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Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art

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Scott McCloud

*Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*

Interface

—Feature by Alan D. Manning
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**Index Terms**—Information design, visuals.

INSIGHTS about professional communication may come from odd and unexpected places. McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* (hereafter *UC*) is a case in point. Despite the juvenile connotations evoked by any discussion of comic books, the theory of visual communication presented in *UC* arguably rivals the best of contemporary semiotics (that is, the study of how we make meaning out of gestures, words, paragraphs, pictures, and so on).

I’d like to relate parts of McCloud’s comic-book semiotics to our concerns as information designers, our everyday decisions to use photographs or line sketches to convey an idea. As more information is posted on the World Wide Web and more technical texts are typeset on computers, most of us will find it easier to scan original photographs into our databases and use these to supplement text. Line drawings, which used to be far easier to reproduce than photos in the old print technologies, now require (relatively) more time and artistic skill to render effectively on computer. Our temptation, then, will likely be to scan in more photos and labor over fewer line sketches. Before giving in to this temptation, however, we should consider what *UC* has to say about the unique psychological impact of the line sketch, in other words, the cartoon.

McCloud lays out a general theory of “icons” (that is, visual forms resembling actual objects in some aspect). All information designers can make good use of this theory. In the balance of this article, I will summarize it and outline just one of its implications for professional communicators.

**Icon Theory** Many have heard of the distinction semioticians make between “icons” (visual forms of resemblance, e.g., photos or sketches), “indices” (pointing signals, e.g., smoke pointing to fire or a mercury level in a thermometer indicating temperature), and “symbols” (forms with meanings learned only by habitual use, e.g., a cross on a church, the letter A, a word, or a wink). Few know that this distinction was developed by American semiotician C. S. Peirce (1839–1914) and that Peirce (whose name is pronounced like purse) further divided icons into three basic types (see, e.g., Peirce’s *Collected Papers* [1]):

- “iconic qualsigns” (abstract forms not necessarily resembling anything but themselves, e.g., a Jackson Pollock painting);
- “iconic sinsigns” (realistic images resembling actual things, like a photograph or a realist painting); and, finally,
- “iconic legisigns” (diagrams or cartoons—abstracted from real appearances, but still perceived as resembling some real thing).

McCloud recreates and elaborates on Peirce’s trichotomy of icons, adopts a simpler terminology, and cleverly applies this theoretical schema to the specific problem of cartoons and comics in relation to other art forms (pp. 146–149, Fig. 1 below).

In brief, the history of art actually began with cartoon-like forms. Consider cave paintings and Egyptian illustrations (Fig. 2).

From these ancient roots, cartoonish representation evolves in two directions. First, many
cartoon-icons become more symbolic (moving rightward) and form the basis for written language as the pictures come to represent ideas and then sounds rather than things. The letter A for example evolved from a stylized sketch of a bull's head (aleph), now inverted. The letter B developed from an ancient glyph for a house (beth), and so on. On the other hand, other cartoon-icons also move in the opposite direction (leftward), gradually evolving to more realistic images, from Egyptian to Renaissance styles.

In modern times, art techniques reached the pinnacle of realism (just as photography came along making the pure-realist artist somewhat superfluous). In order to progress any further, according to McCloud, artists had no place to go but “up” (in the pyramid schema of Fig. 1), up toward Peirce’s pure qualisigns, the realm of pure visual forms, divorced from both physical reality and external meaning. This theory explains the trend toward abstract art typical of the twentieth century.

**Psychological Impact of the Cartoon-Icon** Besides justifying the cartoon comic intellectually in relation to other art forms, UC employs this same theoretical schema to explain the line sketch’s unique psychological impact, conveying ideas in a way that photo realism cannot reproduce:

> When we abstract an image through cartooning we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential “meaning,” an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t. Film critics will sometimes describe a live-action film as a “cartoon” to acknowledge the stripped-down intensity of a simple story or visual style. Though the term is often used disparagingly, it can be equally well applied to many time-tested classics [e.g., The Wizard of Oz]. Simplifying characters and images toward a purpose can be an effective tool for storytelling in any medium. Cartooning isn’t just a way of drawing, it’s a way of seeing (pp. 30–31).

**Interface with Professional Communication: Photos Versus Sketches** Most well-written technical writing manuals recognize that sketches have fewer distracting details than photos and that this can be an advantage. There are other reasons, however, to resist the overuse of photographs for general instruction purposes, not covered in standard technical manuals but explicit in the McCloud/Peirce theory. In McCloud’s terms, cartoons amplify new ideas by simplifying them and cartoon-like sketches embody general con-
cepts in a way that no photo-
realistic image of an actual thing
can. A photograph is the imprint of
one and only one object. A sketch
potentially represents all objects
of a general conceptual type. For
example, I recently encountered on
the World Wide Web a discussion
of dragonflies which made the
following, technical point:

The body plan of the dragon-
fly is among the most suc-
cessful of any animal on the
planet, having survived for
hundreds of millions of years
with relatively little change.
Along with grasshoppers,
cockroaches and crickets,
dragonflies have been on the
planet since long before the
dinosaurs. Fossil evidence
tells us that some of the an-
cestors of this creature were
the size of crows, measuring
two feet from wing tip to wing
wisc.edu/coolimages/captions/
dfly2.html].

This passage was linked to a vast
catalog of dragonfly images scanned
in by the Texas Agricultural Exper-
iment station (www.our-town.com/
experiment/ ©1996 by Forrest L
Mitchell. Permission granted for
nonprofit use). I've included some
suggestive samples (Fig. 3, bitmaps
of the original color images).

Though the images are impressive,
both in their detail and the sheer
number of them available, they do
not efficiently support the point of
the technical passage given above,
that the general biological design
of dragonflies has been highly
effective for hundreds of millions
of years.

The photographs by themselves
are inadequate for at least two
reasons. First, they do not quickly
give a sense of the general bio-
logical design of dragonflies. The
individual insects photographed
vary significantly in leg length,
leg position, tail thickness, wing
shape, and so forth. Second, the
photographs by themselves can-
ot indicate just what biological
advantages any given dragonfly
has. The line sketch in Fig. 4 is far
better suited to these purposes.

Why does the cartoonish sketch
reinforce the general ideas ex-
pressed in words more effectively
than a whole catalogue of pho-
tographs? I refer readers again to
Figs. 1 and 2. Cartoons lie closer
than photo-real images to lan-

Fig. 3.

Fig. 4.
guage and symbolic thought in
the McCloud/Peirce scheme. In
their theory, thoughts and ideas
likewise exist mainly as vaguely
sketched (i.e., cartoon-like) forms.
Since cartoons already exist
as concepts for the reader,
they tend to flow easily
through the conceptual terri-
tory between panels... But re-
alistic images have a bumpier
ride. Theirs is a primarily vi-

sual existence which doesn’t
pass easily into the realm of
ideas (pp. 90–91).

As professional communicators,
our business is to guide readers
along in the realm of ideas. Car-
toons and line sketches serve as
essential tools in this business,
tools that ought not be sacrificed
to the now increasing convenience
of scanning and mounting photo-
graphic images in our instructional
texts.

References

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