

Chapter 14

The Semiotics of Sequential Visual Art in *Asterix and Cleopatra*

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ABSTRACT

*The structure of sequential visual art allows written text and visual images to converge at a common space devoid of polarizations. The distribution of symbols and patterns in the practice of comic art systematically results in a novel language that is flexible enough to hold diverse themes relatable across age groups. The marginalization of comics in both branches of literature and art allows diverse thematic expressions otherwise difficult to represent through traditional tools of expressions. Arthur Danto in his book *The Transfiguration of Common Place* (1981) expresses how paintings have the potential to go beyond the contemplation of merely the aesthetic qualities to an externalization of an artist's consciousness. The following research presents comic art as a spatial deviation from the traditional mediums of storytelling to a more easily accessible yet sophisticated body of work by decoding and analyzing the structure of the unique language of sequential visual art portrayed in Albert Uderzo and René Goscinny's *Asterix and Cleopatra* (1982).*

INTRODUCTION

The postmodern condition according to Jean-François Lyotard (1979) deconstructs the grand narratives or the pre-existing notion of 'métarécit' that saw the narrative of historical meaning, experience and knowledge as the master idea. He uses the term 'petit récit' (p. 60) or little narratives to explain this detachment from the totalitarian interpretation and establishing a rather fragmented reproduction of life. If society is a "giant machine", says Lyotard, then the desire to acquire knowledge is a compulsion (p. 10). It is only by perceiving the action of gaining knowledge as the foundation of the society can the latter be removed from its domineering position as an "integrated whole" (p.10). Through polar choices, where one idea is accepted to have a parallel alternative or the presence of voices that are opposed to

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quantifying a given idea as absolute knowledge can the society open its space for multiple languages to be heard. It is the distribution of symbols and patterns in the practice of comic art that systematically result in a novel language which is flexible enough to hold diverse themes ranging from complex political strife to harmless Sunday funnies relatable across age groups. Referring to Max Ernst's *A Week of Kindness*, McCloud concurs that the 'surrealistic collage novel' nature of Ernst's 182 plates from the twentieth century would never be dreamt of being addressed as 'comics' in the traditional school of art. But even though the plates lack the "conventional story, there is no mistaking the central role which sequence plays in the work. Ernst doesn't want you to browse this thing, he wants you read it" (p. 19). The research below attends to this binary language present in the art of making comics and the action of reading comics through a panel by panel analysis of *Asterix and Cleopatra* thereby attempting to represent the influence of interdisciplinary texts in a critical reading of the comic book.

SEQUENTIAL VISUAL ART AS A "MEETING PLACE BETWEEN TWO SUBJECTS OF EXPRESSION"

The structure of sequential visual art allows written text and visual images to converge at a common space devoid of polarizations. This "meeting place between two 'subjects of expression' (in the sense of the linguist Louis Hjelmslev)" allows Thierry Groensteen to design the term "visual code" where an image is accorded with the text to reveal a defined language (p. 3). Each character in *Asterix and Cleopatra* has been provided with their unique set of visual codes which ultimately helps the reader to imagine the sound of the voices associated with the illustrations of the characters and thereby separating one character from the other. Groensteen identifies this spatial semiotic operation and comes to the conclusion that sequential visual art is not all about the space between the frames of a panel or a disorderly sprinkle of pictures. With logical reasoning behind the art of making comics Groensteen is of the belief that there is order in the creation of sequential visual art where just like our verbal language there is the presence of conjunctions to connect multiple ideas and a repetitive pattern that keeps this unique language cohesive and easily understood,

Within the spatio-topical operation—that is, within the space that comics appropriates and develops—one can distinguish two degrees in the relations between the images. The elementary relations, of the linear type, compose what we will call the restricted arthrology. Governed by the operation of breaking down (decoupage), they put in place the sequential syntagms, which are most often subordinated to the narrative ends. It is at this level that writing takes priority, as a complementary function of narration. The other relations, translinear or distant, emerge from general arthrology and decline all of the modalities of braiding (tressage). They represent a more elaborated level of integration between the narrative flux (which can also be called the narrative energy or, again, to adopt an expression from Hubert Damisch, the "story shuttle" [navette du récit]) and the spatio-topical operation, in which the essential component, as Henri Van Lier has named it, is the "multiframe" (multicadre). (p. 26)

When Cleopatra orders Edifis to build a magnificent palace for Julius Cesar in Alexandria, a distinct difference lies between the hieroglyphic 'image-text' in Cleopatra's speech bubble and that of Edifis's (p. 6). Underlined with a strict dominating tone bound with loud exclamation marks, Cleopatra's speech sequences illustrate the dominative regal way in which she sits and moves about that marks the attitude

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