ideas and opinions about those events. In our discussion of narrative braiding, we adopt the theories of comics scholar Thierry Groensteen to highlight some of the themes and motifs that unite the *Alec* stories into

an artistic whole. Campbell uses these devices—sudden shifts in visual style and intricate networks of connection among panels and pages—to create a graphic memoir with the scope and complexity of a great literary novel.

“Ouch!”: Campbell’s Career and Comic Book Serialization

Eddie Campbell was born in Glasgow in 1955, and became interested in comic books in his early teens. One of his stories, titled “Ouch!”, describes how that interest arose. It begins with Campbell being hit by a car and whisked off to hospital, where he is kept for a few days under observation (probably for concussion symptoms, since his head is wrapped in a large bandage). At one point, a nurse passes

out some comics to Eddie and his hospital suitemate. Eddie gets an issue of the *Beano* (a long-lived British humor weekly) while the other boy is given a copy of *Strange Tales* #141 (February 1966), a bravura example of Marvel Comics’ mid-sixties resuscitation of the American superhero comic book. Eddie burns with curiosity—he’s not seen a Marvel comic before—and when the other boy takes a nap, Eddie reads his *Strange Tales* and is immediately transfixed. The second page of “Ouch!” ends with a close-up of Eddie, bandage around his head, raptly staring at the comic, while a caption written by his wiser, older self poetically describes the Nick Fury story as having “a magic, otherworldly quality, but with all the cheeribleness of this one, also the tragicness, transposed whole to the other” (469).¹ This is the epiphany that changes him into a comics fan and future professional, though the moment is wittily undercut by the notion that Campbell’s blossoming love of the medium might be due to brain damage.

Eddie then leaves the hospital and visits various newsagents all over Glasgow to collect Marvel comics. Because the distribution of U.S. comics in Scotland was erratic, Campbell was often unable to buy Marvel series in proper sequence from month to month, creating gaps in his collection from which he inferred “narratives where the missing portions are even



Fig 1. Eddie Campbell, “Ouch!” *After the Snooter*. From *Alec: The Years Have Pants*, page 470. © Eddie Campbell. Used by permission of the artist.

more special than the ones I have" (470). In fact, young Eddie almost revels in the chaos of reading comics in such an incomplete and out-of order way (Fig. 1). "Ouch!" ends with Eddie picking up a pencil and trying to draw like Jack Kirby, which prompts his mother to say, "Now that you can draw comics yourself, you won't need to buy them any more" (471). She fails to discourage Eddie from buying books—another autobiographical tale shows his adult self spending \$3500 on a complete set of *Punch* magazine's first fifty years—but he does grow up to draw comics himself.

Campbell began his adult career in comics in his early twenties, when, after some formal art education, he moved to England and participated in the London small-press scene alongside such other cartoonists as Glenn Dakin, Phil Elliott, Myra Hancock, Ed Hillyer, and Woodrow (Trevs) Phoenix. These artists created work very different from the genre fare that then dominated British comics production. In 1986, Campbell described the London small-press movement as "the first real upheaval in this country [Britain] of comics as a genuine Art—Art being to me a thing which is a lively part of life while commenting on life—as opposed to comics as journalism-cartooning or comics as a collecting-hobby or comics as boys' power fantasies" (qtd. in Gravett 60). From the beginning, then, Campbell strove to make his mark with literary comics in a medium dominated by superheroes and other putatively lowbrow and fandom-dependent genres.

The epicenter of the small-press scene was the Fast Fiction stall at the Westminster Comics Mart, begun in 1981 by entrepreneur and fan Paul Gravett, who would later publish many Fast Fiction artists in the influential anthology comic *Escape* (ed. Gravett and Peter Stanbury, 1983-1989). By late 1981, Gravett had passed down the Fast Fiction table and distribution business to Phil Elliott and Ian Wiczorek, who created a comic magazine, likewise called *Fast Fiction*, that served as a clearinghouse for small-press artists (1982-1990, ed. Ed Pinsent from 1984).² Campbell's work was featured in the early issues of both *Escape* and *Fast Fiction*, but by the late 1980s he had other plans. In a blog post from 2008, Campbell describes in hindsight the slow dissolution of the small-press movement:

I believe Fast Fiction the table, trading in dozens of new photocopied comic productions as well as screen prints, postcards and other novelties, every two months, and the comic, presenting the cream of the artists that were around, also every two months, in a booklet format of twenty or more pages, may have dribbled into 1990 [...] but I wasn't watching. (*Fate* blog, 27 Oct. 2008)

Campbell's career since the Fast Fiction era roughly divides into three strains. First is his work in conventional comic books, epitomized by *Bacchus*, a superhero-like updating of Greek myth in which the Roman god of wine wanders the modern world. Second are his collaborations with

famed comic book writer Alan Moore: *From Hell* (1989-1998), *The Birth Caul* (1999), and *Snakes and Ladders* (2001), the latter two collected in *A Disease of Language* (2005). *From Hell*, a complex dissection of both the so-called Jack the Ripper case and the misogyny of Victorian England, is the best known of Campbell's comics, due in part to Moore's reputation among fans and in part to the movie version starring Johnny Depp produced by 20th Century Fox (dir. Albert and Allen Hughes, 2001).

Campbell's most acclaimed solo work, and the third strain in his career, is his thinly veiled autobiography, about a Campbell stand-in named "Alec MacGarry." Campbell began doing autobiographic comics in the late 1970s with a strip titled *In the Days of the Ace Rock and Roll Club* (1978-79), and has continued to the present. With the exceptions of the 48-page *Graffiti Kitchen* (1993), which was originally a stand-alone comic book, and the graphic novel *The Fate of the Artist* (about which, more below), all of the *Alec* projects longer than a few pages have first been serialized in episodic form. A typical *Alec* episode runs between two and four pages—although some are longer and many are only one page—and first reaches readers through either multi-artist anthologies or self-published magazines showcasing Campbell's own comics. In the former category are anthologies like *Escape, Dee Vee* (where *Alec* appeared from 1997-2000), and the one-shot *Autobiographix* (2003); in the latter are series such as *Eddie Campbell's Bacchus* (where both reprinted and new *Alec* material appeared from 1996-2001) and the short-lived *Egomania* (2002).³ For instance, "Ouch!" originally appeared in *Bacchus* #51 (March 2000), a comic book with a low print run distributed mostly to the direct market, that is, the international (though US-based) circuit of shops specializing in Anglophone comic books and catering exclusively to fans. On this initial publication, "Ouch!" never reached a general audience.

Through his gradual serialization of *Alec*, Campbell, like other artists, is negotiating comics' roots in and continued reliance on serial publishing. The history of the Anglophone graphic novel is a long dotted line through the never-ending stories of comic strips, comic papers, and comic books—and, more recently, the subculture of collectors and hobbyists willing to amass, preserve, and reread long-running comics series and who clamor for durable reprints of same. Though the original English-language graphic novel has at last been able to achieve some independence from serialization, the fact remains that most of the graphic novels now cited as seminal were originally serials (see Hatfield, *Alternative*, Ch. 6, and "How to Read a...," 142-44). The reputations of graphic novelists like Art Spiegelman, Frank Miller, Alan Moore, and Campbell himself were built on periodical work for magazines, comic books and other intermittent publications.

After their initial publication as serials, the *Alec* stories are typically reprinted by Campbell in book-length graphic novels, including *The King Canute Crowd* (originally and misleadingly titled *The Complete Alec*, 1990; rev. ed. 2000), *How to Be an Artist* (2001), *Three Piece Suit* (2001), and *After the Snooter* (2002). Though Campbell has made editorial and graphic corrections and changes over the years, particularly to the earliest stories, the assembled *Alec* comics retain their original titles and stand-alone plot structures. “Ouch!” was reprinted unchanged in *Snooter*, which, like the *Bacchus* comic book, was self-published by Campbell and distributed primarily to the direct market (although the American publisher Top Shelf made *Snooter* available to mainstream bookstores as well). The collections, then, might be expected to have a scattershot, episodic quality—and yet, taken as a whole, *Alec* exhibits a remarkable unity of form, narrative structure, and theme. The question we have set out to answer is how Campbell achieves this aesthetic unity.

That question has snapped into focus thanks to the publication of *The Years Have Pants*, which reprints the greater part of Campbell’s autobiographical material, beginning with *The King Canute Crowd* and ending with new pages that chronicle his domestic life up to 2008. (“Ouch!” is reprinted here again, still unchanged, on pages 468-471.) Long-time Campbell readers will first see *The Years Have Pants* as a compendium of parts, as each component book roughly covers a significant period in Alec/Campbell’s life. *The King Canute Crowd* chronicles Campbell’s early-adult friendship with bohemian mentor Danny Grey; in contrast, the later *After the Snooter* becomes *A Portrait of the Artist as a Middle-Aged Man*, continuing Campbell’s memoir into adulthood and a semi-respectable bourgeois lifestyle. (*Snooter* tardily drops the “Alec MacGarry” alias in favor of Campbell’s own name.) *The Years Have Pants* excludes only one of Campbell’s autobiographical books, *The Fate of the Artist* (2006), a radical experiment in form that incorporated painting, photography, collage, and typeset text and that was published in a small full-color format. *The Years Have Pants*, by contrast, is in black and white, and mostly drawn in the roughhewn, autographic style that has become a Campbell trademark and a reminder of his small-press roots.

Notwithstanding the omission of *The Fate of the Artist*, whose dialogical relationship with the rest of Campbell’s memoirs is beyond our scope here, *The Years Have Pants* is clearly Campbell’s attempt to transcend the “higgledy piggledy” distribution of his work by pulling almost all of *Alec* together to make a bid at posterity. It is also testimony to a tension between serial and novelistic aesthetics that informs the graphic novel genre as a whole. How, in *Alec*, does Campbell reconcile the fragmentary rhythms of serial narrative with the ambitions of the self-contained literary novel?

Of course the *Alec* episodes are united by Campbell's authorial sensibility and voice; beyond these, however, there are three specific visual aspects of *Alec* that confer unity on the work: Campbell's use of calligraphy, graphic focalization, and the network.

Calligraphy

Again, by *calligraphy* we mean the autographic or doodle-like immediacy of *Alec's* graphic style, which is typically loose, sketchy, spontaneous-seeming, and akin to handwriting. In this style, illustration and text are not "illustration" and "text" but an integrated autographic whole, imbued with a seemingly dashed-out diaristic intimacy. This looseness is a common denominator of most of Campbell's comics, despite his many shifts in style: it unites the earliest *Alec* stories, with their tighter rendering but also their quirky, impressionistic use of Zipatone for texturing; the historically oriented *From Hell*, in which a designing sketchiness is offset by precise architectural settings and a clotted darkness influenced by the look of Victorian penny dreadfuls (about which, see Kobek); and even later, fully-painted color works such as *The Fate of the Artist*.

Campbell begins to perfect this purposely loose autographic style in the interval between 1987, when he completed *The King Canute Crowd*, and 1992, when he completed the long-deferred *Graffiti Kitchen*, begun in 1988 but set aside for some four years until he could figure out how to handle the story. That book's title, *Graffiti Kitchen*, referring to house walls covered in homely scribbling—childish, spontaneous noodling on kitchen wallpaper—describes the book's own style; Campbell goes so far as to suggest that "the ancestors of the comic strip are to be found in [such] facetious scribbles" rather than in the elevated monuments of posterity, the Bayeux Tapestry and other such consecrated examples of sequential art (164). *Graffiti Kitchen* achieves a fetching sloppiness that recalls Jules Feiffer, William Steig, or Claire Bretecher, bringing words and pictures together in one seamless calligraphic performance. This autographic mode reminds us that the written text in comics, as Will Eisner liked to observe, reads as image, with its look contributing to its potential meaning (*Comics & Sequential Art* 10). Campbell's distinctive lettering, so inseparable from his drawings, is a classic example of what Johanna Drucker has called *marked* text, as opposed to the unmarked, uniform, self-effacing, and allegedly neutral text that fills the text blocks of most books (*Visible Word* 94-95).

Conversely, the comics image can read as text, approaching, thanks to the calligraphic hand of the artist, the vanishing point where illustration, diagram, pictogram, and writing are all so many hand-drawn extensions of a single artistic sensibility. If in this respect *Graffiti Kitchen* represents a big step forward, the roughly contemporary *Dance of Lifey Death*, though

begun with tighter drawings, confirms that step, loosening as it goes; in the years that followed, a looser style in his personal work would serve Campbell as relief from the minutely researched decade-long march he made through the collaborative *From Hell*. “Graffiti” becomes an apt descriptor of this style, both for its lack of pretension and for its calligraphic freedom, its gestural openness. Having wanted to be a painter when he was young (*Pants* 429-32), Campbell goes for inspired penmanship in a big way, carving out a style of anti-mimetic scratch-and-slash that manages to be painterly on a small, small scale: cartooning as handwriting.

Graphic Focalization

The term “anti-mimetic” brings us to the second of our three concepts, *graphic focalization*. In fact the calligraphic approach isn’t a single “style” but rather a constantly changing relationship with style, one that leads to continual variations in the comics’ degree of abstractness and in its graphic rendering. Campbell’s artwork isn’t exactly representational in a literal, supposedly objective sense. Rather, it evokes a perspective, a way of seeing that is partial, frankly subjective, and emotionally invested. For something so organically unified, Campbell’s “style” is plural, and all over the place: panel by panel, his drawings modulate to evoke the shifting terms of his attention and emotional entanglement. Witness, for example, the multiple ways in which Campbell draws Alec/himself, even within a single short story such as “Obsession” (375-82), which opens with a portrait of himself as calm and harmonious, rendered in a confident, almost glib, slickness with painterly ink on Zipatone (Fig. 2). Later in “Obsession,” however, when his desire to drink a rare Australian wine reaches a fever pitch, Eddie strips himself down to a tremulous, bare-bones sketch, a few unshaded lines against the whiteness of the page (Fig. 3).

As Roland Barthes long ago recognized, style constitutes a code in itself, a connotative layer (*Image* 17-18, 43). Campbell understands that shifts in style constitute shifts in tone, focus, and implicit meaning. Again, the long pent-up *Graffiti Kitchen* seems to have brought the point home, teaching Campbell graphic focalization. *Kitchen*, mostly completed in what Campbell has called “one blistering exhalation of [...] about three months,” is a self-styled “love story” that is bruisingly frank and unsentimental, a project whose emotional intensity seems to have stripped Campbell’s graphic approach down to bare essentials (*Three Piece Suit*, foreword, n. p.). The book, which paints an unflattering picture of young Alec, has all the evocative power and emotional undertow of a long-lost journal, combined with—this is crucial—the ironic, unforgiving, and astringent intelligence of an older, less indulgent self. Its drawings perfectly match, indeed are of a piece with, its subject and tone.

...a convivial harmony.



Fig 2. Eddie Campbell, "Obsession." *The Dance of Lify Death*. From *Alec: The Years Have Pants*, page 375. © Eddie Campbell. Used by permission of the artist.

...and sometimes even to drink it.



Fig 3. Eddie Campbell, "Obsession." *The Dance of Lify Death*. From *Alec: The Years Have Pants*, page 379. © Eddie Campbell. Used by permission of the artist.

This distinction between the presentation of the younger "Alec" and the connotative commentary of the older "Eddie" is an example of what Alan Palmer calls *aspectuality*. In his discussion of fictive storyworlds, Palmer argues that "the aesthetic appeal of a plot is a function of the richness and variety of the various aspects under which the storyworld is perceived by the characters in that world" (194). Each character has his or her own way of perceiving the storyworld—through his / her own beliefs, desires, motivations, and biases—and comics can communicate this subjectivity through pictures. Examples are legion; a particularly striking one occurs in David Mazzucchelli's graphic novel *Asterios Polyp* (2009), where conflicts between Asterios and his wife Hana are visually represented as non-compatible ways of seeing the world: Asterios reduces everything, even people, to geometric shapes, while Hana views the world as plumes of red cross-hatching. Aspectuality may also have a temporal dimension, whereby a memoirist like Campbell can draw the events of his past in two registers: as a chronicle of what happened, but in a range of styles (comically, or in chiaroscuro, or as a sketchy afterthought) that convey his older narrating self's opinion about his activities as a younger man. At times the images may seem to match young Alec's self-estimation, or to enact his confusion or anger; at other times, the images insinuate commentary,

from a distanced, more experienced view. Graphic variations serve as implicit self-irony, sometimes self-criticism, just as variations in vocabulary, register, syntax, and point of view may in a purely prose narrative.

Drawings in *Graffiti Kitchen* vary from abrupt lightning-sketches with near-stick figures to evocative blots of inky blackness; panels shift from bounded to unbounded; faces and figures are often very brusquely cartooned, but at other times leap out with a strange vividness and particularity. About two-thirds through the book, one particular page offers up some of the graphic variations possible in Campbell's subjective approach (Fig. 4). On this page the characters' "looks" keep changing: in the second panel, as Alec comes up with a "mischievous idea" in his "noodle," his face becomes a silhouette, reflecting the nefariousness of his plan. In panels five and six, however, Campbell draws from photographs of the real "Georgette" to create intricate, life-like portraits, and in panels seven through nine, Alec is barely more than a scarecrow of scribbled vertical lines. The style of Campbell's drawings fluctuates in order to capture memory's selectiveness, blurriness, and bias. In this sense Campbell's graphic focalization comes to grips with questions of authenticity and fictionality that have long informed both autobiography theory and autobiographical comics.⁴

Campbell's graphic treatment of aspectuality dovetails with Harry Morgan's observation that comics stretch the methods of caricature over extended sequences ("Graphic Shorthand" 35). This applies to settings and contextual details as well as to the ever-present characters. Campbell, increasingly in the four or five years after *King Canute*, is often content to let props and backgrounds fall away. He tends to draw settings only when he needs them. More to the point, he uses rendering, or its absence, as an emotional and tonal qualifier, like descriptive wording in prose: its degree of importance varies from scene to scene and even moment to moment. Campbell's cartooning also bears out another of Morgan's points—informed by Stanzel's work on narrative—that in comics *focalization* and *perspective* are not interchangeable; that a character may serve as a focalizer or "reflector" of the action even though we can see that character as if from an "outside" perspective, rather than seeing things as if through his eyes (37). In other words, the action may be focalized in ways consistent with the character's emotional state, while still being presented through an ocular perspective external to the character; or, in Morgan's words, "[T]he graphic character is generally seen from without by a reader who is positioned as spectator, but [nonetheless] the sequence is often read through the character" (37).

This point potentially applies to non-comics narratives as well—cinema, as Morgan acknowledges, or prose narrative, as Stanzel discusses at

Back in my little room I am only half aware of Jane telling Danny about my pal Harwood being a nihilist and they're disagreeing about the pronunciation.



This young guy Gerald is a budding photographer and is now on the scene.



I will empty all the separate jars and bottles of my life into one big pot and cook them all up into a stew.



Thick Three

Pages turning up like that has caused a sublimely mischievous idea to form in my noodle...



George has become his muse or something.



I'll take all the characters from my other book and put them into this one. It'll be a great big cross-over.



Next day I find that Georgette has become even more unreachable. She has an entourage now.



It is clear to me that rampant foolishness is to be the order of the day.



Fig 4. Eddie Campbell, *Graffiti Kitchen*. From *Alec: The Years Have Pants*, page 173. © Eddie Campbell. Used by permission of the artist.

length (*Theory of Narrative*). In comics, however, the question is rendered at once more concrete and more evasive, because the composition of the comics image controls ocular perspective in a manner like that of a camera eye. This confers an illusion of external perspective even when the composition of the image implicitly reflects a character's interior point of view. In other words, the question of *mediacy*, as Stanzel puts it (4-6), is made more complex by comics' seeming *immediacy*—that is, the presentational mode of the image, which partakes of drama or cinema though it may be combined with a more obviously mediating (narrator's) voice. If the effect of figural narration—that is, third-person narration in which events are filtered through the vantage point of a reflector figure—is to superimpose “the illusion of immediacy [...] over mediacy” (Stanzel 5), then, following Morgan's argument, something similar happens in comics, wherein the seeming objectivity and immediacy of the image may disguise a complex act of focalization. In effect, the image, despite its seeming aloofness from the reflector figure, mediates perspective in its emotional and cognitive senses and perspective in its literal, ocular sense. In autobiographical comics in particular,

[t]he cartoon self-image [...] seems to offer a unique way for the artist to recognize and externalize his or her subjectivity. [...] Yet, at the same time, the placement of this self-image among other figures within a visual narrative confers an illusion of objectivity. Seeing the protagonist or narrator, in the context of other characters and objects evoked in the drawings, objectifies him or her. Thus the cartoonist projects and objectifies his or her inward sense of self, achieving at once a sense of intimacy and a critical distance. (Hatfield 115)

In this sense, Campbell's *Alec* and other autobiographic comics exaggerate a potential always inherent in comics: the split between focalization and ocularization.

Autobiographical comics often make this distinction clear to the point of wild overstatement, deploying caricature and selective detail to forcefully project the author-protagonist's state of mind, as in, for instance, the loaded caricatures of the authors' parents that appear in Aline Kominsky-Crumb's “Blabette ‘n’ Arnie” (1976) or Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (2003). Campbell uses this technique continually to comment on “Alec's” circumstances, acquaintances, and ever-shifting state of mind. The constant shifts in detail, degree of abstractness, and exaggeration serve as a means of focalization, an enactment of aspectuality. This is why classical standards of illustrative detail, plenitude, and accuracy are not only irrelevant but inimical to Campbell's method. His artwork is dedicated to evoking and, as in the case of the self-critical *Graffiti Kitchen*, questioning memory and perception.

Narrative Braiding

Campbell's focus on memory and perception also shapes his approach to our third concept: comics as *networks*. Campbell links his disparate tales through subtle visual connections, motifs, and themes, creating a mosaic that embodies the way comics function as, to paraphrase scholar Thierry Groensteen, a lattice or system of networked images. Groensteen defines the comics medium as a kind of reverse Russian *matryoshka* (nesting doll) that begins with the panel, then expands out into larger "dolls" of signification. In his book *The System of Comics* (1999, trans. 2007), which is the culmination of both Groensteen's own work on comics form and larger debates within semiological comics theory, he posits the panel as the first significant unit of meaning on a comics page and then examines the linking of panels—not only with other contiguous panels on the same or facing pages, but also in patterns that extend across multiple pages, and even across the entire body of a work.

Groensteen argues persuasively that it is the concatenation of panels that distinguishes the comics form, not just the detail or vividness of the drawing. Granted, the marks and lines inside a panel can be endlessly broken down and categorized—"Here's another ink dot to represent an eye"—but the purpose behind these lines and marks is most often a straightforward narrative one: if you're drawing a Donald Duck story, your lines from panel to panel serve to render Donald's figure. Resisting attempts to break each drawing down to its least reducible mark, Groensteen instead posits the panel as comics' indivisible unit (3-7). He argues that to put a panel around "an element is the same as testifying that this element constitutes a specific contribution [...] to the story in which it participates" (56). It also places that panel in relationships with other individual panels and the various "frames"—the bigger dolls, the higher-level organizational forms that wrap around panels—to discover how these relationships create meaning. Thus comics can constitute a network.

Moving past the individual panel, Groensteen calls the next "doll" up in the system the *syntagm*, which he defines as "the triad composed of the panel that is currently being read, the panel that preceded it, and the panel that immediately follows it," with all three panels often on the same horizontal tier on the page (111). The panels that come before influence our understanding of the panel we're currently flowing through, even while we're anticipating what might come next. The next level beyond this would be the *page*, which can be as traditional as Campbell's default three-tier, nine-panel-per-page grid, or as unusual as the 24-foot single page (in fact, single panel) that comprises Xavier Robel and Helge Reumann's accordion-folded panorama *Elvis Road* (2007). Beyond the page is the layout of the *double-page spread*—a byproduct of the comic

book format's folded-pamphlet nature—and the *sequence*, characterized by “a unity of action and/or space” that can cut across page borders, as when a dramatically discrete scene begins at the bottom of one page and continues at the top of the next (111).

In this model, a comic is an architected visual space. The entire body of the comic becomes, in Groensteen's phrase, a “multistage multiframe,” a system that builds out from the single panel to various nested multi-frames in a kind of networked, rhizomatic structure (30). In this multi-frame, certain recurring images, panels, or symbols, whether adjacent or widely separated across the work, can form a network of associations, the construction of which Groensteen calls an *arthrology*—literally, a study of joints or joining, from the Greek *arthron*, meaning articulation (21-23).⁵ This concept is distinct from the idea of a recurrent symbol in conventional prose narrative, if only because comics images are literally *sited* upon pages: recurrent symbols are positioned within architected pages to create tabular patterns—that is, meaningful variations in the grid.⁶

Thus, recurrent symbolism can be *presented* without being narrated in the narrow sense of *recounted*—that is, without being called to our attention in words. Again, there's an illusion of immediacy here; recurrent symbols and motifs may be left for the reader to observe (or not) him or herself, without commandeering attention or deferring the forward thrust of the narrative action. This potential for implicit symbolism invites comparison to the workings of cinema, with the proviso that in comics, the rate of reading and acquisition are left fully up to the reader and so the reading experience may be quite slow, or recursive, as the reader needs or desires.

Also, in comics these recurrent symbols can be embedded and located on the page in ways that contribute to the visual patterning of the page, the episode, and the larger work. If the comics page is, as cartoonist Paul Pope likes to point out (see e.g. *Escapo*), a “design container,” then Groensteen's arthrology consists of the nesting of such containers and their contents so as to create complex patterns. The interweaving and positioning of recurrent images across a total work, what Groensteen calls braiding (*tressage*), is one of the main formal possibilities by which long-form comics, such as comic books and graphic novels, can be organized. Through braiding, the information and organization of a panel, a tier, and a page can be extended across many pages, across an entire book, and sometimes even across many successive publications. For Groensteen, “every panel exists, potentially if not actually, in relation with each of the others,” and also potentially in relation to the tier, the page, the sequence, and the whole text (146). Everything can connect to everything else. Symbolic and metaphoric repetition can occur, often unobtrusively, in the context of page and publication design, as part of the architectonics of the total work.

Campbell's *Alec*, with its breathing human passion and constant humor, admittedly seems remote from this sort of high formalism. Campbell is not an obsessive pattern-master to the same extent as Alan Moore (whose work is sometimes so intricately braided that a single panel can summarize the plot of an entire graphic novel). Yet the *Alec* cycle clearly exhibits both the networked structure envisioned by Groensteen and the braiding of particular elements. Remarkably, Campbell molded and tweaked these elements over a span of decades, as *Alec* was serialized in unpredictable, stuttering, seemingly desultory fashion in various forms and formats.

These elements often boast an unassuming ordinariness. For instance, one key element repeated in the early *Alec* stories is the young Campbell's obsession with dental health. At the end of a story in *Canute*'s second book, *Alec* prepares to go to a birthday party for his friend Penny Moore, half-deciding to "make a play" for Penny that night. However, plans go awry. *Alec*'s friend Danny Grey—a Dean Moriarty figure to Campbell's Sal Paradise, and in fact the dominant figure in the book—tells *Alec* that Penny's been in a car accident and "lost a couple of teeth" (55). *Alec* reacts by shuddering in horror, and Campbell reveals, later in book two, that the loss of teeth is *Alec*'s (and presumably Eddie's) "particular anxiety" (77). This phobia about lost and damaged teeth re-emerges later in *Canute*, in a six-panel strip, "The Horrid Vision in the Shaving Mirror," which Campbell disingenuously claims has no connection to anything else in the book (Fig. 5). Throughout *Canute*, *Alec* races from pub to pub, rationalizing his waster lifestyle with bohemian philosophies and Henry Miller-esque speculations about sexuality ("I saw humanity all pasted together with semen," page 80), but his teeth will still wear down, and, as the skull beneath the skin reminds him, his good times (and lifetime) will someday end.

In *Graffiti Kitchen*, chronologically the first *Alec* story after *Canute*, *Alec*'s preoccupation with teeth continues; he takes to carrying a toothbrush so that he can brush his teeth on the spot, a sign perhaps of his uncommitted, peripatetic nature (142). Now teeth symbolize not only mortality but also his inability to transcend his own desires and identify with others. The plot has everything to do with desire: after falling into a strange, somewhat unrequited love affair with a girl named Georgette, *Alec* has sex with Jane, Georgette's mother. *Alec*'s reasons for this are complicated; he's genuinely attracted to Jane, but it also seems a vindictive fuck, done to anger Georgette. On a date soon after, *Alec* and Jane "discuss over a beer what it would be like to suddenly find yourself stuck with someone else's body." The answer: "The hardest thing to get used to would be the backs of the other person's teeth" (156).

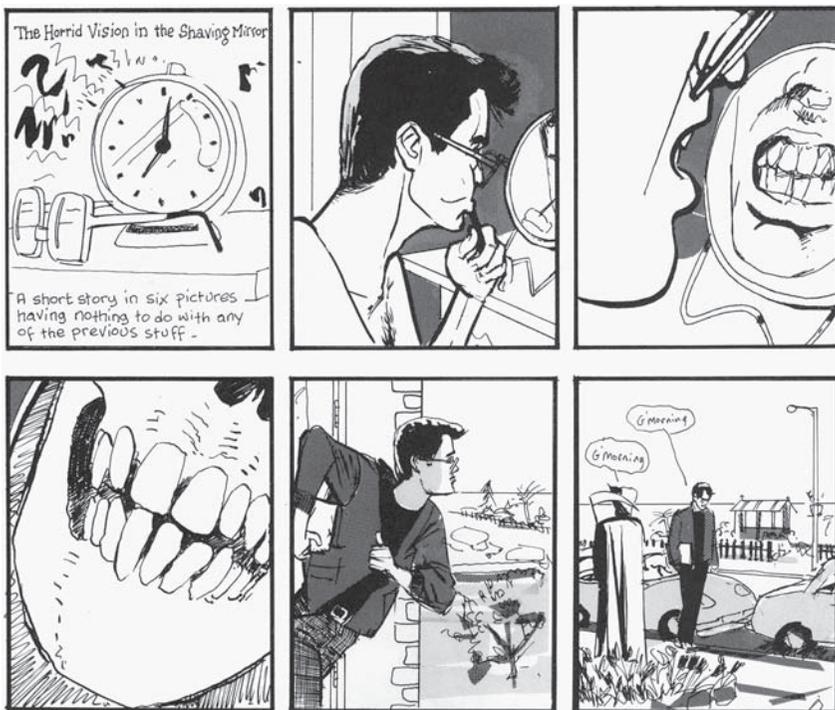


Fig 5. Eddie Campbell, "The Horrid Vision in the Shaving Mirror." *The King Canute Crowd*. From *Alec: The Years Have Pants*, page 123. © Eddie Campbell. Used by permission of the artist.

Predictably, this comedy of errors ends poorly. Alec never gets comfortable with the back of Jane's teeth, and he never understands the situation from her point of view. In fact Jane becomes a pawn in his love-hate relationship with Georgette. In *Canute* and *Kitchen* (the first 188 pages of *The Years Have Pants*) Alec reveals his emotional immaturity by bouncing like a pinball between teeth-rotting *thanatos* and a selfish, non-empathetic *eros*. Thus *Canute* and *Kitchen* make up an unflinchingly truthful, vicariously thrilling memoir of youthful embarrassment and excess. Campbell knits this memoir together with braided motifs that function simultaneously to insinuate meaning and, graphically, to complete his pages. Such motifs are often presented slyly, through an ostensible parataxis (literally, a placing side by side) rather than subordinated to an overtly narrated syntax.

What makes the functioning of such motifs in comics potentially different from that of repeated thematic or symbolic motifs in other media such as the novel or cinema? The difference is not absolute, but

braiding in comics does something medium-specific: it confers unity via fragmentation, or, to put it another way, exploits fragmentation-in-unity, a fragmentation enacted literally on the comics page. The architecture of each page depends on the size, shape, and positioning of the discrete visual elements, including images, panels, metapanel (panels arranged in an overall design to create a singular impact, as Will Eisner discusses in *Comics and Sequential Art*), captions, and display text, which together constitute the page as such. (We speak here of the page as the total design unit, in francophone criticism the *planche*, as opposed to the page as physical piece of paper.) In comics, a tabular awareness of the total design—in Pope’s sense the design container, or in Groensteen’s phrase the *hyperframe*—impinges on the linear unfolding of the narrative, creating another axis of potential meaning. The hyperframe entails the filling of the space of the page: it is quite unusual for a comic book text to end at mid-page, without some final panel or panels, or other graphic device, to fill the vacant space beneath (in contrast to novels, stories, essays, and poems, which often end mid-page, the blankness beneath constituting a form of punctuation or token of finality).

Returning to “The Horrid Vision in the Shaving Mirror,” every book-length edition of *The King Canute Crowd* (i.e., every *Alec* book in which this strip appears) shows the strip filling up the bottom two tiers of a standard nine-panel grid. If the strip at first appears digressive, as Campbell apparently wants it to, it nonetheless completes the hyperframe of the page. It fulfills the formal entailment created by Campbell’s characteristic use of the panel grid. In a tabular sense, then, the page remains unified by its overarching design, even though “The Horrid Vision” may appear as a sudden interruption of the main narrative. This quality—unity in fragmentation—is not a rare and esoteric thing in comics; myriad cartoonists, for example Gilbert Hernandez, Art Spiegelman, Chris Ware, Lynda Barry, and Dan Clowes, have taken advantage of the hyperframe to cram various thematically related strips or elements into a single jigsaw puzzle-like layout (Hatfield, “Tiny Fragments,” n. p.). The reader’s desire to see the comics page “completed” allows for nested or jumbled presentation.⁷ This aesthetics of fragmentation, though most often kept at bay by Campbell’s steady grids, surfaces in his occasional use of collage and his braiding of highly fraught images.

Fear of death and dissolution underlies, and is lent poignancy, by this puzzle-like assemblage of parts. Even as Eddie the man and *Alec* the project mature, life’s finitude remains an underlying concern. For instance, Campbell closes *The Dance of Lively Death* by listing various people fated to die: “The computer programmer, the comic book artist, the entrepreneur, the unemployable, pussycats ... you” (412). He is painfully aware that his

three children are mortal too, citing Edward Lear's poem "The Jumblies" to speak about their vulnerability, the fact that "they've all gone to sea in a sieve" (413-14). Awareness of life's inevitable end haunts the midlife *After the Snooter*, whose title refers to a bizarre winged insect whose unexpected appearance in Campbell's house serves as a *memento mori* and disruption, after which, Campbell says, nothing is the same. Finally, in the third-to-last page of the *Pants* omnibus, Campbell briefly presents a human skull that he says he's "been polishing" since page 128—polishing, revisiting, and braiding into numerous panels and scenes across the entirety of the book (636). Death is never far from Campbell's mind.

These fears of death, however, are offset by the powers of wisdom and the imagination, represented in *Pants* by that famous duo from schoolyard chants, sticks and stones. In *After the Snooter*, both Campbell and his young son Callum are prone to daydreaming; for example, in the strip "Used Car Dealers are Human Too," Campbell botches buying a car because he's busy thinking about his comics work (represented by Bacchus) instead of paying attention to the contracts he's signing. Callum likewise escapes the drudgery of car shopping through daydreams about Batman (478-79). The theme of daydreaming is made incarnate as a wooden stick in "The Visitation," a chronicle of writer Neil Gaiman's first visit with the Campbell family. As Gaiman packs to leave, Callum brings him a bow and arrow made from a stick as a going-away present, and Gaiman immediately takes off on his own flight of imagination, as he fantasizes about firing the weapon when he sides "with the dwarfs [sic] in the beleaguering of Angband" (460). Later in *Snooter*, the one-page strip "Confiscation" reveals that Callum has learned about the powers of both sticks and the imagination—albeit in his own cock-eyed way—from Gaiman's example (Fig. 6). If, as this strip gently suggests, there's a danger in too much daydreaming, art and imagination can also ennoble the stuff of everyday life, or at least provide an escape from the quotidian. Both Alec/Eddie and Callum are able to flee from reality—but the real escape artist is Campbell himself, who builds an imaginative playground out of such everyday occurrences.

Stones first appear in *Canute* as Alec discusses a book called *Thinking to Some Purpose* by L. Susan Stebbing; Alec has extracted from the book "a few little gems" of wisdom, which he archly calls "Stebbing stones." He addresses his readers directly, speaking also about the knowledge and insight he takes from novels, especially Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* (126). This loose *mélange* of wisdom, art, and minerals continues in *How to Be an Artist*, where Alec visits Alan Moore's home and discovers a "chaotic" environment that Moore and his then-wife Phyllis



Fig. 6. Eddie Campbell, "Confiscation." *After the Snooter*. From *Alec: The Years Have Pants*, page 484. © Eddie Campbell. Used by permission of the artist.

restore to some semblance of order each night by putting the fireplace tiles “back where they belong” (213). Comics writing is, in some sense, a matter of putting the tiles in the right places, and Moore’s mastery of the art restores at least momentary wholeness to broken chaos. Later in *Artist*, Campbell shows both himself/Alec and Moore in a used bookshop, sifting through the secondary literature on comics history and theory, then formulating new ideas for their art based on the information they’ve gleaned from these books. As Moore and Alec form their “own plans,” Campbell gives them thought balloons filled with stacking bricks that serve as the foundations for their aesthetic worlds. Stones, tiles, bricks: as Campbell writes, “To cultivate a separate life from the one happening in front of you—there’s a thing to pursue” (295). Just make sure the life of your imagination is built on rock.

The most obvious conflation between stones and art is the Ignatz Award, which Campbell wins in *After the Snooter*. Named after the brick-wielding psychotic mouse in George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat* strip, the Ignatz is a comic-book industry achievement award given out each year at the Small Press Expo. The award comes in the form of a brick. Campbell is justifiably proud of what that brick represents, though unsentimental when he needs to leave the award behind to lighten his luggage for overseas flights (543). Perhaps this is because he’s creating another, more important brick to replace his Ignatz.

The thirty-five new pages that conclude *Pants* are loosely structured around other building blocks, so to speak, or what Campbell calls “obscure objects” from his life, including figurines carved out of wine-bottle corks and a bag of candy Campbell noisily ripped open at the Australian premiere of the *From Hell* movie. Further, Campbell’s coda to the assembled book becomes a roll call of recurrences—this is where the “gleaming pate” of the skull reappears—that lend unity if not resolution to the work. These are the fragments Campbell shores up against chaos, in a process that simultaneously lets in the messiness of life and tries to ascribe meaning if not finality to the results.

Pants ends with a quick look at various other objects that—with world enough and time—Campbell the raconteur could tell us stories about, including the Campbell family’s first clothes wardrobe (a refrigerator box), the gravestones for deceased family cats, and a favorite photograph of Campbell and friends dressed in tuxedos and whooping it up. The last two panels of the book, however, are reserved for “the gift-wrapped brick,” another allusion to Herriman but also a reflexive commentary on Campbell’s own efforts at achieving unity (636). In dimension and in heft, this “gift-wrapped brick”—shown hurtling to the right, as if to escape the hyperframe of the page—symbolizes nothing less than *The*

Years Have Pants itself, Campbell's present to his readers and his stab at immortality, his attempt to externalize, as artfully as possible, the monument built with the bricks stacking up in his mind.

We should remember, though, that most of *The Years Have Pants* was published as smaller bricks first—three pages in an issue of *Dee Vee* here, four pages in an issue of *Bacchus* there—over a span of three decades. It's remarkable, and a testament to Campbell's skill at braiding, that the recurrences that lend structure and weight to individual books also recur over the greater thirty-year arc of *Alec*. If some of the individual books that comprise *The Years Have Pants* were first made possible by an aesthetics of fragmentation and seriality, that same aesthetics repeats at a higher level when one reads the assembled omnibus; yet Campbell's marshalling of fragments, his putting the tiles into order so to speak, imparts an extraordinary sense of fullness and design to the whole work. The driving impulse here is ostensibly to impose order and finality, to make out of Campbell's years of work one big commemorative doorstep.

Campbell's process of ordering becomes even more complex when we consider how texts outside the *Alec* stories also become threads in his weave. Campbell wrote and drew *Snooter* while collaborating with Alan Moore on *From Hell*, and *Snooter* is shot through with verbal and visual references, both amusing and unsettling, to *From Hell*'s characters and narrative situations. The opening page of "Running a Publishing House out of the Front Room" (443) shows Campbell and assistant Pete Mullins composing *From Hell* pages while Campbell's wife Anne cleans up the clerical detritus in their home / studio space; we see a penciled close-up of William Gull, *Hell*'s central villain, as well as typeset excerpts of Moore's voluminous script. In "The House that Jack Built," Campbell redraws panels from *Hell* to make a witty comparison between police inspector Frederick Abberline—whose silence about the Ripper murders ensures his future material comfort—and Campbell's own windfall as his family buys a house with "big fat cheques" from Hollywood because of the *From Hell* movie (501). More disturbingly, several stories in *Snooter* chart Campbell's insomnia, and during one of his sleepless nights Campbell imagines himself murdered by William Gull, who turns out to be Campbell himself (in a brutally literal self-flagellation). Sex between Gull and his virginal new bride plays out in completely black panels in chapter two of *Hell* (pages 1, 12); the final page of *After the Snooter*, likewise in black panels, both presents and refuses to show a failed sex scene between Eddie and Anne (576).

The *Alec* stories, and *Snooter* in particular, allow for multiple intrusions from other texts, including *From Hell*, *Bacchus* (who, ironically, visits Eddie in the middle of the night to warn him of the dangers of drink),

and such diverse non-Campbell characters as Krazy Kat and *Watchmen's* Dr. Manhattan. This intertextual repartee intensifies Campbell's braiding, for these are not momentary, drive-by allusions, but recurrent elements that enrich the autobiography as a whole. The repeated intrusion of these and other comics into Campbell's story casts light on his artistic ambitions and anxieties; for example, the allusions to Herriman simultaneously invoke the greater history of comics, bolster Campbell's unpretentious self-image as craftsman, and testify to his longing for artistic autonomy (see e.g. 296; 372). In short, *Alec's* narrative allusivity unifies and enriches its larger pattern.

As an artist, Campbell is an agent of both order and chaos. His narrative braiding places individual *Alec* stories into greater systems of meaning and organization, even as the poignancy of *The Years Have Pants* comes from his repeated gestures towards chaos, irresolution, and loss. Campbell obsessively builds patterns out of the aleatory cascade of his everyday life, reminding us that we've all gone "to sea in a sieve" and that life is shot through with inexplicable events. Maybe Campbell's tightrope walk between order and chaos was born when he first read that copy of *Strange Tales* #141 in the hospital, and was inspired to make his own comics with "a magic, otherworldly quality" but with all the "cheerbliness" and tragedy of this one. Maybe readers of Campbell's work are a bit like young Eddie scouring the newsstands of Glasgow, slowly assembling a larger story out of bits and pieces, reveling in crossovers with other comics characters, and deriving joy from a life separate from the one happening in front of us.

It remains to pry open one final can-of-worms at our conclusion. We haven't yet mentioned that, in the endnotes to *Pants*, Campbell admits he has revised a number of pages and left others out of the omnibus altogether, making the book's contents not a comprehensive historical archive of his career but rather a selective reconstruction. Further, in his preface to *The Years Have Pants* he imagines another edition of the book, "an old baggy version [...] in another twenty [years]," that will undoubtedly revise the raw materials of his life into new arthrologies (6). On some level, Campbell admits that the autobiographical work of *Alec* is fictive, an issue underscored by the process of editing and polishing his work into the omnibus edition. How far should the braiding and tweaking of a memoir deviate from the events of a life as originally lived? *The Years Have Pants* reactivates a question posed in the first place by Campbell's creation of Alec MacGarry as alter ego: the question of fiction's role in autobiography. We'll end by suggesting that this foundational issue in

autobiography studies warrants a further look in the context of serial comics publication (and republication). The question is how (or to what extent) a long-term, intermittent autobiographical project can inform, put pressure on, narrativize, and fictionalize the long-term business of living.

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Notes

The authors wish to thank Jared Gardner and David Herman for their suggestions and guidance.

1. All page references to *Alec* comics are based on the collected edition, *Alec: "The Years Have Pants."* We have occasionally cited author's notes or indicia from previous *Alec* editions in order to shed light on the work's publication history. Note that the title *The Years Have Pants* appears in quotation marks on the book's cover, but not in its indicia, nor in Campbell's foreword. We have placed it within quotation marks on first mention and in our bibliography, but not elsewhere.
2. Surveys of the London small-press scene include Gravett, "The Great Escape," and Campbell's own idiosyncratic account in *Alec: How to Be an Artist*. There are some pages in the original edition of *Artist*—particularly when Campbell presents his now-outdated canon of exemplary graphic novels—that were not reprinted in *The Years Have Pants*. Campbell's blog *The Fate of the Artist* (not to be confused with the book of the same name) has also included valuable postings about the scene. Ed Pinsent's blog is a fine source of bibliographical information, including galleries showing scores of small-press comics, among them *Fast Fiction* and individual efforts by many artists.
3. For more on the overall trajectory of Campbell's career and publications, see Kreiner, "Lust for Life, Mate!"; Deppey, "A Kind of Alchemy"; and Campbell's *Comics Journal* interviews (1991 and 2006).
4. What are truth and self in autobiographical comics? One important test case is the late Harvey Pekar, who chronicled his quotidian Cleveland life within the pages of his comic *American Splendor*, begun in 1976. Pekar, however, was a writer only, not an illustrator; he wrote stories with stick-figure storyboards that were then drawn by various artists with different styles. As Joseph Witek notes, this mode of collaboration destabilizes the notion of a coherent, autonomous "I" in Pekar's autobiographical tales: "In *American Splendor* the sequential art medium embodies in its material form the collaboration of other people in the construction of individual identity" (137).

Paul John Eakin makes a similar point when he argues that in Art's Spiegelman's *Maus* (2 volumes, 1986 and 1991), the core relationship between father and concentration-camp survivor Vladek Spiegelman and Art exemplifies how much our sense of our authentic self is shaped by our relationships with others (*How Our Lives Become Stories* 58-61). Spiegelman the son acknowledges the difficulty of truthful expressions of the self by self-reflexively showing his cartoon avatar thinking about what masks he and the other characters should wear. Charles Hatfield further discusses questions of authenticity and

fictionalization in Chapter 4 of *Alternative Comics*, examining not only Pekar's relatively realistic approach but also other "autobiographical" works, including satires by Robert Crumb, Daniel Clowes, and Gilbert Hernandez that question both autobiography's claims to truthfulness and the very possibility of a coherent self, inside or outside the panels.

Questions of authenticity, and of the role of the fictive and performative in enabling self-invention, are fundamental to autobiography studies more broadly. See, for example, the influential studies by Eakin—both *How Our Lives Become Stories* and *Fictions in Autobiography*—or Adams' *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*, or numerous selections in Smith and Watson's anthology *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (1998). Important recent contributions to the study of autobiographical comics include Chute's *Graphic Women* (2010), articles by Tensuan and Whitlock in a special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* on "graphic narrative" (52.4, 2006), and a special issue of *Biography* on "autographics" (31.1, 2008).

5. Groensteen's concept of arthrology has roots both in prior comics study and in literary theory. Indeed the term *arthrology*, if not Groensteen's precise use of it, hails from Jean Ricardou, whose literary criticism Groensteen cites (168), specifically the series of articles "Éléments de textique" that appeared in the journal *Conséquences* in 1987-1991. More generally, Groensteen's work, and that of other Francophone comics theorists such as Jan Baetens, Pascal Lefèvre, and Benoît Peeters, appears to have been influenced by Ricardou's work on and within the *nouveau roman* (if not his subsequent theoretical project *la textique*). For example, Groensteen's stress on moving beyond linear reading to the translinear and networked aspects of a text recalls Ricardou's *Nouveaux problèmes du roman* (1978). Similar discussion of "relations translinéaires" can be found in Baetens and Lefèvre's book of comics theory, *Pour une lecture moderne de la bande dessinée* (1993). However, Groensteen's *System* is the most up-to-date and fully elaborated work of comics theory available in English that discusses translinear relationships. The technical use of the word *tressage* also appears to be original to Groensteen. We thank Jan Baetens and Pascal Lefèvre for bringing this critical genealogy to our attention.
6. Francophone comics theory takes as given the distinction between *linear* and *tabular* readings of the comics page, that is, between reading the page in conventional reading order (the linear) and reading it as an overall visual surface or grid (the tabular, in the sense of tablet or board). Pierre Fresnault-Deruelles codified these terms in his seminal essay, "Du linéaire au tabulaire" (1976).
7. An outstanding example of this unity-in-fragmentation would be Chris Ware's "Comic Section," the dust jacket-cum-introductory story in the Ware-edited anthology *McSweeney's Issue 13* (2004). See Fischer, "Crickets," n. p.

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