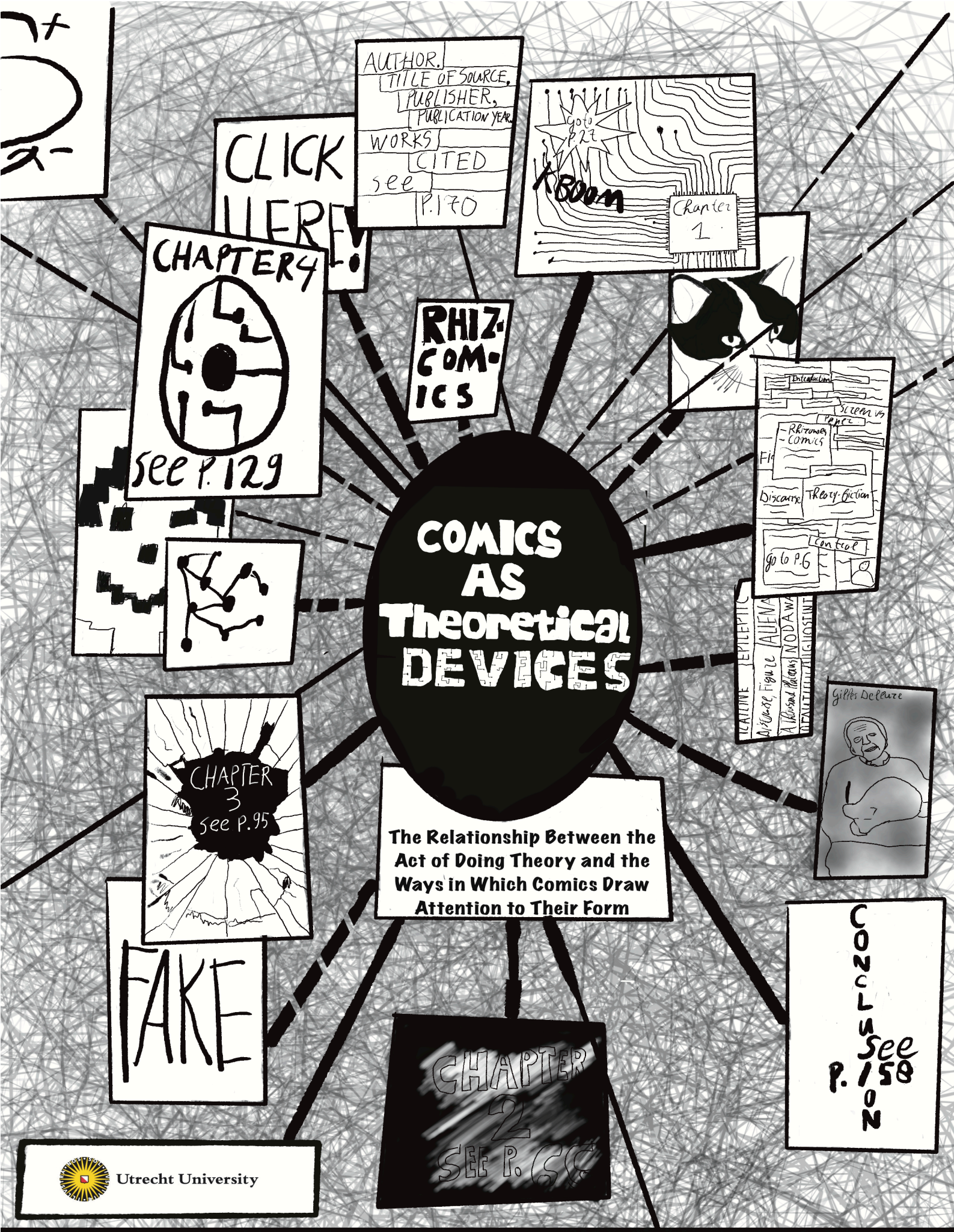

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Table of Contents

The title page, as well as every other image captioned with "comic," is drawn by the author of this thesis, unless mentioned otherwise.

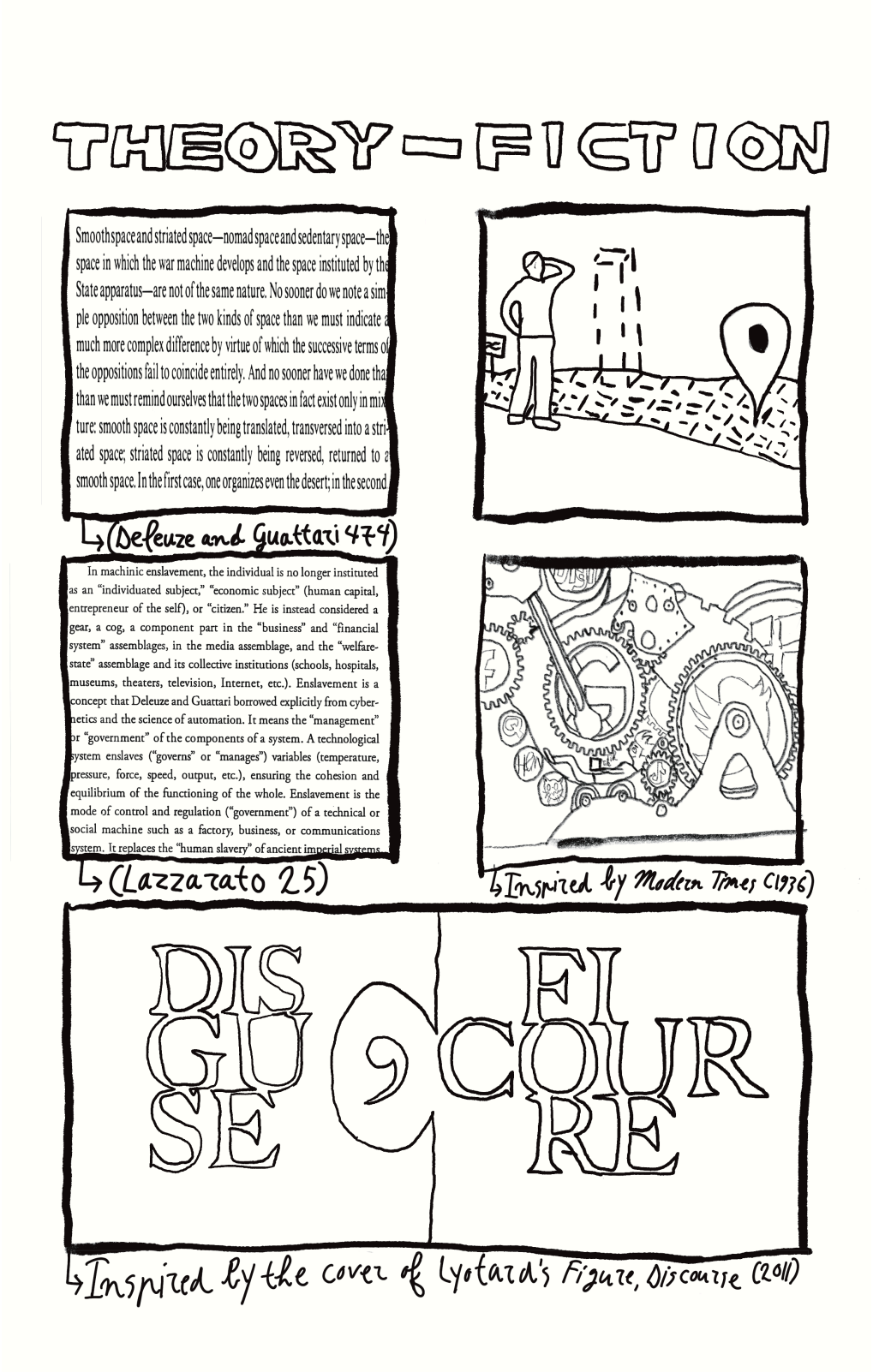
Abstract

Today's digital culture is becoming harder to analytically approach and theorize due to its multimodality, speed, scale, and pervasive control. These difficulties present a problem for theory, as many scholars continue to focus on textual discourse as a constituting factor of, and approach to, digital culture, rather than on its formal, or material, aspects. Due to this gap in scholarship, this thesis argues for a new and more emblematic theoretical approach to the digital in the form of comics by explicitly positioning comics' potential as "theory-fiction."

Initially conceptualized by Mark Fisher, theory-fiction seeks to do theory from a fictional standpoint to align it more closely with the digital and to mirror how the digital is subjected to the same fictional groundings. In my work, I extend Fisher's concept to argue that comics, much in the same way, are emblematic of digital culture, and further, that, as a hybrid form combing both visuals and text, offer a theoretical vantage point even more closely aligned to the digital in providing a reading practice where the relationship between text and image is complicated and ruptured.

By oscillating between looking *at* the formal aspects of comics and *through* their content—a method of close reading taken from Jason Helms— my thesis highlights these points of complication and rupture and proposes using comics as theory-fiction. Through close analysis of three case studies—Joshua W. Cotter's *Nod Away* (2016), Inés Estrada's *Alienation* (2019), and Shirow Masamune's *The Ghost in the Shell* series (1991-2001)—I argue that each, taken as theory-fiction, offers a disruptive reading experience from which a space can be opened to approach digitality. First, *Nod Away* analyzes the way mediation within comics, and in extension digital media, is built upon negation, on which *Alienation* marks this absence as the constituting factor of alienation between user and mediator, whereupon *The Ghost in the Shell* highlights this alienating mediation as an interface that

changes the machine as much as the human. Taken together, my reading of these three comics as theory-fiction aims to show a more fruitful way to approach and theorize digital media with from a relatively outside position, as well as to further highlight the theoretical importance of comics in general and to offer the tools to do theory with them.



Comic 1 – The first two panels on the left contain references to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (the University of Minnesota Press edition) and Maurizio Lazzarato's *Signs and Machines*, whereas the second panel on the right is referencing Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. The bottom panel is inspired by the cover of the English translation of Jean-François Lyotard's *Discourse, Figure* which was designed by Wilsted & Taylor Publishing Services.

Maybe speech and Communication have been corrupted. They're thoroughly permeated by money—and not by accident but by their very nature. We've got to hijack speech. Creating has always been something different from communicating. The key thing may be to create vacuoles of noncommunication, circuit breakers, so we can elude control.

—Gilles Deleuze, "Control and Becoming" 175

Introduction: The Need for New Approaches in a Fictionalized World

The Economy of Attention

There are several different ways of reading this introduction, but the most probable ways are that you are either reading it on a printed page or on the screen of one of your digital devices. Each different mode of reading has its own advantages. The paper version perhaps allows for more focus, the ease of taking notes with a pen or pencil and the comfort of reading without any light emanating from the page itself. Whereas reading it from a digital device enables you to quickly look up interesting concepts or ideas found in this thesis, to highlight sentences with the precision a mouse allows for and to offer you several different tools to easily copy and paste text when necessary. Besides the actual reading advantages, what is of importance is the medium itself. When you read on paper, it is, presumably, only the paper in front you, whereas the paper on the screen is embedded within a program, which is again embedded within an operating system. What this marks is a difference in the way a text can play with composition, for instance, imposing hyperlinks in a digital text that will not work in an analogue text, and invoking other elements, such as images, which an analogue text does not allow for. In this way, reading on a screen has more in common with reading a comic than just plan analogue text, due to the amount of connections the reader has to make between their

different distinct elements. Moreover, it is a different way of spending your attention. Invoking my own experience here, I can safely say that I drift off easier when reading on screen than on paper. All the images on a screen invite me to click on them, to do something simultaneously, to immediately look up something which causes me to forget where I was, and to lose myself in another website. My attention, when reading on a screen is dispersed, rather than focused.

Chances are that this sounds familiar to you and, if so, you are implicated in what Richard A. Lanham has termed an "economics of plenty." As he explains:

> The screen works differently from the page. […] Above all, a different expressive economy prevails. The printed page depends on an economics of deprival. No color, no movement, images in careful moderation. All these sacrificed to create an expressive field that encourages concentration on conceptual thought. It is a monopolistic attention economy, directed from the top. The digital screen depends on an economics of plenty. It allows competition between word, image, and sound for our attention. It is a market attention economy, driven from the bottom. (20)

An economy of deprival only allows for attention to be directed one way, from the reader to the page. Whereas in an economy of plenty, attention is being fought over by the different elements existing on the screen. Which element wins depends not only on the conscious decision of the user and her intentions when using her device, but rather, it also largely depends on preconscious factors, for instance, which elements look the most attractive and which application is able to capture your attention the longest before you return to your previous intention.

Societies of Control

In other words, it is a competition of control. Famously conceptualized by Gilles Deleuze, "control" is a form of power that is not directly related to any human actor as such and in this way differs from the disciplinary power that came before it ("Societies of Control" 4).[1] Control is situated within connectiveness, as Deleuze puts it: "the man of control is undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network" (6). It is precisely in connection where control is situated. The individual within "the society of control" has to be connected all the time to everything and everyone, rather than being able to move between spaces that are different from each other (5-6). To bring this back to the previous discussion of the screen, the design of certain applications and (digital) environments are made to know the user's movements, for instance, making certain aspects as addictive as possible to keep the user longer on the platform itself and by making them click desirable content (Moore 441). These designs are based on statistics, which measure user's responses and can, therefore, show the highest probability of what a user will do. It is pre-emptive rather than coordinated, since to control something is to know with a certain probability what someone will do. It is here that the "dividual" is located (4). On the one hand the user is an actor—someone with intentions—while on the other hand she is located within statistics and behavior, that is, the likelihood of her performing in a certain way. In other words, the user is no longer just a free agent who will be punished once she has done something wrong, but an agent whose actions are measured against the larger population to establish the likelihood of them happening and thus to correct and strike pre-emptively when necessary.

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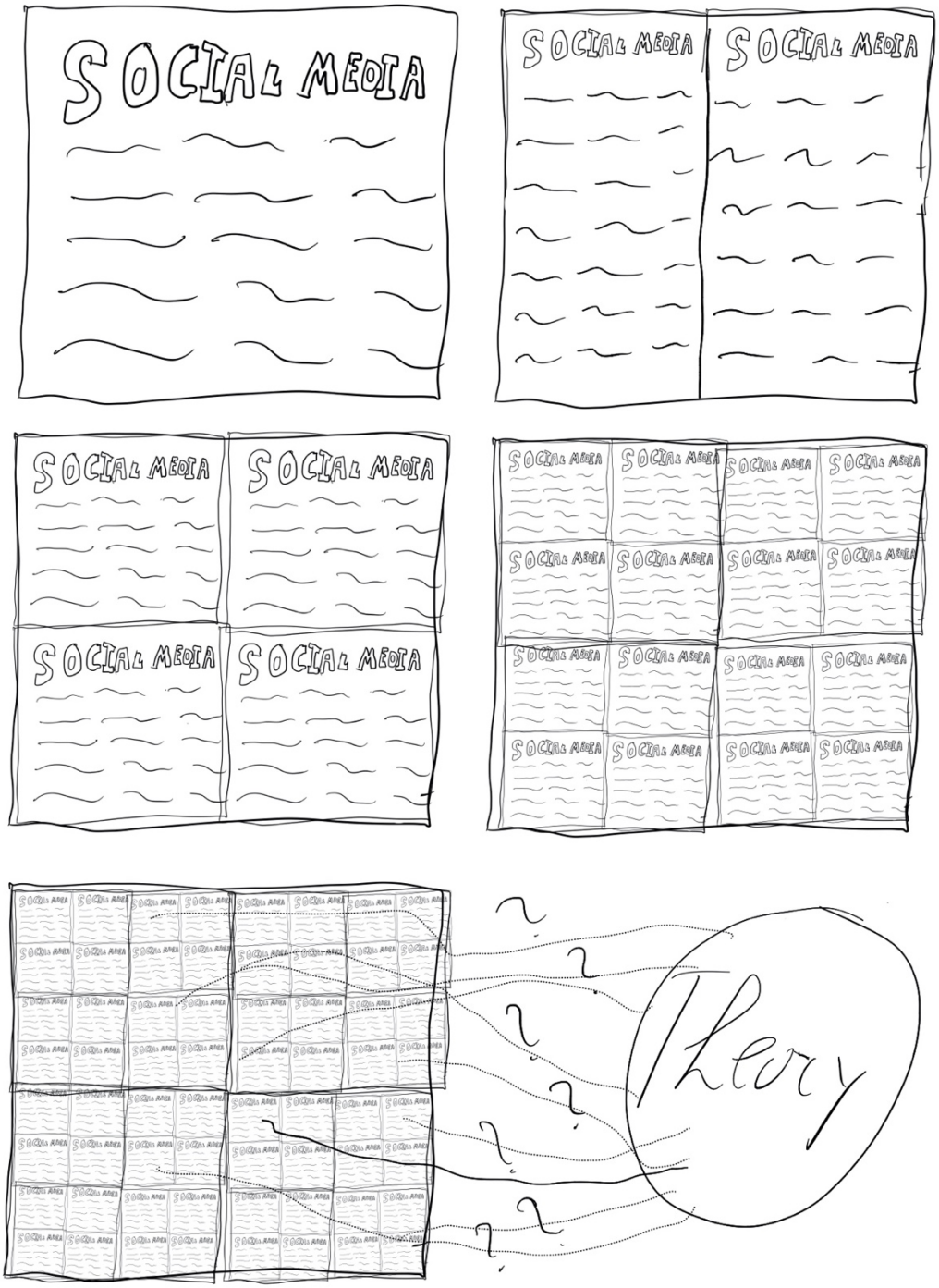
[1]The disciplinary society, to which Deleuze refers, can be characterized as a grid. Each separate space in the grid stands for a space with its own rules and customs, such as the family and work, in which the individual moves and where she knows what to except. Whereas societies of control, following Deleuze, blur the line between each of the spaces. Work needs to be done at home and home is brought at work through, for instance, smartphones. The dividual no longer knows what to except when entering space, since via connection all disciplinary spaces are homogenized.

Comic 2 - Inspired by the cover of Ellen Forney's *Marbles*.

Along with the user, the role of information displayed on these screens and platform changes as well. According to Nathan Moore, information is "primary in control societies: all propositions are brought under statistical regulation so that their potential meanings might be arranged in advance, not through processes of exclusion and inclusion (confinement), but

through a radical equalization where one is just as good as another" (441). Moore posits here that every piece of information, rather than just being denied seeing the light of day, is made equal by making them appear as one of the possible choices a user can pick from. Following the work of William S. Burroughs, Moore argues that control needs uncontrolled options as much as it needs controlled options for the user to choose from. Otherwise, control would have more in common with an absolute power, where choice is out of the question. In other words, to control someone that person still needs to have an array of choices to choose from. Control exists in having a good grasp on which choice will be chosen by having the desired choice made as attractive, or attentive, as possible. Therefore, rather than telling a person what is true or not, control societies present every piece of information as being equally true with the caveat that it probably already knows which choice will be chosen. This explains the high valiance of problematic news on platforms like Facebook; because regardless of their validity, each item or post is presented in the same manner for many of its users.[2] Also, sometimes the validity of information does not really matter for platforms, as what is important are the views and clicks on advertisements rather than the information presented.

[2]It should be noted that after the storming of the United States Capital at the start of 2021, many digital platforms, including Facebook, acted against fake news sources by questioning the validity of some posts to the users seeing them. Nonetheless, they remain on the platform, and it is easy for fake news to slip through. See, for instance, Datta.



Comic 3

What these situations necessitate is a rhetoric accounting for the different ways information is presented, with an emphasis on preconsciousness rather than just on consciousness, and which enables proper reflection on why we spend attention or make our choices in this or that way. In other words, as Deleuze puts it: "We've got to hijack speech. Creating has always been something different from communicating. The key thing may be to create vacuoles of noncommunication, circuit breakers, so we can elude control" ("Becoming and Control" 175). Deleuze explicitly highlights here that to elude control, spaces need to be created that disrupt the communication happening, as breakers rather than enablers. Such spaces allow the user to exit the "circuit"—the line someone follows due to the predicative structure within a society of control—by, for instance, allowing for a brief exit from that circuit relation.

The earlier brief allusion to Burroughs gives an insight into how these spaces can be created. Burroughs was someone on whom Deleuze relied heavily when conceptualizing his notion of control, as well as searching for how to elude it (Gontarski 72).[3] Especially valuable here is Burroughs' "cut-up method" because it allowed him to recompose different pieces of texts which, when placed together, created new meaning. This method works against control by cutting the associations one text previously called upon and which enabled the control to take place, for example, by associating the text with an action or idea. The end result of the technique, for instance Burroughs' *Nova Trilogy*,[4] created new meaning out of different textual parts and, therefore, aimed to elude control (70). Nonetheless, Deleuze and Félix Guattari argued that Burroughs' method was not enough because it still implied a linguistic

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[3]For more on the close connection between Burroughs and Deleuze' thinking of control, see Moore 435-442 and O'Sullivan 205-207.

[4]*The Nova Trilogy* consisted of a total of three novels, which were *The Soft Machine* (1961), *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962) and *Nova Express* (1964).

unity between its different cut-up elements (*A Thousand Plateaus* 4). In extension, I argue that what is needed is the shattering of such unity on a level that is closer to digital media by working with some of the same heterogeneous elements, in this case image and text, precisely a shattering that comics allow for.[5]

Comics as Breakers

Today, comics are considered a major creative and cultural force. Take, for instance, the field of "graphic medicine" which connects comics to the practice of medicine by allowing them to challenge "accepted conventions" (Czerwiek et al 3), the renewed interest in autobiographical comics and the way they can challenge social norms (Whitlock and Poletti 4), as well as the way comics "offer powerful tools for scholarly inquiry" (Kuttner et al. 2). My thesis aims to add to the discourse on the relevance of comics by highlighting the ways they can open up new creative spaces to think about contemporary societies of control and offer new conceptual and practical tools to theorists. The focus here is thus not on the unity of comics and the way they can relay a coherent narrative, but rather on the ways they break with such narratives, or the ways they problematize the relationship between image and text.

In this way, this thesis follows Jason Helms in arguing that: "To write comics is to write from the middle, between modes. To read comics is to enter between panels" ("Defining Rhizcomics").[6] What Helms is interested in is the way comics resist the synthesis between language and imagery. This becomes clearer when taking his concept of "rhizcomics" into account, which “serves to indicate the impossibility of defining comics arborescently, of

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[5]This is also put forward by William Kuskin, who argues for the close connection between Burroughs' work and that of Alan Moore, in specific his magnum opus *Watchmen* (50). Moore's *Watchmen* also makes allusions to Burroughs' work as an important influence on Moore's thinking about comics (349).

[6]Helms' book is a digital one, so it does not use any page numbers. Instead, I will refer to the specific section from which the references come, to make them more easily traceable in Helms' text.

tracing their roots and branches, of finding any final center or periphery" ("Defining Rhizcomics"). Rhizcomics, a combination of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "rhizome" and the medium of comics, allows for thinking about comics not in the way of "tree logic" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 11)—a logic of a fixed structure/definition which overlays each instance of an object—but as a continuous resistance to any structure.

For instance, Scott McCloud's famous definition of comics only defines comics as juxtaposing "pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence," with the intention to either "convey information" or to "produce an aesthetic response" (9). As McCloud himself mentions, his definition leaves out non-sequential comics (i.e. comics consisting of a single panel) (20-1), while leaving open the possibility of some historical art to be considered as comics, such as the *Bayeux Tapestry* (12-3). In other words, McCloud's centering of specific elements of comics leaves out, or includes, works which could rightly be considered as being, or not being, comics. A different centering of comics, for example on narrative or the spaces in which comics are created, could include these comics, but, inevitably, will exclude other instances now included in McCloud's definition. What this leads to is the realization that any definition of comics can always be undone by centering on other specific elements, which themselves can be decentered again, meaning that no definite definition of comics can be created without excluding works that could, and should, be considered as comics. Therefore, following Helms, I argue that comics actively resist any attempt at a specific definition, thus leaving open the possibility for new definitions. Helms' rhizcomics brings this poetic nature of comics to the fore. Throughout this thesis, my use of comics is connected to this concept of rhizcomics, either implicitly or explicitly.

The relevance of Helms' rhizcomics for this project is twofold. First, it challenges subjection—by refusing to define comics in a specific way—and shows that subjection can be

undone by focusing on different formal elements. Second, and most importantly here, is that rhizcomics shows the combination of signifying signifiers and non-discursive, preconscious, signifiers in a medium. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, "not every trait in a rhizome is necessarily linked to a linguistic feature: semiotic chains of every nature are connected to very diverse modes of coding (biological, political, economic, etc.) that bring into play not only different regimes of signs but also states of things of differing status" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 6). Comics, much as the rhizome is described here, can do this in their unique combination of words and images, which juxtaposes written language with images and possibly other non-discursive signifiers, like time—through a denser panel lay-out (McCloud 97)—or creating a specific affect through line and style (118-20). In other words, comics resist the centralization of logos, because to do so would again emphasize one element over the other, which, following Helms, is resisted. Comics studies already emphasized this by asserting that images, rather than text, are the defining feature of comics. In *The System of Comics* Thierry Groensteen notes that: "The necessary, if not sufficient, condition required to speak of comics is that the images will be multiple and correlated in some fashion" (19). It is not text or language that need to be addressed when talking about comics, but images. The resistance of comics to one definition, could, therefore, also be applied to comics' resistance to logos, due to, following Groensteen, their form which requires us to speak of images rather than text. Describing and analyzing comics will, therefore, leave out the many connections made through these images, because it can only describe so many. In other words, different connections between disperse elements can be continuously unconnected and connected.

Looking as Method

The method that will be used for reading the comics in this thesis is oscillating between "looking *at*" and "looking *through*," as developed by Helms via Jean-François Lyotard's concepts of "figure" and "discourse." As Lyotard reminds us, historically, discourse has been privileged over the figure. Discourse points mainly towards language and the referential space it creates (*Discourse, Figure* 7), and thus, could be said to point towards writing and verbalization specifically, and towards linguistics in general. In *Discourse, Figure* Lyotard points towards the tendency in psychoanalysis (implicitly of Jacques Lacan),[7] "[t]o transform the unconscious into discourse," which has the danger of bypassing "the dynamics, to become complicit with the whole of Western *ratio* that kills art at the same time as the dream" (9, emphasis in original). Such rationalization is complicit in repressing the sensory and only emphasizes understanding rather than complexity. This "violence transforms the object into a sign" (9), meaning that the understanding of objects does not come from the objects themselves but how they are mediated linguistically, which Lyotard considers to be simultaneously a repression of otherness and alterity. Against this Lyotard "takes the side of the eye," which enables him to theorize the "figure." The figure can, for instance, be found in art:

> The position of art indicates a function of the figure, which is not signified—a function around and even in the figure. This position indicates that the symbol's transcendence is

[7]See for instance, Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'," where he, following Sigmund Freud, gives as psychoanalysis main formula: "*the unconscious is the discourse of the Other*" (45, emphasis in original). The only way to make sense of the unconscious, and how it can presumably reveal itself, is through language. This tendency can still be spotted in modern psychology. For instance, "cognitive behavioral therapy" tries to expose "core beliefs" in the patient in order for the patient to become aware of them (Kazantzis, et al. 349). Unconscious processes are rendered linguistically and, subsequently, challenged in "Socratic dialogue" (350). As Mark Fisher argued in *Capitalist Realism*, this takes no regard of the influences of the context in which the individual finds herself in, rather the problem is only related to the individual due to their core belief system (19), so only what can be rendered legible, or linguistically, is considered and it precludes the influence of the figure.

> the figure, that is, a spatial manifestation that linguistic space cannot incorporate without being shaken, an exteriority it cannot interiorize as *signification*. (7, emphasis in original)

What the encounter of the figure in an artwork, therefore, entails is a moment of silence that cannot be rendered in speech. For instance, Alan Moore's and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* contains a page where an alien shockwave is released upon New York, which subsequently kills half of the city's inhabitants. This page is powerful because it does not contain any words, rather it just focuses on the amazed faces of those about to be engulfed by the wave and two strangers hugging while their bodies are dissolved (376). This page shows the figure in that no words can fully describe the sensations it brings across, the only thing for the reader to do is stare at the page and become aware of what she is seeing. Nonetheless, the attempt to put words to this page renders the figure void, as representation ultimately has to negate some of the sensations that are brought across by the image to properly describe it.

In this way, the "figure" is the flipside of discourse, being sensible rather than legible; however, it is not necessarily its opposite, in the sense that rendering the figure linguistically necessarily negates the figure. Where the figure "makes visible seeing itself," discourse represses this seeing (9).[8] In other words, the figure is always part of discourse since we always see a text before reading it, but is repressed and hidden by precisely the process of reading by overlaying it with what it ought to represent. The figure, in this thesis at least, aims to reveal form, where discourse is the interpretation of these forms without necessarily looking at them.

Nonetheless, the figure is always present and can be drawn out in discourse: "Discourse," as Lyotard puts it, "is always thick. It does not merely signify, but expresses. And if it expresses, it is because it too has something trembling trapped within it, enough movement

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[8]Lyotard here is inspired by the painter Paul Klee, from which his phrasing used here is derived.

and power to overthrow the tale of significations with a quake that produces the meaning" (*Discourse, Figure* 9). Rather than looking at the opposition between form and content—or the power of discourse—for Lyotard form is always constituent to the content and content to power: "Power is never anything other than the energy that folds and crumples the text and makes an artwork out of it, a difference, that is, a form" (9). Power is in the form and content, which both inform each other through Difference.[9] In order to have the power to think differently, one has to invoke the figure in the discursive, as merely staying within discourse would produce nothing new. Specifically, the figure, or the aesthetic moment to put it more bluntly, is needed to shake up the text, because without it a text would just retain the same meaning to which the reader would subscribe.

Reading comics in this way, to finally return to Helms' method, is to read them through "oscillation," both "looking *at*" them and "looking through them" ("Toward an *Oscillatio*").[10] Looking *at* a comic is to foreground the figure, that is, emphasizing the materiality of the comic—such as by looking at the line, gesture, style, density and composition in a work—whereas looking *through* them emphasizes the content of the comic—for instance, narrative, the overall plot, setting, the characters and what it specifically relays. Helms argues that the "[m]eaning exists in oscillation between these two modes" ("Toward an *Oscillatio*"): form

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[9]While Lyotard never explicitly mentions Deleuze in *Discourse, Figure*, Helms argues that "Difference" here refers to Deleuze's concept of Difference as he put forward in *Difference and Repetition* ("Nonreflection"). Following Helms here, the use of Difference in Lyotard should not be seen as opposition, but rather, following Deleuze, more as a process of becoming. So, discourse differs from figure because it already includes the figure and not because it excludes it. In other words: "*It is not the same which returns, it is not the similar which returns*; rather, the Same is the returning of that which returns,—*in other words, of the Different* […] (*Difference and Repetition* 300, emphasis in original). When looking at discourse through Deleuze's metaphysics, discourse repeats itself in time, but in each repeating it is not the same discourse that returns. Otherwise, it would mean that it is a static object which cannot be different. Rather, applying Deleuze's Difference here, there is a difference in this repetition and in this repetition the figure can be glimpsed, through, for instance, a difference that is noticeable in the form and which allows for seeing rather than reading. To put it simply, each reading is different because different aspects are noticeable through seeing—so an aesthetic experience invoked by the figure—which enables new thinking. This would be impossible if a text was just a static object in time since that would imply that it would also retain the same meaning each reading.

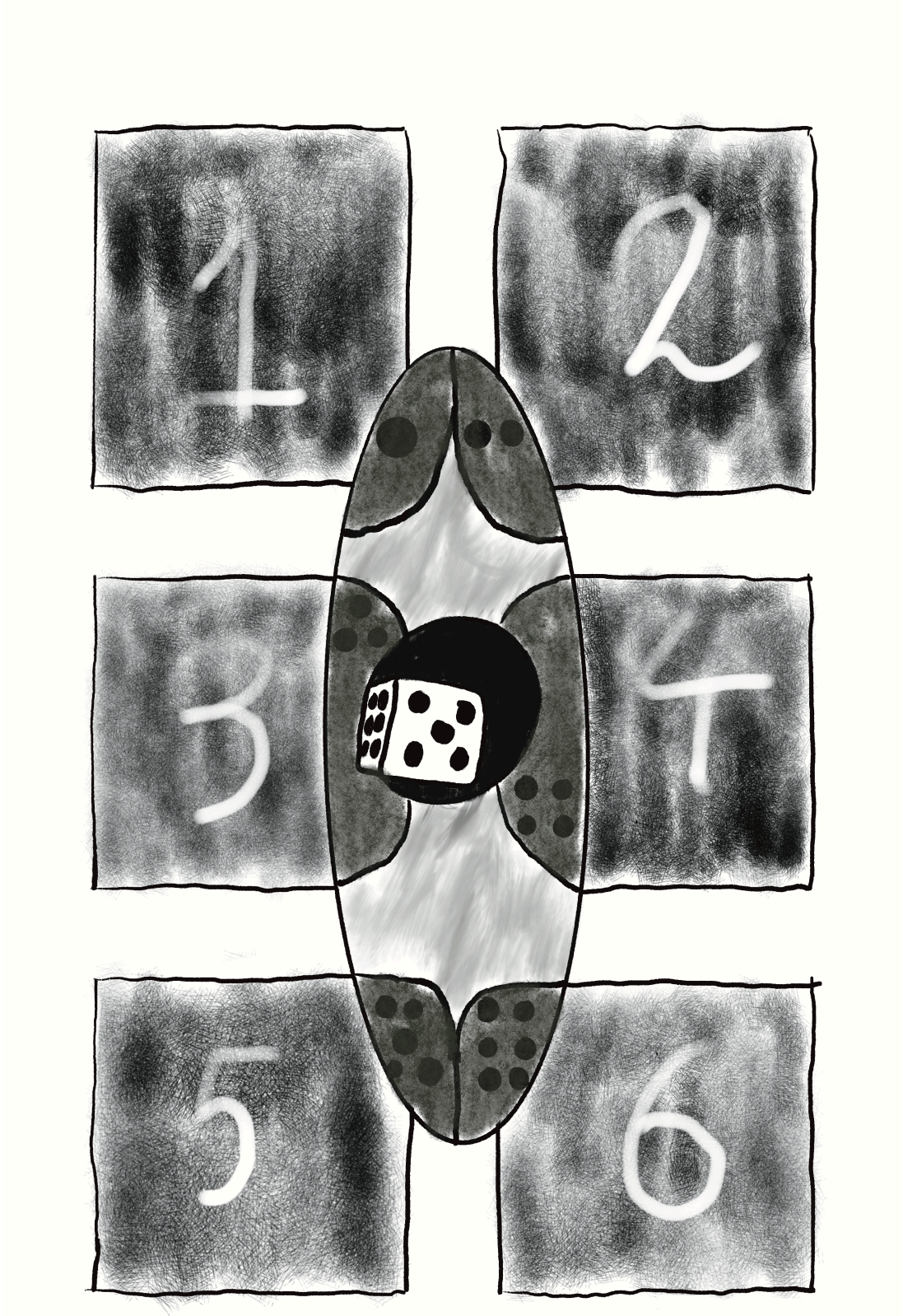
[10]These two modes of reading come from Lanham's, who we encountered earlier, theory of "revisionist thinking," which he developed in *Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information*. Helms' contribution here is to apply them to the reading of comics.

informs content and vice versa, and, in this way, together they form a synthesis from which the reader can derive meaning. However, such synthesis can always be undone by focusing on different interrelations, much as Helms' concept of rhizcomics elucidates. By reading my case studies in this way, I hope to raise awareness of, and foreground, the non-discursive signifiers, or the figure, in comics and the way that the figure informs, interact, and produces meaning with, without or in contradiction of the content. Reading comics using this method, I hope to create a parallel between reading comics and how to elude control.

Theory-Fiction

In extension of Helms's method, I want to use comics as "theory-fiction," to come back to the major concept implicitly present within this thesis' title. With the concept of theory-fiction, the philosopher Mark Fisher highlights a new practice, that designates on the one hand "the becoming-fiction of theory," and on the other "the becoming-real of fiction" (156). Throughout *Flatline Constructs*, Fisher makes the argument, through Jean Baudrillard and Deleuze and Guattari, that "it is no longer adequate to consider fiction to be on the side of the false, the fake or the imaginary. It can be considered to belong to the artificial, once we understand […] that the Real—far from being opposed to the artificial, is composed of it" (156). Following Baudrillard, Fisher argues that today's "Real," understood here as unmediated reality which can be exposed—is "hyperreal," a reality that is always simulated through their means of mediation, for example digital media, and so has no longer any point of reference outside of these mediations (25). As discussed earlier in relation to Burroughs and control, every option has become a possibility and a probable choice because each piece of information, whether true or false, is shown as being on the same plane rather than being relayed on separate planes. All are considered in the statistics on which they are based.

Deleuze's concept of the "virtual" and "actual" can be helpful here. In Deleuze's flat ontology both the actualized event and its virtualities exist simultaneously rather than apart. For instance, when throwing a six-sided die all six outcomes are virtual for as long as the die is up in the air, whereas the outcome becomes actualized once the die has fallen and shows a specific number (*Difference and Repetition* 284). The virtualities are different from their actualization, which is where chance is located. However, in societies of control, the virtual has become a possibility, for instance, by already predicating on what every outcome of the die will cause (282)—when you throw between 1 and 3 you win the game and otherwise you lose. Rather than each virtuality being different from their actualization—meaning that each different outcome than the one actualized would have resulted in a different event—the possible is already part of reality (*Bergsonism* 97-8). The virtual is entirely different from its actualization, which causes a shift because it was not known to be possible beforehand. Think here, for instance, of mutations brought about through evolution, as these cannot be known beforehand and are thus radically new, or different. In other words, evolutionary processes are not possibilities, but virtualities (98). A possibility, however, is already part of a reality, otherwise, it could not have been known to be possible in the first place, or to be one of the possibilities, within that reality. What this ultimately means is that what used to constitute a moment of chance and a different world, is now already taken up in reality by considering it as a possibility. Therefore, fiction is no longer virtual or remarkably different from reality, but rather one of the many possibilities included within reality.



Comic 4

The reason for bringing this up is because Fisher posits with theory-fiction that every virtuality has become a possibility within digital culture, thus losing the creative potential Deleuze and Guattari so valued, as each virtuality is already processed and coded as a possibility by the process power present within the digital environment (Fisher 176). To put it differently, every virtuality of the dice throw is taken into account and mapped out, and thus the creative potential of doing something different through a different outcome is lost, since it is no longer seen as a virtuality but as a possibility. What was previously seen as fiction, a mere thinkable possibility that does not apply, has now become real and has influence on the real. The same holds for theory, as it is unable to take on a position which lies outside of the digital, because everything has already been mapped and, thus, it becomes increasingly difficult to theorize new ways of relaying to it from an outside position, or to represent it. Therefore, theory needs to acknowledge its leveling on the same plane as fiction within digital media.

Hence, theory-fiction is put forward by Fisher "as realism about the hyperreal" (25). In this way, theory-fiction moves away from representational thinking, so seeing language—and in extension theory—as a transparent stand-in between subject and the world to focus more on showing the figure present within a medium. The purpose here is that the reader becomes aware of the fictious element present within a given digital system. For instance, Deleuze and Guattari's work illuminates this by focusing on fiction to grasp how subjects are constructed, rather than already invoking a system to which the subject corresponds, and which fiction merely reveals. For instance, when talking about Virginia Woolf's writing, they note: "[W]riting should produce a becoming-woman as atoms of womanhood capable of crossing and impregnating an entire social field, and of contaminating men, of sweeping them up in that becoming" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 322). It is not that Woolf's writing reveals her

'womanness' and the social structures corresponding to it, but that it constructs a field where non-discursive signifiers invoke in the reader a different becoming. Fiction here produces, rather than being separate from the world. In other words, the theory of theory-fiction is aware of its own fictional position—an awareness that especially came about through its confrontation with digital culture—by focusing on the figure of its surroundings rather than on representing them.

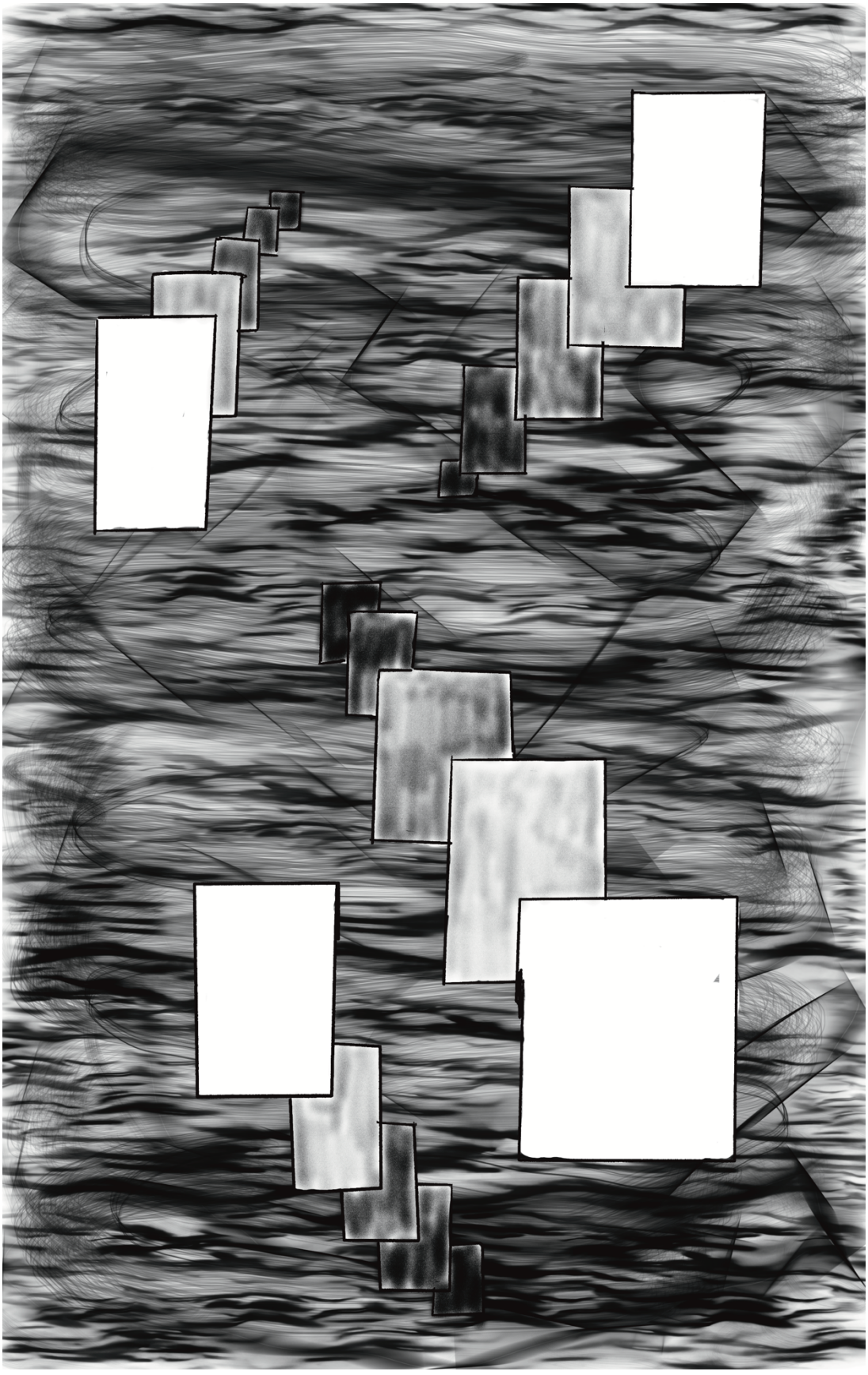
Comics-as-Theory-Fiction

By connecting theory-fiction to comics, this thesis aims to put forward comics as another theoretical device to analyze digital culture with. Not through unity or representing digitality —as that would be a possibility rather than a virtuality and a continuation of control—but through the ruptures happening within some comics. Theory(-fiction) here should not be seen as putting forward an explanation of what is happening, but rather as a hermeneutical exercise. In other words, comics-as-theory-fiction aims to open a space where the figure, and the reader's position to it, is exposed; subsequently, this space should allow for a new, creative way to think about this position which could then be relayed. Keeping in mind the ways comics can bring about a disruptive reading and can reveal the figure, this thesis asks the question: *How can comics be thought of as theoretical devices to engage with digital culture differently?* The comics I analyze— Joshua W. Cotter's *Nod Away*, Inés Estrada's *Alienation* and Masamune Shirow's *The Ghost in the Shell*—each add their own unique voice to this debate which allows for an analysis of the different aspects of digitality today. Because all the case studies already engage with a highly digitalized future, and in some cases a future that has already been surpassed by the present, they are primed to both serve as the showing of oscillation and theorizing digital mediation.

To properly illuminate the workings of these comics and the spaces they open, this thesis is divided into four main chapters. The first chapter "Why Comics?" delves deeper into the question of why comics are a good vessel for theory-fiction. In it, I aim to elucidate the problems of digital culture more deeply before moving on to assert the subsequent need for theory-fiction, and why comics are an ideal medium to analyze digital culture with, to finally, fully connect theory-fiction and comics to propose the concept of comics-as-theory-fiction. The subsequent chapters each offer an example of comics-as-theory-fiction through a close reading of one of my case studies. The second chapter is a close reading of Cotter's *Nod Away* and explores how, through its rupturing of the reading experience, the comic aims to show that absence is the basis of digital mediation. The next chapter engages with Estrada's *Alienation* and builds upon this mediating relationship by positing that such digital mediation is always an alienating relationship between the user and the digital. The subsequent reading of Shirow's *The Ghost in the Shell* will add a consolidating factor to this relationship, positing that thinking the alienating mediation as interface highlights the need for a new conception, or rather becoming, of the human to allow for a more proper engagement with digital culture. Taken together, my close reading of these three case studies highlight that digital mediation is built on absence rather than on presence, that this absence alienates the user and how, through its use, this alienation marks a becoming-machine of the human.

The conclusion of this thesis is that comics can highlight different engagements with digital culture through specifically rupturing our experiences with it, allowing the reader to turn back into herself for a moment and reflect on her own position to re-engage with her surroundings. It argues that, in this way, comics offer an emblematic reading of the digital, whilst opening up a space through which it can be glanced at from an outside position. As I argue, *Nod Away*, *Alienation* and *The Ghost in the Shell* expose the role of old conceptions of

the human to be still present when engaging with digital culture, revealing that it is no longer sufficient to think within these conceptions and, rather than rejecting the digital, offer up a critical embrace of it. Beyond this, this thesis aims to show the relevance of fictional genre comics for academic inquiry by allowing them to act as lenses through which the digital can be reengaged. Finally, it hopes to show a way to do theory that deviates from the norm, is enabled within close proximity of its object and which simultaneously acts as a practice, thus, showing the importance of different theoretical practices to analyze contemporary society.



Comic 5

Chapter 1: Why Comics?

To establish comics as theory-fiction—that is, that they open a space that theoretically engages today's mediated culture in a way that corresponds to it—it is important to establish the fundamental question this chapter asks: Why comics? Or rather: Why not comics? Or, more specifically: Why are comics a good way to do theory-fiction compared to other media? How do comics overall figure in digital and visual culture? How can they be used to do theory-fiction *through* and *with*? And how is drawing comics already a praxis? To answer these questions, it becomes first necessary to juxtapose comics in relation to the object this thesis aims to theorize with them, namely, digital culture and, more specifically, the ways of seeing and visuality that it engenders. What will now follow, therefore, is an exploration of current academic discourses within digital and visual culture, which I will instrumentalize to move towards an analysis of comics and where they stand in relation to digital culture before finally concluding with the way I conceptualize comics as being theory-fiction.

The Binaries of Digital Culture

According to Lev Manovich, digital culture can mainly be identified by four features: "scale, speed, diversity, and connectedness" (9). This definition makes it hard to conceptualize digital culture, as it points to its being in constant flux and thus defying being encapsulated. Furthermore, the scope of digital culture disallows mental comprehension. The amount of information that is processed digitally is too much for any individual to comprehend all at once, resulting in an overload of information and an inability to enact, for instance ecological, change (Stiegler 21-3). In other words, because a comprehensive overview is missing, users lack awareness of problems, such as the validity of information online, that might be caused by digitality, as they cannot see them due to the scale they are presented in (Stoner and

Melathopoulos 21). This overload can result in frustration and short-term solutions rather than solutions to more significant problems. Political polarization, for instance, is addressed as a political problem, whereas it now also has become a problem of design (Nelimarkka et al. 957-60), as communities are formed online and are less able, due to the design of many social media platforms, to reach out to and empathize with other communities. Another problem, presented by Manovich as well, is that digital culture does not necessarily operate through "natural language"—which Manovich argues is more static because it has to be written down to identify ongoing processes—but by numbers and their subsequent translation into visualizations (10). Indeed, digital culture is reliant on non-discursive signifiers, in the sense that language can never fully grasp digital culture. Rather, the machines of digital culture rely on different methods, such as algorithmic computation, visualization, and data, as I will elaborate below.

Visuality and Digitality

The methods that are dominant here rely not on speaking and writing, but rather are more closely linked, according to Manovich, to the visual and optical, both in a practical and metaphorical way. While the metaphor of seeing is used as a way to more easily understand the ways machines make sense of the world, machines do not actually see in the same way that humans do (Agostinho 2). As Daniela Agostinho explicates, "Machine vision occurs through data, not optical means, and through datafication, vision becomes essentially post-optical" (2). In other words, machines use data as a way to structure and analyze what they are appointed to, rather than acquiring data from seeing as humans have to. The post-optical highlights this in the sense that, for a machine, data is needed to see rather than needing to see in order to get data (7-9).

Essentially, Agostinho's conceptualization of the post-optical shows a reversal of John Berger's formula that seeing comes before knowing (7-9). Berger's *Ways of Seeing* can be considered as a seminal work in the thinking about vision and the ways it is structured. Berger opens his first essay with the words: "Seeing comes before words" (7), implying that in order to get to words and understanding—data in this case—you first have to see what you aim to understand.[11] In other words, data is revealed by seeing. However, digital 'seeing' works first from data before it moves on to seeing. As Lila Lee-Morrison argues, machines see "by way of recognition through an automated algorithmic process" (79), meaning that machines first need to learn through data what to see and how to see it properly, rather than the other way around. Visual recognition software, for instance, first needs to be fed a dataset of a variety of faces which it can then use to measure other different faces against (74). The software can only see by virtue of the data, whereas a human has to sense before it can obtain data about the world itself.

The models and visualizations created by the machine are essentially for human eyes only and are not needed for the machine to see or properly function on its own. So, the actual 'seeing' of the machine is absent from any visualization it renders. For instance, the facial recognition software *Eigenface* creates vectors of faces to recognize them. The process of creating the vector is the way for the software to see, as it creates a grid to which it can measure facial features of the faces it is asked to recognize. However, the visualization of the vector, or rather its creation as image, is unnecessary for the workings of the software itself. In other words, the visualization is essentially only necessary for the human actors operating with it. Such visualization "allows," as Lee-Morrison puts it, "human eyes to see like

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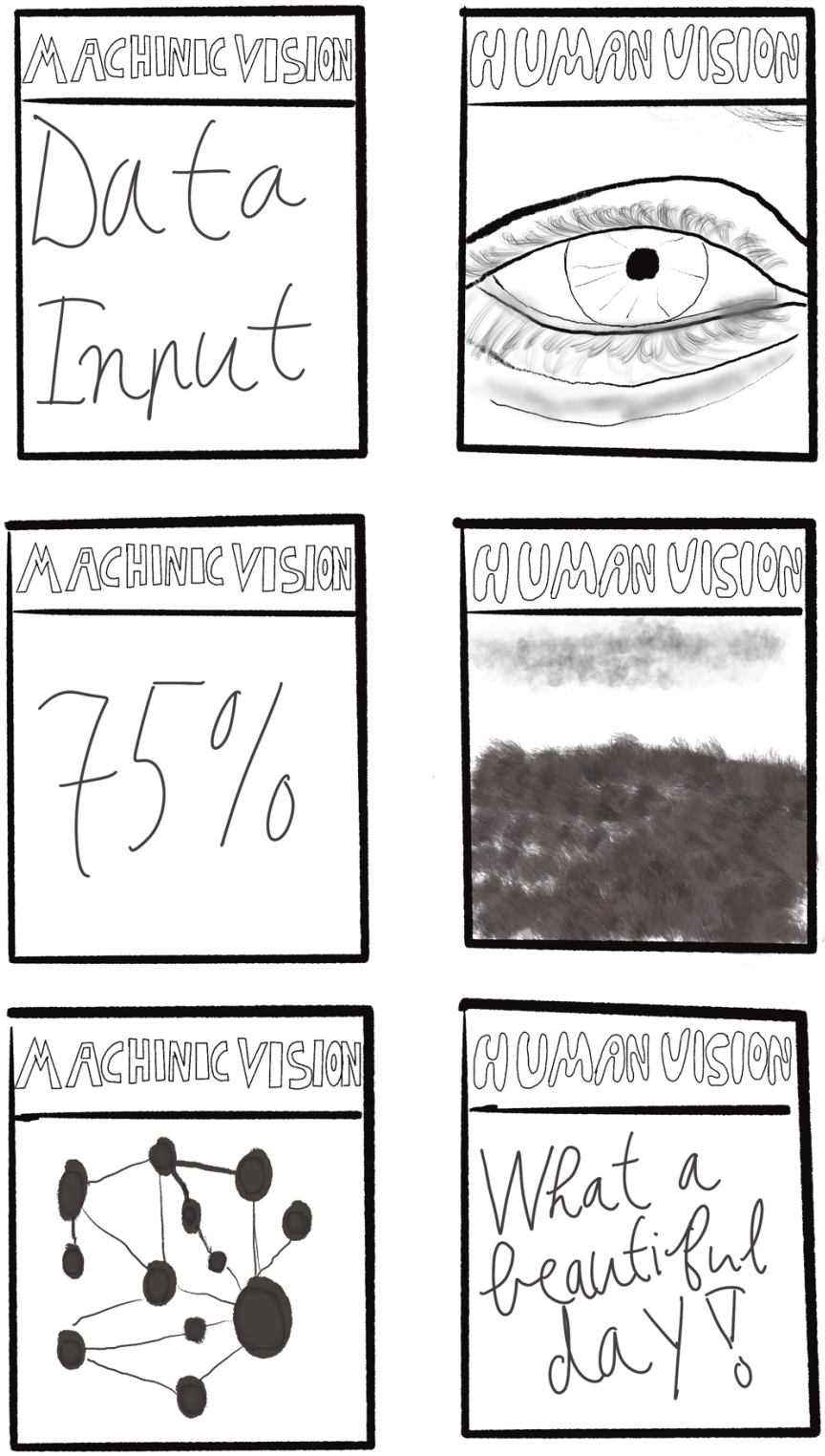
[11]The main focus here on vision can be seen as ableist because the other senses, which are not necessarily focused on vision, should also be taken into account as ways to gain understanding about the world and get to words.

algorithmic eyes" (82). This has as a practical consequence, that thinking of digitality as optical informs and reconceptualizes our understanding of both machinic operation and human vision, since vision is not necessary for a machine to acquire data. "Data visualization," Agostinho argues, "largely reinscribes the figure of the omniscient, autonomous subject placed in an observer-independent relation to knowledge" (2). Paradoxically, it is not the dependence on machines that informs the subject, but the way that seeing through data informs her about the world in a more independent way—Big Data supposedly reveals a "super visual world" (2).


MACHINIC VISION
Data Input
HUMAN VISION
MACHINIC VISION
75%
HUMAN VISION
MACHINIC VISION
HUMAN VISION
What a beautiful day!

Comic 6

Readability and Legibility

The problems of this claim have already been challenged by many critical theorists. Alexander Galloway, for instance, starts his essay "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?" with a visual representation used to depict the American strategy during the Iraq war (86). This overwhelming representation is dense with nodes and different details, each of which are connected to other nodes. Therefore, the visualization does not necessarily represent the strategy—in fact, it proved to be illegible to the commanders during the meeting where it was presented. The diagram failed to convey the necessary information, which also proved, at least for Galloway, to be true on an aesthetic level as the image failed to aesthetically structure the flow of information in such a way as to make it legible (87). Failures such as this example allowed Galloway to propose two opposing theses: "*Data have no necessary visual form*" (88, emphasis in original) and "*only one visualization has ever been made of an information network* (90, emphasis in original). The first thesis points towards the empirical and numerical nature of data, on the one hand, and, on the other, the necessary translation it has to undergo to become visually represented. Therefore, what is visually represented is not necessarily the data itself, but always a translation—meaning that the actual data remains obfuscated. Galloway's second thesis points out that the only available way to visualize data is through a visualization of it as being in a network, in which it clusters and connects. Therefore, it does not inform its reader about what the data represents, but rather informs the reader that it is networked. As Galloway already notes, there is a dissonance at play between these two theses, since if data has no set visualization and thus can be represented in a multitude of ways, it is uncanny that it has only ever been represented in one way (91). This dissonance points towards the "unrepresentability" of data, or rather, to the lack—as of yet—of any other aesthetic possibility.

What comes to the fore here is a tension between the readability and legibility of data visualizations. While readability and legibility are usually regarded as synonyms, Pepita Hesselberth et al. argue that there is an important difference between the two. "[T]he readable," they argue, "is not restricted to that which can be understood (in the sense of being processed cognitively or hermeneutically), but includes what can be processed mechanically and what generates affect" (2). Readability points here to a more general act which can be undertaken by both machines and humans. For instance, the graph that Galloway pointed towards can be read, meaning that it can be processed by a machine and affect a human viewer. However, readability, as Hesselberth et al. already note, does not imply understanding. Rather, understanding, and the production of meaning, is connected to legibility (7). A good example that they give is that of an old language which has not yet been deciphered. This language is readable and might even evoke affect, but as long as it is not deciphered it does not hold any meaning for the reader—in other words it is not yet legible. Illegibility, or legibility, is never absolute, as "[w]hat is illegible today could conceivably be made legible tomorrow" (7). Hesselberth et al. posit that "in the digital age," however, "it is more and more common for the legible to, quite quickly, become illegible as technology evolves" (7). Due to the speed and complexity involved in technology, the legible can suddenly prove to be illegible for the human eye and thus fail to produce meaning. For instance, the war strategy mentioned above might have previously been legible to commanders, but due to the complexities involved in, and possibly connected by, the mapping techniques of the software used, it became too much to make sense of.

Algorithmic Computations

One of these complexities are, for instance, the algorithms which already filter and connect data on a level that is not yet visible to the human viewer: the pre-optical. Algorithms, following Tarleton Gillespie, are not identified as software per se, but as "encoded procedures for transforming input data into a desired output, based on specified calculations" (167). Thus, an algorithm is more a mathematical formula that calculates a specific response based on a data set. This formula is used, for instance, to select information, calculate users' responses and show relevant advertisements to a specific group of users (168). Gillespie specifically highlights the role of the dataset in the workings of algorithms, since an algorithm needs to have a large source of data from which it can base its decisions, comparable to the *Eigenface* software discussed earlier. The dataset for algorithms, particularly those used by social media platforms, is generally the user's behavior on the platform they analyze. The start of the dataset can be said to be empirical and numerical in nature since it involves countable actions in the world. Even training data sets, data specifically designed or chosen to train an algorithm's decisions, must have some empirical basis for the machine to be properly trained. Due to their size and, as previously argued, their non-visuality, algorithms are required to visualize these datasets for humans to understand their workings. However, no translation is ever without its flaws and, based on their training, the algorithm's programming has a significant influence on the way the data is visualized. The extra step required in the visualization of data, therefore, necessitates that every visualization is already a mediation of events.

One the one hand, this provides a less deterministic picture of technology, since the human factor remains and can also significantly impact online environments. An analysis should "not conceive of algorithms as abstract […] but must unpack the warm human and

institutional choices that lie behind these mechanisms" (Gillespie 169). For instance, economic incentives play an important role in what is valuable or not, and which can be the basis on which algorithms are trained. The (current) neo-liberal environment in which some of these algorithms were conceived should thus be taken into account as well, as they constitute their reality and are, in turn, part of what they produce. Also, the context of the dataset, particularity when seeing it as an archive, becomes political. For instance, Nanna Blonde Thylstrup et al., argue it is highly political what, or who, gets excluded or included in this archive.[12] As they put it: "the crucial methods of appraisal, storage, and classification are once again being performed by a small group that exercises white patriarchal power over the rest of the world, with disproportionate impact" (17). It is not necessarily the algorithms that decide who or what gets excluded, but rather their programming and on what they were trained.

Thus, it would be a mistake to view technology as either being fully deterministic or as being fully reliant on human decision-making. Following David M. Berry: "[W]e must be sure that the notion of the algorithm does not dis-embed computation, in effect reifying it" (Berry, 43). What is needed is a way to analyze the complexities involved when talking about algorithms, and in extension digital culture, without returning to algorithms as the pure cause of computation, as such thinking could prove to be reductive in only highlighting one side of the problem. In other words, the political and material aspects are always there and should be taken into account when analyzing it.

The political aspects of digital media become even more prevalent because it is possible that every user can see different information online, which is catered accordingly to their own specific likes and dislikes through an algorithm (188). While the archival datasets remain

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[12]On the political aspect of digital culture see also Thylstrup 101-138 and Bigo, et al. 1-18.

largely the same for everyone, the translation of the algorithm can differ based on its specific instructions. In other words, reality is no longer shared, if it ever was, and is partially constructed through these algorithms. Niklas Luhmann's concept of "constructivism" is important here. Following his system theoretical approach, each media system has its own set of referents which construct a reality together with the person interacting with it. For instance, the news gives at once information of something that has happened and also codes that information by referencing it, for example, to what it sees as morally bad or good (78). In reality events are always far more complicated and such simple categorizations do not exist; however, for the media systems it must, otherwise, they would have to mediate an environment that is far too complicated to properly relay. They thus have to code it according to their own system.

The problem with digital media is that these referents do not necessarily correspond to each other anymore. Two persons in a social media system are viewing different information based on their preferences and behavior. The construction, and referents, of their realities do not necessarily have to be connected to each other. In other words, each person is presented with their own fiction and truth (Fuller 101-102). This problematizes the ways digital culture can be made legible, since each perspective on it depends on the algorithms' translations and can differ based on their instructions. Such mediation invokes Mark Fisher's and, more specially, Jean Baudrillard's claim that we are dealing with a hyperreality, as everything is mediated and, assuming that Big Data encapsulates what is happening everywhere, marks all. Following Gillespie, the workings of algorithms are obtuse and multi-layered (Gillespie 186) —meaning that the specific ways in which they interact with the data are unclear, sometimes even to the makers themselves, and that a complex system of algorithms, rather than just one,

works and reworks the data.[13] What this reveals is that digital culture is based on a complex interplay between, on the one hand, human factors and decisions and, on the other hand, their reception and translation into the digital systems themselves, causing a rift between the two.

Cybernetics

As a consequence of this rift, users are no longer necessarily viewed as human agents but as mere consumers and profit producers (Raunig 17). Every step and click is calculated and anticipated to have the user view as many commercials as possible and thus maximize profit. The reading behavior within ebooks can, for instance, be tracked to identify the moments where readers stopped reading or which passages they had the most difficulty with, information which a company then relays to the author to make her work more sellable, or to remove her books from their store if it proves to be too much of an unattractive read (16-7). Most interactions online, even personal stories, are beholden to this logic. In this way, users are seen as machines that can be calculated and predicted. For the algorithms at least, they are merely data and information (Stiegler 7 and Koopman 13). This view started with the rise of cybernetics in the 1940s and was popularized in other disciplines by systems theory. The idea that spread was that nature, and also human beings, worked along the same lines as machines —for instance, through feedback loops, which could in turn be controlled and influenced (Malapi-Nelson 120-21).[14] This marked an ontological transformation of the sovereign human being present within humanism into a more machinic creature subject to the same set of rules as machines and other (non)organic beings (Culp 120). The human image formed here

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[13]For more discussions regarding algorithms and their implications, see de Vries 6-15, Amoore 1-28; and Amoore and Piotukh.

[14]For more on cybernetics and its trajectory, see Hayles 145-56 for its contributions to digital media studies, Novikov 1-19 for its history, and Beckman 1-19 and Pinto 23-36 for how it reconceptualized the notion of control.

coincides more with posthumanism and antihumanism, in that what is emphasized here is not agency and autonomy but rather a human's implicatedness within a system and how this system influences her behavior (Foster 451-53). Therefore, digital culture can sometimes also be referred to as machinic culture, or cybernetic culture, which emphasizes the mechanical view of human beings as a set of processes derived from cybernetics.

The aforementioned tension between a humanist and post/antihumanist vision of technology is especially important when thinking about the visual, a tension that is, according to Orit Halpern, situated between two paradoxical receptions of big data. As already argued, cybernetics views the human as being implicated in a system rather than standing outside of it. Following Halpern, such a view is incompatible with humanist reasoning, which focused on "intuition, genius, or liberal agency" (29), as reason in cybernetics is more computational in nature. In other words, humanism relies on thinking of the human as a free agent and as the source of measurement, whereas cybernetics sees the human as one number among others that can be measured with a variety of other beings. Nonetheless, Halpern points towards a strange tension since "the nonreasonable rationality and logic" of computational thinking has now become reason, or rather on what reason is based. "[P]olicy-makers and social scientists," who turned to computational thinking as a mode of inquiry, "repressed their discovery by valorizing data visualization as a technique to command and control what was increasingly understood to be a world of unknowns, chance, and unreasonable behavior" (29). Data visualization is seen as something rational, and which reveals facts of the world, even though it relies on a rationality completely different from what is inferred. Halpern conceptualizes this as our "contemporary amnesia": "While contemporary culture looks ever more frequently to neuroscience, behaviorism, and data mining to predict human behavior, economists, policy-makers and even the public also continue to insist on older nineteenth—and earlier twentieth

—century definitions of consciousness and choice" (30). What Halpern indicates here is that there is a predominate focus on the humanist human in the reception of digital media, whereas the use of digital media is antagonistic to exactly this model.

The Need for Theory-Fiction

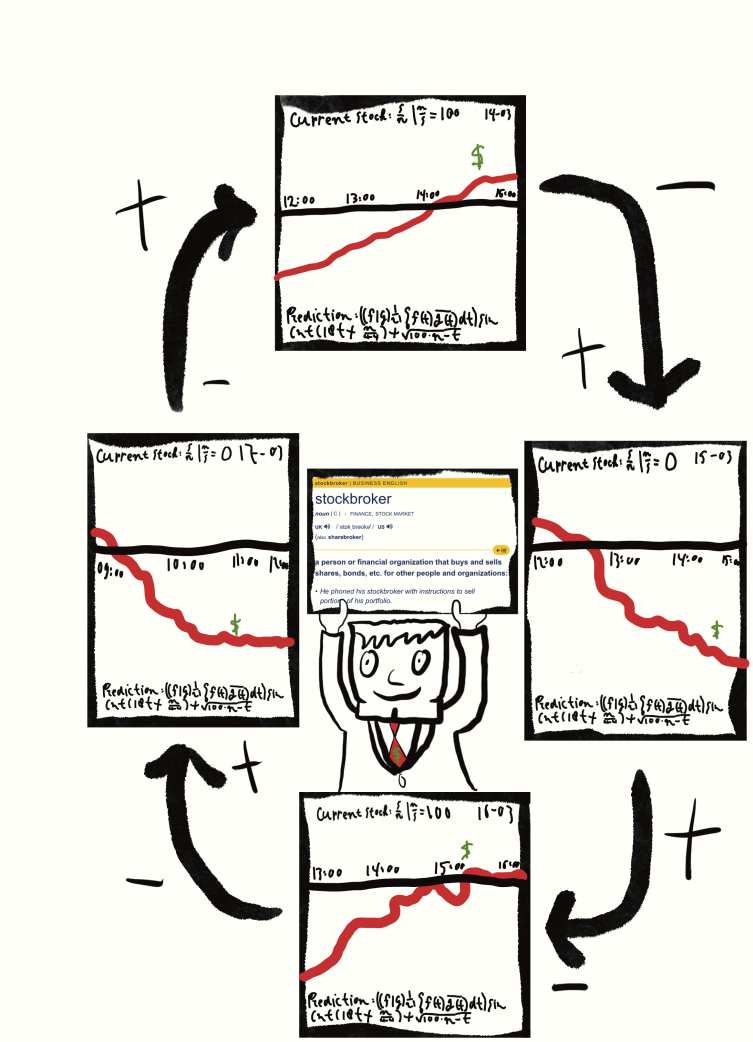
What the above section has indicated is that thinking about digital media and contemporary culture consists of binaries: the binary between human vision and machine vision (Agostinho), between representation and visualization (Galloway), between readability and legibility (Hesselberth et al.), between technological determinism and human agency, and between the humanist and posthumanist human (Halpern). What is lost in such configurations, and to what this thesis would like to contribute, is a "middle," a thinking otherwise, or a thinking from the gutter. Comics-as-theory-fiction can contribute to such thinking. However, before the potential of comics will be addressed, a small detour is necessary to properly extrapolate what theory-fiction is and how it can be related to comics. In other words, what does a theory-fiction look like?

Theory-fiction was first conceptualized by Mark Fisher in *Flatline Constructs* from the thinking of both Jean Baudrillard and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. According to Fisher, and to which my earlier analysis of digital culture hopes to contribute, digital culture is comparable to what Baudrillard termed the "third-order," and possibly the "fourth-order," "simulacra" (Baudrillard 6). The third-order "masks the *absence* of a profound reality" and the fourth "has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (6). For instance, the stocks that are dealt in the stock market do not necessarily have to correspond to the position of the stock's companies within the market itself. This means that a company's

actual profit or loss do not have to be reflected in its stock's prices.[15] Instead, speculation and anticipation through computer models are more determinant for these prices (*Signs and Machines* 96-101). To put this in more Deleuzean terms, the virtualities of the market are also anticipated and, in this way, incorporated into the market itself.[16] The market is a system that constructs a specific Real. As Fisher explains: "Baudrillard's point is that there is no *image of the Real* which does not participate in—and therefore affect—what it is supposedly representing. Therefore, no more representation" (146, emphasis in original). In other words, a fiction—which in the case of the stock market is the speculation created by computer models trying to predict the future—influences the Real, which is, therefore, no longer possible, if it even existed in the first place.

[15]A good example of this was the Gamestop stock spike. Gamestop, which failed to turn a profit over a number of years, was backed by a group of fans on the social media platform *Reddit*. This resulted in an increase in the value of Gamestop's stocks and caused many so-called short sellers, brokers who only temporally keep a stock to sell it at a higher price and buy it again at a lower price, to lose a lot of money, for a summary of this event see Monica.

[16]To reiterate Deleuze in *Bergonism*, the virtual has in this case become the possible (98).



Comic 7 – Screenshot of the definition of a stockbroker taken from the *Cambridge Dictionary* website ("Stockbroker").

Therefore, reality can be compared to a cybernetic loop of input and output of which everything there is consists in that loop. For example, the internet is reality rather than fiction because it has a direct impact on the world. So, seeing the artifice, in this case the internet, as separate from reality is misunderstanding the effects of the internet. Fiction has invaded the Real and has become part of it (143-4). Fisher puts this in the following way: "the mirror is replaced by a television, by media apparatuses and cybernetic modeling systems that do not

represent or reflect a primary world, but smear the distinction between themselves and it. In hyperreality […] 'reality' is constituted by mediamatic simulation machineries such as advertising" (148). In other words, what is constituted as Real is no longer a one-on-one reflection, but rather a mediated reflection. Here, Fisher argues as well that non-discursive signifiers—which he conceptualizes through the concept of the "gothic"(4)[17]—do in fact have a large influence on reality and behavior. In this way, the "hyperreal" is "[m]ore real than real" (Baudrillard 81). Hyperreal refers here to a reality that is no longer divided—meaning that it no longer has another representation from which it can distinguish itself, for instance religion—but now only consists of a singular plane on which all that is real exists (81). Here the false is no longer possible, since authenticity depends on a "reality from which it can be separated" (Fisher 148). Due to constant mediation, reality has become fragmented and has no longer a Real on which to base whether something is authentic or not.

In response, Fisher develops the concept of "theory-fiction" which he defines sporadically across *Flatline Constructs*.[18] According to Fisher, theory-fiction's task is to function "as realism about the hyperreal" (25)—meaning that it is aware, both as fiction and as theory, of the hyperreal structure it is embedded within. In a footnote later in his book, he gives a more elaborate explanation: "We can perhaps most profitably approach this problem [of theory-fiction] by considering the conventional opposition between theory and fiction. Here, theory is on the side of the real and fiction is on the side of the imaginary" (155). Having complicated this relationship earlier on, he posits two possibilities for theory-fiction, either as "fiction as theory"—any fictional texts incorporating theoretical conventions—or "theory as

[17]Fisher's use of "gothic" can be confusing because it moves away from classical notions of the gothic, for instance, the animism through which objects or dead matter can influence the world around them. Whereas Fisher focuses more on the fear of being unable "to differentiate subject from object" (4). Therefore, Fisher's gothic highlights not the fear of objects coming to life, but the fear becoming an object.

[18]For more on the recent reception of theory-fiction, see Carswell's blog *Orbistertius*, particularly his "Origins of Theory-Fiction" series, and Marks' "theory-fiction reading list" on his blog *The Wasted World*.

fiction," which he simply defines as "theory presented in the form of fiction" (155). Building upon the second form, Fisher posits his most important claim:

> At its most radical, what is at stake here is more than the disguise of theory as fiction, or fiction as theory, but a dissolution of the opposition itself. Two, related, claims, one descriptive, the other prescriptive emerge from this: (1) all theory is already fiction; and, (2) theory should abandon its assumed position of "objective neutrality", and embrace its fictionality. But something happens to fiction here; it is no longer, simply, on the side of the imaginary. (156)

To summarize, Fisher can be said to argue that theory can no longer be thought of as objective, because it cannot relate back to a different reality status within the hyperreal, and that it should embrace this position. In other words, to enact change, theory no longer needs to try to be outside of reality by taking an objective stance, but rather needs to argue from the fictional nature of reality by taking a fictional stance.[19] In this way, theory no longer becomes a possibility but a virtuality.

The uptake of theory-fiction has been as much sporadic as Fisher's own definitions of the concept, and is often referred to more implicitly. For instance, Simon Sellars' book *Applied Ballardianism* (2018)—a fictional tale of a scholar's maddening obsession with the work of J.G. Ballard—is promoted by its publisher Urbanomic as being a work of theory-fiction ("K-Pulp"), but the book itself only mentions it once in passing (34). The label could be said to be applied retrospectively rather than beforehand, meaning that it is only through

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[19]The concept of theory-fiction also can be argued to have a lot in common with "autotheory" as put forward in the work of Lauren Fournier. Autotheory refers here mainly to autobiographical and feminist works that try to subvert dominant discourses through a performance of theory in their own lives ("Sick Women" 644-5). In other words, the lived experience of the author herself becomes the ground for theory, allowing it to have a closer connection to lived experiences. See especially Fournier's book *Autotheory as Feminist Practice* (2021).

the work that someone can mark it as theory-fiction. In a review of this book, philosopher Reza Negarestani[20] mentions that Sellars shows:

> that the game—that is, reality—becomes corrupted when you try to overstretch or reduce ideas and practices to a so-called fundamental vision of the world and how one should live in it. This is where I think fiction has far more power than philosophy to show us that not everything should be, from the start, *theorized* in a strict sense. The philosophical power of fiction is something apocalyptic: it reveals to us that we are bound up in multiple universes which might actually be in conflict. […] But the philosophical world too is distinct from that of fiction. In order for philosophy or theory to even begin its activity, in this sense, it must accept the sovereignty of fiction as a different world of reality—one that insinuates something of the sheer plethora of variables (worlds or world versions) that need to be accounted for—not only described, but also envisioned and exemplified. ("Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin," emphasis in original)

Fiction, following Negarestani, shows the existence of multiple worlds and worldviews, which theory should account for before it can begin to theorize the world it is situated in. So, what theory, in theory-fiction at least, should do is show other (fictional) virtualities rather than just harshly imposing theory on what is seen. Theory-fiction, in the words of Sellars, is the result of a "world [that] is so chaotic that no overarching theory can ever hope to explain it. So, the form itself leaks and cracks. It becomes bent out of shape and bleeds into other genres" ("One Small Node"). It is the recognition of these bleedings where theory-fiction comes into play.

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[20] Recently, Negarestani also published a theory-fiction comic together with Keith Tilford and Robin Mackay called *Chronosis* (2021). It focuses especially on Negarestani's notion that fiction can give access to different worlds and, in this way, could be said to be a direct performance of theory-fiction in comic form. Unfortunately, the comic arrived too late to be taken into account for this thesis, but it could make for an exceptional case study for further research on the topic.

I want to put theory-fiction forward as a practice which focuses on these cracks and bleedings rather than on unity or thinking from dualisms, thereby opening up new spaces from which to think or do theory. Theory is, therefore, used here as designating multiplicities rather than dualisms and as a more local practice, meaning that it focuses on a specific (fictional) instance. This is best encapsulated in a conversation between Deleuze and Michel Foucault, entitled "Intellectuals and Power," where Deleuze posits that: "For us the relationships between theory and praxis are much more fragmentary and partial" (206). This means that, first, "theory is always local" (206). For instance, Foucault's analysis of prisons moves not from a representational idea of what prisons are, but from the local struggle against prison's power on prisoners by prisoners. As Foucault puts it: "[T]heory does not express, translate, or apply a praxis, it is a praxis—but local and regional, as you [Deleuze] say: non-totalizing" (207). This makes theory function "like a tool box" that can be used to theorize a specific instance, and from that particular instance recognizes something more global. In this way, theory will undoubtedly encounter "obstacles, walls, collisions" which highlight "a need for the theory to be relayed by another kind of discourse" (206). So, for Deleuze and Foucault theory is always bound up with praxis, forming "a network of relays from one theoretical point to another […] a praxis is needed to break through" (206). Praxis informs theory and helps it become more refined, even though it can also disprove it and show the need for it to recombine. In my view, theory-fiction puts theory back in the network and posits fiction as a praxis to break through walls. In this way, theory is seen more as a hermeneutical exercise, which opens a space of uncertainty from which new thinking can start.

Such openings aim to provide a thinking from the middle which does not necessarily fall back on already identified binaries or representational thinking. More specifically, I posit that comics-as-theory-fiction could provide a more visually oriented analysis of the digital and,

therefore, provide a better way to describe the forces at play within it. This is emphasized by, for instance, Steve F. Anderson: "The best of visual culture theory was never solely about representation. It always engaged systems of power and knowledge alongside the pleasures and politics of perception—all of which remain centrally relevant to the study of digital culture" (3).[21] As Anderson, and also others like W.J.T. Mitchell (134), state, visual culture is full of forces like power and knowledge, which can be highlighted by focusing on the relation between discourse and figure present within it.

Following this, I argue that comics can especially offer a valuable way of visualizing the digital, due to their, following Jason Helms, ability to create ruptures between their distinct elements, thus rupturing thinking and allowing for new spaces to think from. Drawing and reading comics, as shall now be argued, allow us to mobilize these abilities to highlight the role they can play as theory-fiction, a link that I will make more explicit in the last section of this chapter.

Comics and Digital Cultures

To conceptualize drawing and reading comics as theory-fiction, comics will first have to be mapped and differentiated from digital culture and its problems to fully answer the question: Why comics? What will follow is first a discussion of the materiality of comics, which will lead into mapping them in digital culture, and finally, a conclusion on the ways comics can oscillate between the nonhuman and human.

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[21] Anderson mentions here visual culture theory, which is theory that focuses on the visual and sensible products of media and their historical roots. While this thesis does not explicitly mention visual culture theory itself, it is largely indebted to many theorists working in this field, especially because there is much overlap between visual culture theory and comics studies, on which the next section will largely focus. See especially Anderson 1-38 for the relation between visual culture theory and digital media.

Monstration

Comics foreground their fictionality in a particular way by virtue of their drawn form.[22] As argued by Thierry Groensteen, "The source is inherent to any image and cannot be dissociated from it. Although the comics image is not seen through a lens, it nonetheless emanates from a specific viewpoint on the action or the subject represented; we necessarily apprehend it from a particular angle and at a particular distance" (*Comics and Narration* 84). The visibilities in a comic are always connected to their artificiality and a maker. On the other hand, following Friedrich Kittler's thinking, textual media are also artificial but not immediately connected to their materiality due to their production—meaning that the actual materiality of the text cannot be traced back to the author who first birthed them. In particular, Kittler connects handwriting to the individual who initially penned it down. This connection started with Romanticism, which tried to move away from the "old cultural technique of imitation" that came before it (*Discourse Networks* 81). This technique, exemplified in disconnected and capital writing, left no room for the individual who had written it, whereas "flowing, cursive handwriting" did (83). These kinds of handwritings left traces, through which one was able to follow, among other things, the desire and motivation of the writer (102). Following Kittler, machinic writing is devoid of such traces and has become universal—being able to be read by both machines and humans and which can perfectly imitate each letter ("There Is no Software" 220).

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[22]This is also argued extensively by theorists focusing on non-fiction comics. For instance, Hilary Chute argues that non-fiction comics are able to bear witness through their graphically recreation of significant events (*Disaster Drawn* 4). This enables them to make sensible, for instance, painful events as well as foreground history as something that is been told, rather than as an objective process.

I follow Kittler here by arguing that in comics such traces remain, since, usually, both the lettering and drawings leave marks of their creation and creators.[23] Comics can provide a closeness, where writing now provides a distance. As Jared Gardner argues: "The story of the graphic narrative is always finally two stories, equally and at once: the story of what happens to the characters and (in the graphic traces we cannot erase but never fully recover) the story of the telling of the story itself" (67). This story of the telling itself is revealed by the traces of the author, which more specifically for comics can also be referred to as "graphiation" (Marion 83).[24] This graphiation is bound to the author that drew it and makes the comic opaque rather than transparent. Before the reading process can begin, the reader must first understand and come to terms with the graphiation. Philippe Marion describes graphiation as that what provides the "monstration"—also identified by Groensteen as a vital part of the narrative within comics (*Comics and Narration* 84-7)—which he also refers to as an "analogue simulacrum" (Marion 83, own translation). The monstration designates the performed action that is captured in the drawing, which resembles the performance in a theater from which the term initially came (Groensteen 84). The simulation of reality is imbued with the subjectivity of the author and drawer, as they are the ones whose traces can be felt and seen throughout the work. In other words, a comic is always subjective even when

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[23]Nonetheless, in the case of lettering at least, this point should be nuanced, since not every instance of lettering is hand-drawn. In many cases, comics also use a specific typeset font to make it easier to copy the author's own lettering, or use machinic ways for lettering. Nevertheless, I still want to argue that the subjectiveness remains, because either the words were initially drawn or their machinic creation was done purposefully, thus conveying a specific style. See Baetens "Words and Images" 205-7 for more information on these distinctions.

[24]It should be noted that with the rise of distant reading—reading a corpus of literary texts through digital means—the same can be said for literature, because an author can now be identified through, for instance, specific word usage or specific repetitions of sentences across their corpus, see Van de Ven 184-5. Nevertheless, the difference here is that digital methods are needed to spot these similarities, whereas a drawing style more easily foregrounds its specific authorship for the human eye.

it shows factual renderings of reality.[25] In this way, the supposedly objective stance present in visualization, discussed earlier by Halpern, is absent within comics (Atkinson 266).

In extension, drawings that have been done digitally do not significantly alter the medium, besides the limitations set on them by the digital environment (Evangelia et al. 1456). The drawings are still related to a specific artist and to her drawing style, so still a graphiation, which can be supplemented by the affordances offered by either the digital or the analog work environment.[26] They can even add a layer of critique by highlighting the disjunction between the techniques used and the materiality on which it was published (Licari-Guillaume), which will also be explored later in my close reading of Shirow Masamune's *The Ghost in the Shell*. This also holds true for how comic artists are now being funded, for example through donations, and for the distribution process, which can be done digitally (Wershler et al. 257-61). In this way, comics, whether digital or analog, can be seen as constituting the Deleuzean-Guattarian concept of "minor literature," which, as Erin La Cour puts it, "destratifies the workings of dominant systems to provide a veritable escape from the impasse they create" (La Cour 83). In alignment with La Cour, I argue that comics work as a disrupter of other major forms, particularly here the digital, rather than subscribing to it. Digitally drawn comics, therefore, still ascribe to this minor position due to their embeddedness in both the formal and cultural aspects found within the medium of comics. In this way, what makes a comic a comic is not its medium specificity but rather its function and, subsequently, the hybridity it works with.

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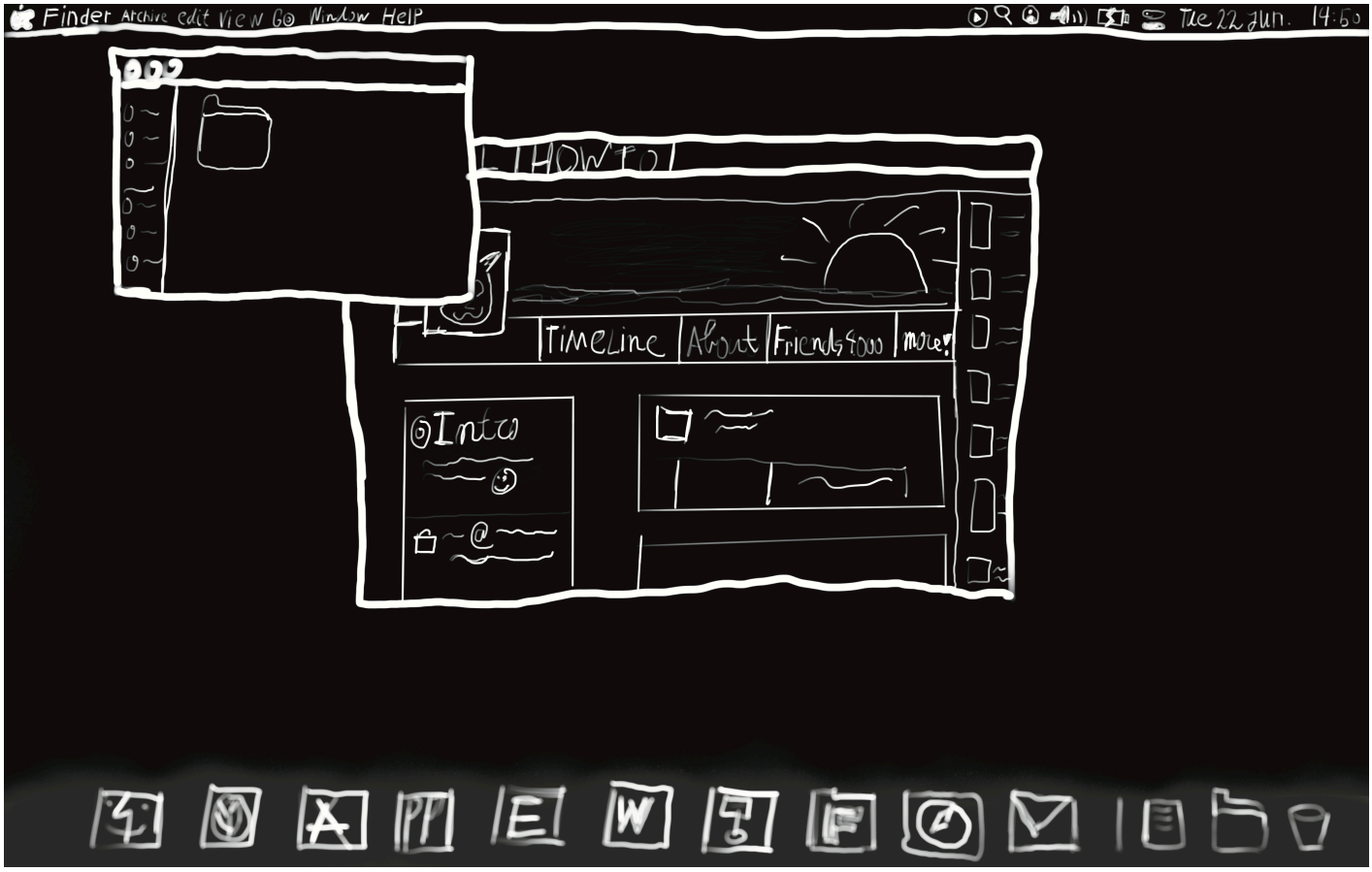
[25]The comic journalism of Joe Sacco is a good example of this because his drawings remain imbedded within the figure of Sacco himself through either the character or his drawing style. Thus, Sacco's comics challenge an objective view of journalism and foreground the lived experience present in it, see Miller 395-8 for a discussion of this point in Sacco's work.

[26]See, for instance, Orbán's analysis of digital comics that also include sound-effects and the way they can strengthen the comic's aims.



Comic 8 - Inspired by the *Mac Operating System* (*Mac OS X*).

(Il)legible Comics

Furthermore, comics highlight the difference between readability and legibility, as previously conceptualized by Hesselberth et al. In other words, comics are always readable—a reader can flip through the pages and enjoy the way they were drawn—but they oscillate between legibility and illegibility. For instance, a sudden page break can disrupt a linear temporal sequence, making the previous legible sequence illegible when connected to this break. Therefore, I disagree with Groensteen when he says that "Comic art is fundamentally a form of literature in which nothing is hidden, which can be possessed in its entirety, with nothing left out" (*Comics and Narration* 76).[27] For Groensteen, comics are marked by "transparency

[27]The "immediacy" of images also remains an issue within the discipline of art history, where it is still up for debate in what ways images are presented immediately—as an unmediated instance—or are still mediated. See Wolff 3-16 for an overview of this debate.

and immediacy" (76), but transparency and immediacy only go so far as to make comics readable and not legible. Comics studies has moved on from this position as well, which now focuses more on the complex interplay within comics and what is not immediately transparent (Baetens, "Words and Images" 196). Therefore, I would like to argue, in accordance with Helms, that it is precisely the composition of comics which allow them to hide a lot of from the reader on both first and second glances. The immediate transparency and immediacy of a comic is deceptive because a lot of meaning is created by making connections across a work, thus making it easy, or even probable, to miss these in a first reading.

Regarding comics in this way makes for a close link between comics and digital culture, especially interfaces. Following Groensteen's argument that comics are a "system" (*System of Comics* 20)—meaning that every element in a comic stands in relation to any other element in the comic—comics can be seen as emblematic of, for instance, actual computer operating systems. For example, an operating system, like *Windows 10*, is a juxtaposition of text and images which each stand in relation to one another.[28] When the user clicks on something, something will happen. If it is a good operating system, these steps will work quickly and seamlessly, meaning that the user remains unaware of any background processes which enable these actions. When following the operating system analogy, a comic can be both a 'good' or a 'bad' system. In other words, a comic can already do a lot of the background work for the reader, by, for instance, having a straight-forward sequence of images, or a comic can disrupt the reading by breaking up the sequence of the panels. Many comics do both, which is why the reader needs to be involved when reading a comic by linking different elements together and closing the gaps between the gutters (McCloud 63). In

[28]Helms uses a similar argument in comparing *Linux* and *Mac OS X* to each other, arguing that a *Linux* user becomes more aware of the background processes due to the involvement required of the user to instigate something; whereas, *Mac OS X* works more seamlessly which causes the user to become less aware of any background processes and so also less knowledgeable about them ("Windows and Mirrors").

other words, "[c]omics make reading difficult" Helms argues, "by depending on readers who are capable of shifting between looking at the pictures and through the words (and vice versa). They create ethical readers by training them in interpretive instability and hermeneutic hesitation" (Comics, Differend, ~~Synthesis~~). This relation to digital interfaces makes comics an ideal way to theorize them, as it makes the reader/user suddenly aware that form and content do not necessarily operate smoothly and that they can significantly influence each other.[29]

Digitalized Comics

Explicitly highlighting the resistance comics can offer against the immersive quality of digitality opens the questions if the same would hold true for comics that are digitalized, in other words, comics that can be read on a screen.[30] It could be argued that these comics have become part of the digital infrastructure I argue against here. From my own experience with reading digitalized comics, I argue that digital comics are still hard to read on digital screens. For instance, the CBR (Comic Book Reader) file formatting many digitalized comics use does not always work perfectly with their designated readers, resulting in, for instance, the loss of resolution, page numbers and the taking apart of page spreads which ought to be viewed together. For the most comfortable reading experience, the preferred format for reading comics remains the physical book, as the disruption of screen reading takes away from rather than complements comics' purposeful disruptions. Nonetheless, applications like Amazon's *Comixology* and Marvel's *Unlimited*—both subscription services on which users can get unlimited access to a number of comics or buy them separately—change this disruption by

[29]Other media do this as well, for instance, Lazzarato focuses on video art as one way to cause disruption to our ways of seeing (*Videophilosophy* 12).

[30]What I do not discuss here is the phenomena of webcomics, which are comics that are fully digital and integrated into a website. In this way, they are distinct from analogue or digital(ized) comics. This is the reason why discussing them here is beyond the scope of this thesis, as they deserve their own unique approach. For more on webcomics, see Batinic "Digital Comics" and Wershler, et al. 260-2.

bringing in new technology to 'properly' read comics (Crucifix and Dozo 580). For example, *Comixology* offers a "guiding view" function, which tracks the user's eyes to offer her a smooth reading experience through each panel without her having to search for the sequence itself. Benoît Crucifix and Björn-Olav Dozo see a lot of resistance against such technology, however, because it challenges the specificity of reading comics and puts it more on par with viewing a movie or website (580).

In other words, such technological 'advancement' reduces the user's agency in reading. Consequently, guided reading practices can transgress comics' potentiality in mapping digital culture in the sense that they are becoming a continuous reading experience embedded in digital culture rather than one that can challenge these assumptions (Batinic, "Enhanced Webcomics" 81). Indeed, rather than viewing the whole page and having to make their own way through it, with applications like *Comixology*, a reader is immediately presented with the 'right' way to read the comic, a notion rejected in comics studies. In *The System of Comics*, Groensteen puts forward a functional definition of comics through, what he terms, a "general arthrology" (22).[31] General arthrology refers to the way a comic acts as a system by creating meaning at a distance through the movement of "*tressage*" ("braiding") (22). "Braiding," Groensteen argues, "thus manifests into consciousness the notion that the panels of a comic constitute a network, and even a system. To the syntagmatic logic of the sequence, it imposes another logic, the associative" (158). In other words, the movement of braiding can be characterized as the recognition of meaning across different panels—rather than just in the panel next to it—which reveals the connection of disperse panels, thus highlighting the page,

[31]Groensteen sets this against a "restricted arthrology," which focuses more on the function of sequentiality in comics through, what he terms, "*decoupage*" (breakdown) (22). Breakdowns are the way meaning is generated through sequentiality, so through the juxtaposition of panels next to each other. This is a more linear approach to comics, whereas general arthrology focuses more on distant and "translinear" meaning (22). Nonetheless, they operate in oscitation with each other, both are needed for a comic to convey meaning.

or the comic in general, as a system. For instance, Groensteen gives the example of how the repetition of a window or moon across several panels can invoke the symbol of the eye, providing new meaning to the comic itself (157). Such meaning can be lost through digital reading practices, since the page as a whole is lost to the reader and, thus, also the connections that could have been made through braiding. This is the reason why Groensteen, among others (Crucifix and Dozo 581), has been so critical of digital reading practices, because, as a consequence, these reading practices undermine the specificity of comics by once again introducing the question of what it means for a comic to be a comic.[32]

This is one of the reasons comic artists resist the opportunity to digitalize their work (574-5). One of the most prolific comic artists against digitalization is Chris Ware. This is especially true for Ware's *Building Stories*, whose very materiality—seen in the actual difference in size between its different parts, the different materials on which it is printed, and the non-linearity of the work—resists an easy digital rendering.[33] Consequently, the digital editions that there are of *Building Stories* are not as easily legible as the print version (Kashtan 421-23). Nevertheless, many comics are digitalized and distributed on digital platforms and were conceived on the internet itself (Crucifix and Dozo 577). The format of the book, as Crucifix and Dozo argue, is no longer tantamount to comics because, especially many young, comic artists start out online and only publish once established (577). However, this means that many comics, even those that started out digitally, still adhere to the book as their main format—a lot of comics are foremost written and drawn as an object meant to be printed rather than as one for digitalization, even though the book has become more a

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[32]See also Wilde 1-14 for a discussion regarding the form of digital comics.

[33]It is interesting to note that *Building Stories*, nevertheless, reflects digital culture in its structure, because it is "mutli-directional," can be accessed randomly and has an "interactive structure" (Crucifix and Dozo 575-6). In this way, digitality also influences comics the other way around, so not only digitalized comics but also analogue comics and their structure.

"prestige" object for those successful enough to publish (577). In other words, while commercial publishing is no longer the ultimate goal, comics artists still often adhere to the book form and, as a consequence, many digital comics remain close to their analogue counterparts (578).[34] In this way, many digital comics still foreground their materiality as being a comic and, therefore, also their resistance against, for instance, digital reading practices. Even when some aspects provided by digital culture, such as animation, are appropriated by (digital) comic artists to "enhance" the medium (Batinic, "Enhanced Webcomics" 81), they still adhere to the form of comics simply because, otherwise, a reader would not be able to recognize them as a comic or differentiate them from another medium.[35]

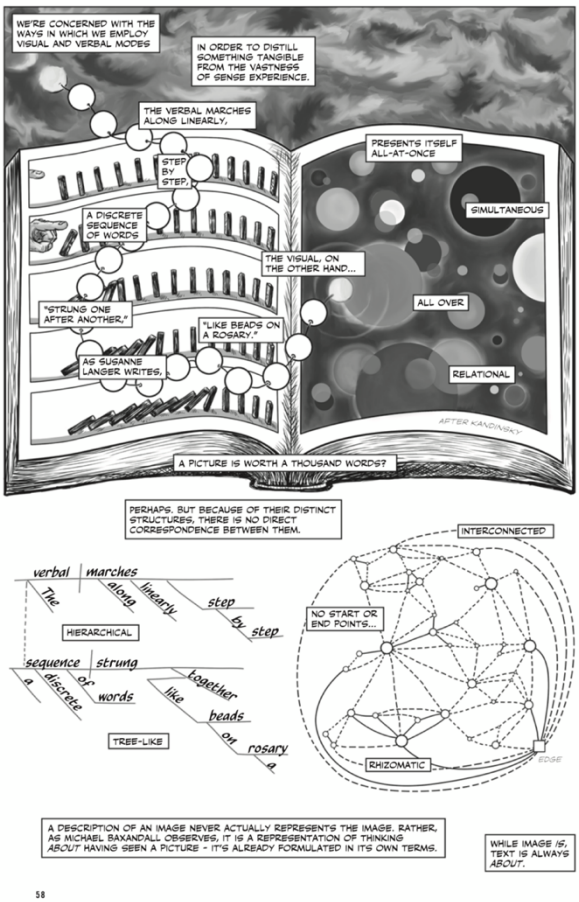

Figure 1 - Unflattening 58

Comics as Praxis

Nick Sousanis' comic *Unflattening*—which was his PhD dissertation as well and, in this way, allowed him to make his arguments about comics in a direct formalistic way—is a prime example of how a comic can be used to think with. In *Unflattening*, Sousanis makes the claim that comics can create "a rupture in experience" (25),

[34]For instance, Sarah Andersen's recent comic *Fangs* started out as a series of digital comics on *Tapas* which remained close to the comic form, e.g. having panels and gutters (Andersen). Once proven itself to be a successful web series, those same webcomics were published as an anthology (2020).

[35]Many webcomics on the digital platform *Tapas*, for instance, are all recognizable as being a comic, since they contain many of the same features—speech balloons, panels and gutters—as analogue comics. Even though they also appropriate digital methods, such as the "infinite canvas," where the user can scroll through the comic without having to 'turn' a page or click to continue ("Enhanced Webcomics" 8). See, for instance, *The Sound of Bread* by Miqin on *Tapas* as a good example of this.

which enables us to "look anew" (26). Connections have to be found and created, which is different from text that makes an argument in a more tree-like manner. Sousanis' drawings presented in figure 1 (58), for instance, show the text on the left-side corner of the page as being interlinked with a string of beads. The reader, presumably, follows this string of beads and the text boxes attached to each bead. What is presented here is that text works in a tree-like manner, which imposes a specific reading structure on the reader—acting like the domino stones seen on the left-hand page of the book, whereas the picture on the right-hand side, in which the beads disappear, presents itself as "simultaneous" (58). The reader has to make sense of this picture before it can be appropriately read. So, for the reader to properly navigate and make sense of this page, she needs to find the right reading order as well as the way the elements correspond to each other. These are questions that the reader has to navigate before knowing how to read a specific page. In some cases, even having made sense of how to read the page presents the reader with several more options and connections. As Sousanis puts it: "While image *is*, text is always *about*" (58, emphasis in original). Most texts signify something, whereas an image needs to be navigated to make it legible.

Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that this does not mean that an image is always directly understandable or that comics are necessarily read the way Sousanis indicates. As the cognitive scientist Niel Cohn states:

> [E]vidence of fluency for visual narratives contrasts popular assumptions that sequential image understanding is transparent or developmentally inevitable […] Rather, comprehenders must acquire and encode specific knowledge from the visual narratives that they read, which in turn habituate them to understand sequential images on the basis of these patterns. (377)

Cohn indicates here the necessity for learning and acquiring skills to properly read comics, that are different from reading purely textual texts. Rather, when reading a comic, the reader first moves cyclically through its structure to establish the right reading patterns which leads to a fixation on the panels themselves (358). This reading structure is constantly updated depending on the structure of the comic. This is reflected in the reader's eye movements, which move less and fixate more when reading a coherent visual narrative, whereas more movements are needed when reading a more disperse and abstract narrative. These findings do not necessarily contradict Sousanis' argument about reading images, but it does complicate it since the reader also wants to impose structure on the comic as much as on the text, and reading comics is not self-evident for everyone. Still, it can be said that, following Sousanis, a text (can) impose(s) meaning on the reader in a linear way, which relates to what the text is talking about, whereas images, and comics, must leave it to the reader to find this structure—allowing for them to break up the desire to structure and foreground the reading experience.

Figure 2 – Unflattening 80

Interestingly, Sousanis also equates making comics, and drawing in general, with how our thoughts are shaped and how our brains work. This is exemplified by figure 2 (80). Through the use of the pen, the figure is able to create new, different and free-flowing shapes: "The physical activity of drawing occurs in dynamic relationship with the artist's visual response to what's put down. […] Drawer and drawing journey forth into the unknown together" (80). The act of drawing is what allows Sousanis to make new

connections.[36] According to Katalin Orbán, these connections are even multisensorial and can also invoke the sensation of sound and temporality which go beyond the visual (240), by, for instance, the attempt to actually draw the non-visual. Therefore, the practice of making a comic can already be seen as a theoretical practice that forces the artist or theorist to visualize what she wants to put down on paper in a way that has yet to fully connect, or even leaves open any connection. [37] In this way, Sousanis argues that drawing provides a different way to make (theoretical) sense of the world.[38]

Questioning Humanness

Many other theorists echo Sousanis' aims. For instance, considering the effects of technology on personhood and how this can influence the law, comics "can bring into question law's vision and image of the human, drawing our attention to the ways of seeing that structure our ideas of law and the human, but also providing ways of envisioning it anew" (Peters 115). According to Timothy D. Peters, comics both simplify—because some abstraction is needed to render reality visual—and complicate reality. In other words, comics situate the reader in a space oscillating between presence and absence. Thomas Giddens emphasizes this when talking about the figure of the cyborg in comics: "Wholeness is resisted by the cyborg; it is partial, fractured, divided" ("Law and the Machine" 92). Giddens argues that comics in particular highlight this resistance by, for example, defying the reader, or encouraging her, to ascribe humaneness on a cyborg, or any other non-human being for that matter. This offers

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[36]See also Sousanis "Frames of Thought"154-59, for his application of drawing into a methodology and Grennan 28-37 for a further exploration of the affordances allowed by drawing.

[37]See for the way this can influence literary education Milyakina 569-89.

[38]Applications of this are, for instance, already happening in the medical field through Graphic Medicine, see Czerweic, et al. 1-20.; literacy studies, see Smith, et al. 3-11; data sciences, see Bach, et al.; and in primary education, see Dallacqua and Peralta 111-18 and Burger 1-9.

comics the ability to draw attention to technology in a way that is not always self-evident, and that can question past assumptions.[39]

Furthermore, comics are also a fruitful medium to explore the nonorganic, or the gothic when following Fisher. Julia Round situates the connection between the gothic in the formal aspects of comics especially in the ways "[t]he reader becomes the author" (419), meaning that the reader needs to resolve tensions between "opposing signifiers" and needs to fill in the gap between panels (419). In other words: "We are at once ourselves, but also not, as we are bombarded with different visual perspectives, addressed by different narrative voices, and privy to thought, speech, precis, sound, motion and numerous other *emanata* and signifying devices" (419, emphasis in original). As Round argues here, comics' spectrality is as much invoked by the reader as the comic itself by virtue of its layout.[40] This strange tension—between the reader's role and the actual comic in front of them—can invoke the gothic through contradiction. This can for example happen through an information overload, which mirrors the real urban world. As argued by Stuart Lindsay when discussing technological dystopias in comics:

> The traumatic, personal impact of this existence is represented by novel use of the comics panel: its palimpsestic nature illustrates the disorienting experience and transmission of a manifold reality via the virtual space of networked communication technology, while the limits of the frame, as much as the disintegrating physical bonds of the city, are portrayed as unable to contain, order, or undo the repressed trauma of this urban world. (445)

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[39]On comics and their visualization of non-human worlds, see, for instance, also Wilcox 21-34, Schmeink 276-87, Zetter 437-60, Giddens "The Law and the Machine" 89-106 and King and Page 109-136 on the representation of technology in comics; and Hermans 2-25 for comics and their relationship to animals.

[40]Round's argument here is a classical one, which finds its origin in more classical texts on the medium of comics and its form. See, for instance, McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, specifically chapter 2 and 3, and Eisner's *Comics & Sequential Art*.

The traumatic caused by the gothic through technology is actively shown and engaged with in comics—mirroring the world we find ourselves in and highlighting the nonorganic elements that influence it.

Filippo Menga and Dominic Davies situate the way nonorganic entities can be highlighted by comics specifically in the ways they show their "narrative infrastructure," which reveals that on "the surface of the page multiple events [are happening] *simultaneously* as well as sequentially" (670). According to them, this infrastructure structures time spatially rather than temporally, which allows the reader to look beyond what we generally conceive of as 'human time' and restructure it accordingly. In other words, comics do not show a linear progression of time, but they rather highlight time spatially by showing it as being fractured and segmented. Here, Menga and Davies continue, comics mark a posthuman way of engaging with narrative, as it is markedly different from what normally would be considered as constituting, in this case, human time (670).

Reading Comics

This coincides with the political, or theoretical, aim of comics, which is to create a rupture within reading. Following Mitchell, the study of comics can therefore provide a "field of study that refuses to take vision for granted, that insists on problematizing, theorizing, critiquing, and historicizing the visual process as such" (134).[41] Comics problematizes what we see by its very form, for instance, in its spatial rather than temporal rendering of time. This differentiates comics from other time-based media, such as television and in some ways the internet, and allows them to disengage the reader from linear temporality. In this way, comics

[41]For more on the formal aspects of comics and how they deal with meaning making, see also Davies 1-32.

can do theory differently by showing and highlighting different connections, breaking up temporal aspects, and showing theory in action.[42]

For instance, Francesco-Alessio Ursini, et al. identify three generalizations in how comics can tackle the problem of the future and the inability to think of it. First, the "representations of the future [in comics] […] reflect the thoughts, hopes and anxieties about the present" (3); second, comics' "speculations, or let them be called visions, are inexorably connected to the authors' present cultural environment as well as perspectives on the past" (4); and finally, "since comics ultimately represent the personal visions of the authors that create them, comics inevitably lend themselves to represent perhaps chaotic but certainly creative visions of the future" (4). By emphasizing the connection between the author's presence and the comic, Urini, et al. show that the present is always accounted for in comics, whether they are actively reflected upon, speculated on, or presented. These are several of the ways through which comics can be used to critically engage with the present and the future.[43]

Comics-as-Theory-Fiction, or Thinking from the Gutter

As I hope to have shown, comics are close to digital culture in that they are emblematic of the way digital systems are composed and function. However, comics remain at a critical distance, since they explicatively foreground their materiality, require the participation of the reader, invoke the gothic as much as the human, and oscillate between legibility and illegibility. In this way, comics invoke a "realism about the hyperreal" (Fisher 25), or, in other words, theory-fiction. As theory-fiction, comics provide a reading practice which ruptures and

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[42]See also Giddens "Critical Comics Studies: An Origin Story" 3-12 and Magnussen, et al. xvii-xxv for a discussion on comics and their ability to represent power, Køhlert 11-32 on comics and anarchy and King and Page 1-22 on posthumanism within comics.

[43]The relationship between the future and comics is also discussed in Noys 235-50 and Mortenson 5-20.

allows for a space through which digital culture can be mapped and conceptualized. In other words, they show a specific local "diagram" of digital culture.

The "diagram" is a concept found throughout Deleuze (and Guattari)'s work. "The concept of the diagram," as argued by Jakub Zdebik, "marks a zone of abstraction in which concrete systems shed their specificity and interact on the level of pure function […] first, as an informal dimension and second, as a display of relations as pure functions" (23). What this means is that the diagram acts as the intermediate between what is seen and interacted with and their concepts, or abstractions. The best example here is to think of an actual architectural diagram. Such diagrams are an abstraction of the ultimate building yet are concrete enough to instruct the building of a specific structure. The space of the diagram contains both textual and visual elements in conjunction with each other, so language is never primary (*A Thousand Plateaus* 164-6). Building on Foucault, Deleuze gives the following approximation of the diagram: "The diagram or abstract machine is the map of relations between forces, a map of destiny, or intensity, which proceeds by primary non-localizable relations and at every moment passes through every point, 'or rather in every relation from one point to another'" (*Foucault* 32). In other words, Deleuze posits that for Foucault, the diagram is the concept that connects the visual and textual elements together and shows their relations. For instance, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* reveals the diagram of discipline which connects the visibility of the panopticon with the discourse of legality. This diagram can then be transposed and connected to other settings, like education or sexuality.

This openness of the diagram differentiates it from a system, since it can connect and be used on different settings. To follow Deleuze:

> [T]he diagram shows how it is different from structure in so far as the alliances weave a supple and transversal network that is perpendicular to vertical structure; define a

> practice, proceeding or strategy distinct from any single combination; *and form an unstable physical system* that is in perpetual disequilibrium instead of a closed, exchangist cycle. (*Foucault* 31, emphasis my own)

In other words, a diagram is the intermediatory network between abstraction and praxis, more or less like the relation between theory and praxis itself. A diagram is always an unstable system, as new connections can be found and other practices or abstractions from the outside can be brought in. Thus, in both philosophy and art diagrams are important.

In *What is Philosophy?*, for instance, Deleuze and Guattari posit that philosophers have "*[t]o give consistency*" to chaos by making a diagram of it (42).[44] Philosophers have to create order in the chaos of daily life to build their philosophies on. However, these philosophies are never closed off, but always open since they are built on unstable ground. That is why others are able to appropriate and use different philosophies to build their own diagram and create their own concepts. The same holds for painting, where the diagram functions as the state between the abstract canvas, also called the "frame," and the more concrete state of "sensations, or a point of view" (*Francis Bacon* 91). The artist has to find a way to marry the two states in order to convey the sensibility of the sensation in such a way that it can be 'seen' by the viewer. The diagram is the way Deleuze conceptualizes what happens between these two states. I wish to conceptualize both the reading and drawing of comics in the same way, that is, seeing them as a diagram rather than as a system due to their openness, the way they connect between different elements and how they require the reader.

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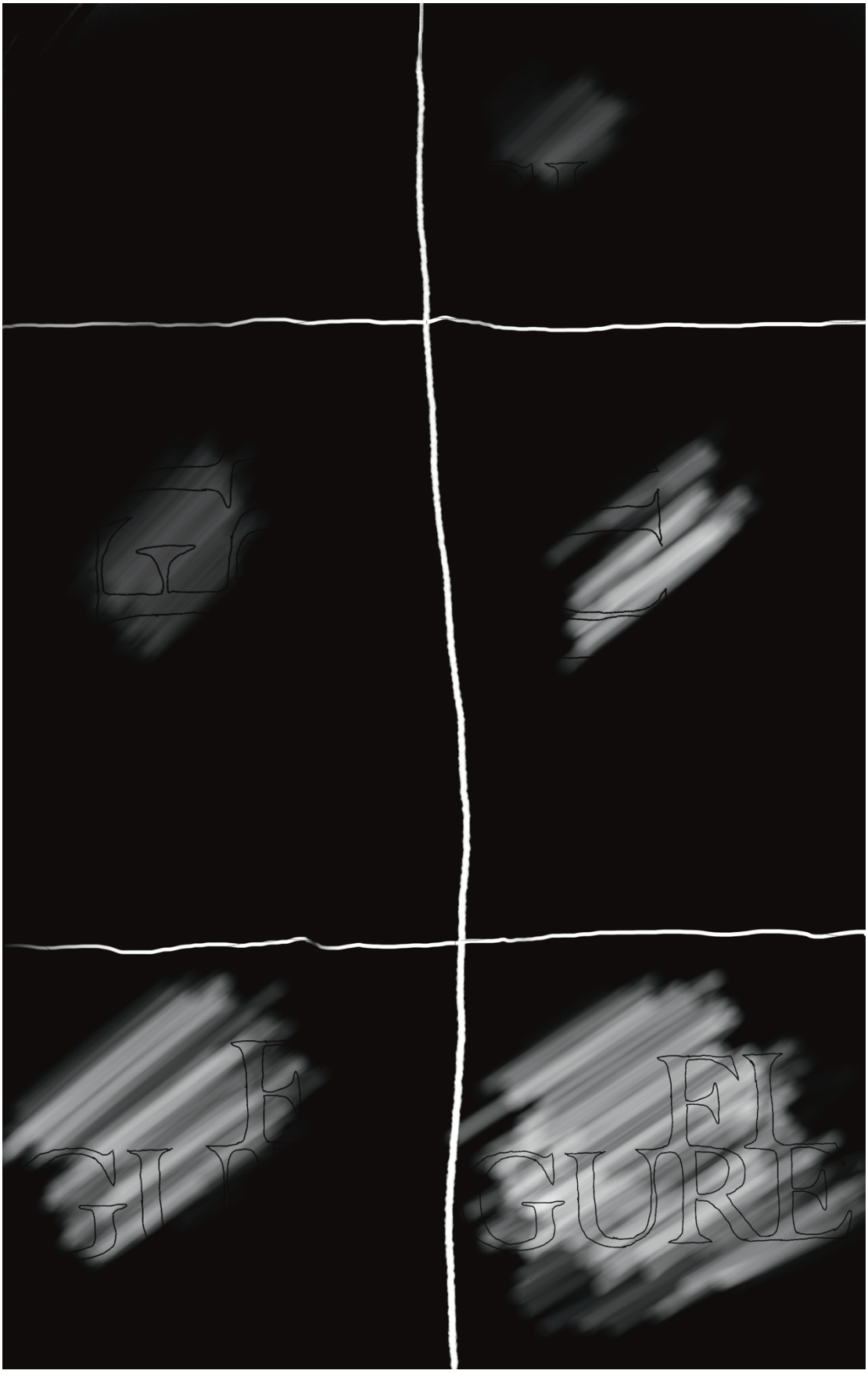
[44]For Deleuze and Guattari, chaos is the main state of the world, meaning that nothing is ever truly stable or essential. Instead, stabilities and essences are imposed on the chaos to make it seem more predictable and controllable. Nonetheless, these attempts can be shown to fail in this respect, thus returning to the continuous movement of chaos. In this way, Deleuze is able to talk about Difference as the ontological basis, rather than Being, since in chaos everything is in flux rather than stable (*Difference and Repetition* 301).

In conclusion, comics-as-theory-fiction aims to think of comics in a diagrammatic way, working from the concrete example of the comic, the looking *at*, to the way they create and disrupt a system, the looking *through*. Due to the way comics are emblematic of digital culture, I want to show it is possible to theorize digital culture from them in a way that thinks from the middle, or between form and content. By applying the concept of comics-as-theory-fiction on all three of my case studies, I aim to show such thinking by focusing on the specific ways each break their reading, open up a space to look upon the diagram of digital culture and transpose this looking to an act of theorizing. Inés Estrada's *Alienation* will comment upon the way the digital and the human are in an alienating relationship, whereas Shirow's *The Ghost in the Shell* will argue that in this relationship both elements significantly influence each other. My first close reading of Joshua W. Cotter's *Nod Away*, however, will build on this by foregrounding the way Cotter's comic shows the working of mediation within comics and, in extension, digital culture.



Comic 9 - The word "Figure" is inspired by the cover of the English translation of Jean-François Lyotard's *Discourse, Figure*, which was designed by Wilsted & Taylor Publishing Services.

Chapter 2: Nodding Mediation

One of the ways to approach digital culture through comics-as-theory-fiction is by analyzing one of its fundamental aspects: mediation. Especially because one of the key points in the last chapter is that most instances within digital culture are always mediated, meaning that each conscious experience of digital information is preceded by an instance to make it legible for the human and was translated by machines. Deceptively, these legible instances show themselves to be moments of clarity, through which we can supposedly understand the workings of technologies themselves. Nonetheless, these instances have undergone a moment of translation and are not a direct way to understand digital culture. My close reading of Joshua W. Cotter's *Nod Away* will focus on precisely the mediating instances at play here and the ways their structure reveals itself to be built on an absence rather than on presence. First, I will discuss *Nod Away* more in depth, to then tie it back to Thomas Giddens' close reading of it. Following Giddens, I argue *Nod Away* to reveal structures of absence and presence, which I couple to Jean-François Lyotard's project in *Discourse, Figure* as it reveals the way discourse and figure oscillates. Subsequently, I will analyze *Nod Away* as theory-fiction—the ways it shows the cracks in its own mediation which allow for a space to theorize differently from—by focusing on the instances where it seems to rupture the reading itself. In my close reading I will mainly focus on *Nod Away*'s opening sequence, since this part specifically foregrounds the workings of its own form. After which I will move on to discuss the narrative and the ways *Nod Away* breaks away from a linear narrative.

Nod Away is the first volume of what is supposed to be a seven volume comic series ("Joshua W. Cotter). Consequently, *Nod Away* contains some unresolved plot holes that, most probably, will be expanded on in later volumes. Besides these plot holes, *Nod Away* offers an engaging visual experience, which starts with an opening sequence that is loosely connected

to the rest of the comic, to then embark on its main narrative about female protagonist Melody McCabe, as well as a, almost silent, second narrative interlaced with it, about an as-of-yet unknown male protagonist. The parts involving the latter remain vague throughout the narrative, leaving the reader only able to extrapolate that the male protagonist is situated in a post-apocalyptic landscape that he is trying to traverse. It is also unclear how these parts relate to the rest of the story timewise. It is possible that Cotter will remain working on expanding the male protagonist's story in the volumes yet to come.

What the reader does glean is that Melody is a scientist specialized in "neurometrics" (45) and was closely involved with the development of the "innernet" (89). The innernet is a new kind of internet and functions not through external mediation, for instance through screens, but by internally receiving information through a central hub (35), which, in this case, is a young child by the name of Eva (97). The innernet is "not a visual process [but] more akin to the flow of **natural** thought […] It's an entirely unique sense, a whole new means of perception" (35, emphasis in original). The innernet, which is impossible to represent in the comic due to its non-visual nature, is more on par with unconsciousness and thought than with any 'classical' mediation. In the story world of *Nod Away* not everyone can be a "streamer"—the name for someone who has access to the innernet—and some, including Melody, are incompatible with the innernet and are thus unable to stream (56). For these cases the internet and devices such as smartphones and televisions still exist, although they have become obsolete for most people. During the start of the narrative, Melody is on an airplane making its way to the space station "USS Integrity" (49). Once she arrives she must deal with tiresome bureaucratic processes, an attack from mutated astronauts who were transported by a recently developed teleportation device, at times irritating colleagues and, at the end, being

kidnapped by the head scientist of the space station who just released a deadly virus to all the streamers, possibly both on earth as well as on the space station itself.

In terms of formal aspects, the comic is fully in black-and-white and realistically drawn. Both the characters and environments contain a lot of detail, which gives the comic a vibrant atmosphere and presents a world that seems to be teeming with activity. *Nod Away*'s formatting is also in close approximation to classical adventure-genre comics, as most of the pages utilize an irregular layout, speech balloons, and sporadic full-page spreads. What makes Cotter's work more experimental is the way he manages to oscillate pages in this format with more abstract drawings and page layouts. For instance, as aforementioned the comic starts not with the main narrative, but with an opening sequence that directly reflects on the workings of the comic, and, as I would like to argue, mediation in general. The opening sequence eventually culminates into a mess of lines, which seem to connect each chapter, since each chapter starts and ends with a collection of chaotic lines like those presented in the opening sequence. It is precisely because of Cotter's continuous juxtaposition between abstractness and realism that I argue *Nod Away*'s main goal is located in exploring "what consciousness could be, where it could possibly be located, and what function or point it might serve" ("Nod Away Vol. 1"), a goal Cotter himself, or at least its publisher Fantagraphics Books, also foregrounds.

Being a relatively new comic, not a lot of academic work has been done on it yet. Comics legal scholar Thomas Giddens' article "Institution and Abyss" is the notable exception. Even though Giddens' analysis remains close to an analysis of the law in *Nod Away*, his analysis can also be applied more generally to the way the comic problematizes mediation itself, because much as most instances, law must be mediated as well, as Giddens' article also aims to show. In his article Giddens sets out to analyze the gap present in the law that exists

between institution and abyss within the comic. Both are tied back to the working of the law in today's legal context, where the former refers to a positivistic account of the law—the material that can be accessed, read and interpreted (151), such as written law, jurisprudence, and the actual institutions and their rules themselves, and the latter refers to that what is unknowable in each legal case—mainly the continuously changing context surrounding each legal instance and its actors (151), but also to the source(s) of authority the law claims to have (152). For instance, the law presupposes a subject that can think and act autonomously and with agency. Without this idea of the subject, which is nowhere defined as such in legal discourse, the law would lose some of its authority, since if subjects do not have agency, they cannot be held responsible for their actions.

Following Giddens, this results in "a 'horrific jurisprudence'—a mode of legal thought preoccupied with the law's reliance upon the idea of a (suppressed) infinite or unknowable context, and how engagement with this context might be understood to progressively challenge the conscious order(s) of legality" (151). On the one hand, law is a positivistic presence, the law that can be seen and sensed, while on the other hand, it also presupposes a negative absence, that which falls outside what can be seen and inferred. It should be noted that this is not necessarily a dialectic division—in which case both presence and absence would exist simultaneously—but rather an imposition (159). A legal presence is imposed on an absence where there was no structure before. In this way, Giddens argues that the law is similar to myths, because it imposes structure and rules in order to make sense of an otherwise unknown outside (160), and, in this way, pushes away the absence on which it remains based (163). Giddens' article tries to challenge this and to bring the outside of legal discourse more to the foreground.

Giddens uses *Nod Away* to signify this divide between absence and presence, which Giddens also applies more broadly to the ways *Nod Away* signals the workings of mediation:

> [W]hat Cotter's work articulates—founded in the mythic elaboration of its opening sequence and presented explicitly in the early stages of its substantive narrative—is a closely delineated institutional life, navigated by McCabe, and presented against an undivided universe that is paradoxically both immanent and almost completely masked by the material forms of institution. (161)

In this chapter I argue that, following Giddens, what *Nod Away* signifies is, first, the way comics are built on a structure of absence and presence. This can especially be seen in *Nod Away*'s opening sequence, due to its interplay between blackness and whiteness, or, as I argue, presence and absence. In this interplay it shows on the one hand the mythic, to reiterate Giddens, origins of the narrative, in disallowing the reader to make proper sense of its narrative. In other words, it does not allow for the myth of structure that needs to be transposed on comics to read them. Second, on the literal whiteness of the page a structure needs to be build, or in the case of comics drawn, in order to be read and for meaning to come across to the reader. In this way, it pushes away absence, the whiteness of the page, and imposes presence on it in the form of panels, words, and drawings. The opening sequence, again, comments upon these workings by specifically foregrounding the filling of the empty white page with signifiers, which it at times also undoes, thus, showing the reader the interplay between presence and absence in the comic.

While I do not discuss it as such, the rest of the narrative mirrors the opening sequence, due to its predominant setting in space, and, in this way, signifying the divide between presence and absence happening in social life as well. As Giddens explains, the space station McCabe finds herself on is full of rules and legislation, yet it is situated in the vast

nothingness that is space (156). A vastness that becomes unnoticeable precisely due to structures present on the space station. Yet, a vastness *Nod Away* subtly shows to the reader throughout the narrative, mirroring the opening sequence that, I argue, plays with the vastness of the empty page and its drawn structures. Thus, a strange tension becomes palpable between the finiteness of human structures and the background it is set against. It are these ways, I argue, through which *Nod Away* can signify the divide between presence and absence.

Here *Nod Away* comes close to Jean-François Lyotard's project in *Discourse, Figure*, earlier encountered in the introduction of the thesis, in which Lyotard tries to signify the "figure" within "discourse"—which for Lyotard is not necessarily language but any representative structure (Ionescu 145)—by arguing that such compositions always break and, through this breakage, reveals the figure, or, to put simply, the non-discursive materiality of a text. The figure designates here what falls outside these structures, so, for instance, what cannot be put into words. *Nod Away*, as theory-fiction, provides its reader with precisely such exercise, by not merely signifying such breakings but actually performing them. To use Lyotard' terminology, which he in turn burrowed from Sigmund Freud, *Nod Away* serves as an intensification of the "death drive" (*Discourse, Figure* 354), which, rather than the "*Eros*" drive to structure, destroys any structure, or shows them to be void. The death drive comes to the fore when the negative—absence—seeps into presence, or structure. Lyotard does not necessarily see this as purely destructive, rather, the death drive can be used creatively, as "a free agent" (355). It can reveal structures to allow the participant, reader or artist to play with them in order to displace them, restructure them, or show the figure underneath them (384). As Jason Helms argues, it makes us drop the illusion of clarity ("Opposition and Difference"), and from this moment a new theory can be constructed.

These are the moments where *Nod Away* most clearly shows its doing of theory-fiction, meaning that it shows the cracks in its own form and in the reading itself such that a space forms itself to argue differently from. For *Nod Away*, this lies precisely in its intensity and the confrontation it offers the reader, as I now want to show though my close reading and the oscillation between looking *at* and *through* in it, to highlight where these breakages become visible. In other words, *Nod Away* directly confronts the reader with the figure and its irrepresentability by not only signifying it, but by performing this breakage.

"Wynken, Blynken, and Nod"

At the start of the comic, Cotter immediately tries to evoke a sense of eeriness by not directly starting with the story itself, as one would expect, but rather with a reflection on the form of the comic, or perhaps even discourse at large. At first this can be disorienting for the reader, since it is unclear how this exercise connects to the rest of the comic and how it needs to be interpreted against it. The comic starts off with two fully white pages (1-2) followed by, on the third page, a single black dot set against a further fully white page (3). According to Giddens:

> This transition is key because it is a transition from absence (blankness) to presence (dot). In this transition the radical cut from ~~absence~~ is articulated, and in this movement form and content appear simultaneously, a duality of 'emergence' and 'monstration'—of that which appears, and that which it communicates. These 'two indissociable planes of representation and discourse' appear together: the first (structure or form) describes the locus of the absolute and the division from the beyond; the second (content or discourse) provides the narration of that limit, indicating the edge of possible speech. (157-8)

Following Giddens, by interposing the dot on the blank page Cotter is able to show both form and content, or figure and discourse. The white page is still imbued with absence, thus communicating the unrepresentable, whereas the singular dot juxtaposed against it does communicate meaning. Even though, as Giddens mentions, it foregrounds its own limit, because a dot on its own set against a white space does not necessarily convey anything. Rather the dot is pure figure and not, to use Giddens' term here, "substantive" (158).

On the subsequent page, this dot transforms into the dot atop an "i" (4). Suddenly, the pure form of the dot is given substance in the form of a letter. The letter can be interpreted as representing something, or at the least can give a hint at the meaning of these pages. However, the "i" remains lowercase throughout the first the pages of the comic, so it is unclear whether the i refers to a person, as in "I", or to something else entirely. On the next page, the i multiplies into four other i's (5), before being interrupted by two pages of poetry, seen in figure 3, each containing three lines from the poem "Wynken, Blynken, and Nod" (1889) by American poet Eugene Field (6-7). This hypertextual reference comes suddenly and disappears in the same manner. On the following pages, the "i"'s start to multiply again, grow larger and are accompanied by "n"'s (8-13).

Before continuing with the comic, it is worth analyzing the six lines of poetry, seen below, a bit more in depth, as I posit that they contain valuable information regarding the comic. Field's "Wynken, Blynken, and Nod," subtitled "Dutch Lullaby," was originally a nursery rhyme meant for children at bedtime (Rumens). The reason for the subtitle can be gleaned throughout the poem, which invokes images of "wooden shoes" and "herring fish" (Field), thus harkening back to the European roots (in this case Dutch) of many Americans, and the recognizable origin it offered them in a, as-of-then, still rootless land where they had to settle. By including the poem, *Nod Away* can be said to offer its reader the

same kind of reassurance by providing an anchor point which the reader can relate to, and, perhaps, even offers a sense of clarity if they are inclined to use the poem for understanding the opening sequence at large.

Figure 3 - Nod Away 6-7

However, the reassuring qualities of the lullaby do not give us the reason for its presence in *Nod Away*. Of course, there is a direct connection between the title of the poem and the comic, since both contain "nod." Seeing that Field's poem is directly related to the coming of sleep, nod can be interpreted here as the motion of someone's head when that person is sleepy or drowsy, just before falling asleep. Thus, nodding relates directly to the oscillation between consciousness and unconsciousness. In this way it is a connection between the two states, more or less in the same way as a 'nod to' is a concealed hyper-

connection to, for instance, another author or work. At one moment someone is awake—nod —that person is asleep.

This connection is also made, however briefly, by Groensteen, who argues that a blink, which I extend here to a nod, can be said to be a "micro blackout" equivalent to "crossing between frames" (*Comics and Narration* 137). Each crossing is a blink that is 'edited' away when reading a comic, thus making the reading experience go smoothly rather than being interrupted by the gutter between frames. By making the nod and blink explicit in *Nod Away*, the comic seems to pose that a lot of what we read is lost when reading it. For instance, the title of the poem, as well as the author and the rest of the poem, is omitted from *Nod Away*, so for readers unfamiliar with the poem this reference remains lost. In this way, the reader is kept in the dark about the origins of the poem here, never fully knowing whether this is a poem written by Cotter, a character in the book, the comic itself or constitutes an hypertextual reference. Looking *at* these pages, the poem can still be said to function as an anchor of safety among the harsh white page. The words immediately grab attention and, while ripped from any context, the reader can do nothing but be a reader of these words. Being on a white page, several allusions can be made that connect the poem directly to it. On page 6 the comic mentions "sail," and on page 7 "dream" and "sea." The same letter "i" previously encountered can also be read in the comic, specifically in the word "it." The letter "n," making its appearance on the pages after the poem, comes back in "not," which sounds phonetically similar to nod.

Looking *through* these pages, they seem to hint at the way Cotter theorizes the comic, and perhaps consciousness in general, to work. To cite the second and third line of the poem: "a sail it seemed / as if it could not be" (6). The lyric subject seems to be unsure what exactly she is looking at, but she imposes on it the substance of a sail, even though she knows that it

is too good to be true. What "it" is remains, therefore, unclear to the reader, since it is never properly defined—except through the negation “it could not be”—and its meaning is only hinted at. The reader thus remains in the dark as to if "it" even exists or whether it can hold up to scrutiny. The three lines of poetry on the other page seem to affirm this, as they invoke the image of a dream—the imaginary—rather than a factual experience by inferring that "some folks thought 'twas a dream they'd dreamed" (7). In this way, it reverses the clarity the poem could have provided when imbued with a specific meaning, through questioning whether that meaning found in the poem is not merely ephemeral. It breaks here with the unconscious drive to impose structure or meaning on it, thus allowing the death drive to do its work, as well as breaking with the immersion felt when still reading the poem and the attempt to connect it to the comic at large. The nod signifies here a change in the state of the reader, a change that can either undo the “it,” reaffirm it, or impose it. Indeed, what first seemed to be a safe haven for the reader—the comfort of discourse and the meaning that it represents—proved to be misleading and, perhaps, more deconstructive than the parts before it.

The pages that follow the poem again show a multiplication of the "i" with the inclusion of the "n" (8), which quickly takes over from the "i" in quantity (10) as well as in size. On page 10 other letters come into the mix. On my first reading, I was trying to make sense of all these words and their connection to, possibly, the comic and other ideas. What I forgot to do was look *at* these pages to see how the "n" and "i" become larger than any of these letters and slowly begin to take over the page. Something which I did not notice at first since I was too busy trying to make words, but which becomes inescapable on pages 12 and 13 where the "n" and "i"'s are all but dominant. It is as if the comic rejects any attempt of the reader to make sense of it, almost maliciously evading every such attempt. This is affirmed on the pages that follow. First, these pages negativized the previous black letters, turning them

into white letters with a black outline. On top of these outlines are speech balloon(s), which are starkly outlined against the text. The first speech balloon contains the text "limit" (14), whereas the pages that follow from there make up the following sentences once they are connected:

> "[T]he bane of all sentenced to bear the burden of sentience[.] [T]he *sine qua non* to bestow designation upon all that is perceived discrete[.] Discrete packets[,] capsules of essence to make more palatable finite's passage[.] [E]ndurable to process[,] to sort file away an effort to make sense of external[,] internal throughout infinity[.] [R]egardless of means inadequate the need intrinsic resisting assimilation[,] as lungs resist for the in the presence of that which is without definition[,] one is left undefined[.] [A]morphous state floating abhorrent to being as life without meaning[,] purpose[,] for in the presence of negative necessitates positive and so negative invents limit." (15-22, emphasis my own)

Assembling this passage was torturous and frustrating, since, especially in the end of this passage, the comic defies being read chronologically and instead proposes other ways to combine or recombine the words into a sentence (see for instance figure 4 below). Moreover, the grammatical structure never properly fits together, thus leaving the assembler frustrated and constantly in doubt whether or not she missed something. The material structure of *Nod Away* directly reflects the point that the sentence tries to make, which is the *sine qua non* (an essentiality) to impose a limit on what we see in order to differentiate it and, subsequently, to designate it.

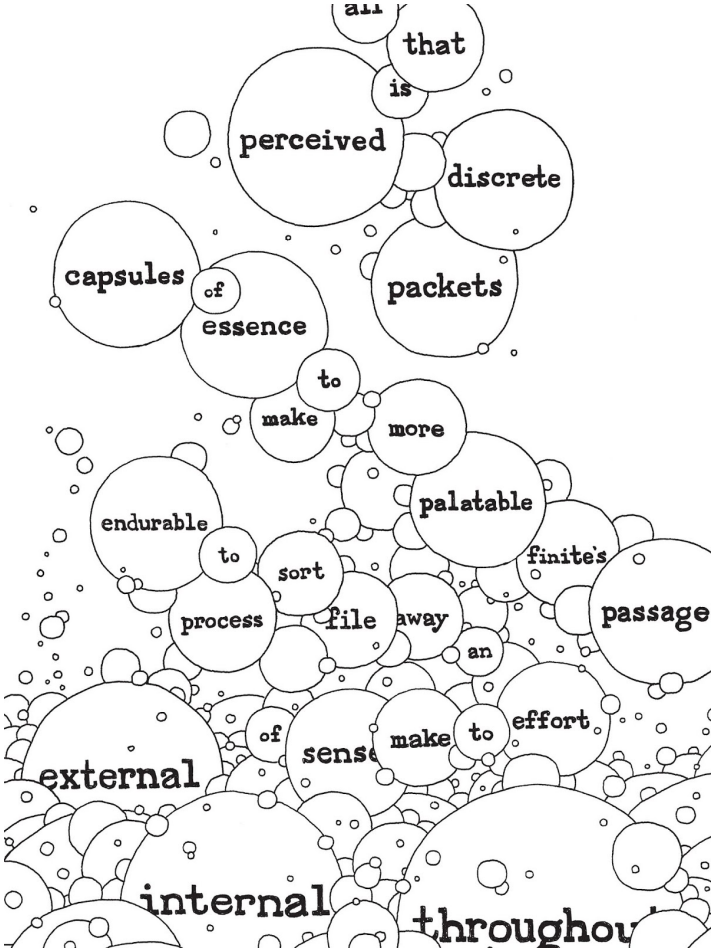


Figure 4 – Nod Away 17

Whiteness and Blackness

The separate speech balloons slowly give way to panels, as seen in figure 5 (22-3). Looking *at* these pages, the left page can be seen to still overlap with the previous page, as most of the pages in this specific section of the opening sequence do (16-23), so, the meaning of this page cannot be fully contained in just the page itself, but the reader needs the previous pages to make fully sense of it. The same holds true for the predominantly black background which continues the black color first established earlier (19). However, it can be seen to be slowly receding on the right page in figure 5 (23), giving way to the white background space underneath it. The speech balloons on this page, both those containing text and not, are fully

black, whereas the letters are white. The texts within these balloons do not necessarily make sense when put together. Nonetheless, several sentences can be made but also immediately present the feeling that they are assembled incorrectly, due to the weird grammatical structure, the words that do not always fit together properly, or because a different speech balloon seems to fit better. That is why I chose to complete the paragraph in the previous section with "limit," which is the word seen within the attention-grabbing panel on the bottom right.

This panel seems to indicate an evolution of the speech balloons before it, as the oval spaces slowly become more rectangular until they fulfil their *telos* as the white panel, containing just the word "limit." The white paneling continues on the subsequent pages, which has more in common with a typical type of comic book layout, meaning that it repeats a specific number of panels across several pages. Nonetheless, rather than visuals, these panels contain just text. Each panel, except for the first and last one, are hard to read due to the way the words are broken down. For instance, in the second panel it breaks down "dimensional" into "dimension" and "al" without the use of a dash to connect them, which makes it hard to discern whether it should be read as either "dimensional" or "dimension al," and in the case of the latter what the role of "al" is in the panel. The last three panels focus on the word "infinity," which is first fully seen but then gets zoomed in on, ultimately focusing only on its first two letters, the oft repeated "in." The background on this page shows a continuation of the black background previously seen; however, it is seen to be slowly fading into the white background, leaving just the black bordered panels on a white background, setting the stage for most of the comic.

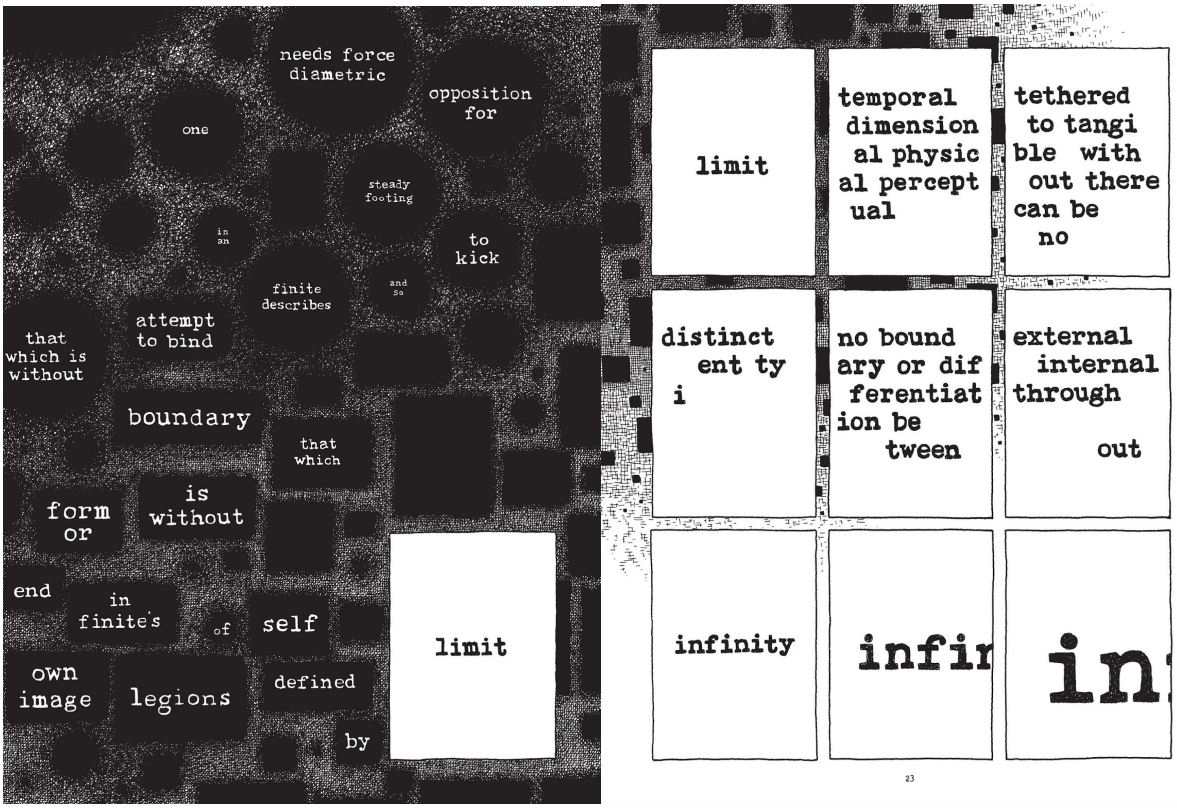


Figure 5 – Nod Away 22-3

What is especially noticeable, therefore, is the juxtaposition of white and black spaces within these pages and the effect they have on the reader. As already briefly mentioned in Giddens' argument, the whiteness of the comic page can be put on the same level as absence on which presence is imposed. Giddens builds here upon Xavier Marcó del Pont and his analysis of the use of "whiteness," in a formal sense, in comics. Del Pont, through a close reading of several comics, posits that there are three kinds of losses associated with whiteness, or the blank panel/page. It can either signify "personal loss," "under [for instance] the guise of death, obliteration, oblivion, [and] blindness" (256), "temporary loss," the temporary loss of any reference point for the reader (262-4), and, finally, "mass loss," for example, the mass destruction of objects or the obliteration caused by weapons of mass destructions (264-6). All three losses point towards the attempt to represent the unrepresentable, either being a state

which cannot be accessed physically or a loss that is so grand that the writer is unable to translate it into the comic. In this way, blank panels serve as "a statement on abstraction" (254), since they aim to represent a state of being in a disconnected way.

In these instances, the use of whiteness in comics has a lot of overlap with the function of black panels / pages. As Hilary Chute mentions in "The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*," "[t]he visual emptiness of the simple, ungraded blackness in the frames shows not the scarcity of memory, but rather its thickness, its depth; the 'vacancy' represents the practice of memory, for the author and possibly for the reader" (98). Blackness here, following Chute, is an abstraction of the act of remembrance the comic engages in to recall especially traumatic memories. The depth of the blackness serves to elicit those memories previously deemed too painful or hidden too far away to remember. In extension, Chute argues that Satrapi also uses blackness, especially black backgrounds, to highlight certain instances. For instance, the corpses of a massacre are delineated by a black background, thus providing a traumatic image removed from any realism (100). In the sense that the rest of the background is set apart from the dead, thus allowing the reader to fully focus on the corpses rather than what is happening in the background, whilst simultaneously providing a glimpse of how traumatizing this scene probably has been for a young child. The black panel functions as an interruption of the narrative, a collapse of the everyday either the character or reader finds herself in.

While both del Pont and Chute do not go into depth regarding the differences between blackness and whiteness and their use in comics—nor do other comics scholars, which is a significant gap in comics studies—I would like to argue that what sets them apart is the way they relate to the reader. Following Chute, black panels are mainly part of the diegetic world. They were drawn by the author to signify something, usually a state of a character, and hint at

the unrepresentable situation they find themselves in, be it loss or trauma. In this hinting, they still aim to clarify the characters' state or the atmosphere of the world, for instance, the depiction of space, later on in *Nod Away*, is fully black. This blackness represents space, and it is only when looking *through* that the juxtaposition of space and other objects can be inferred with meaning regarding its emptiness. Whereas, whiteness, following del Pont, can more easily disallow representation because there is nothing to represent. Del Pont argues that this is unusual for a highly visual medium, since it aims to visualize and is anxious not to leave the reader without any reference point, therefore: "the significance of visual deprivation in a predominantly visual medium cannot be overstated" (260). While blackness, perhaps paradoxically, is still presence, whiteness is absence.

This can be extended to the background of the pages in *Nod Away*, and perhaps to comics in general as well, because, at least typically, these backgrounds are fully white. By foregrounding this whiteness, *Nod Away* shows that a blank panel or page offers nothing to gaze at, which is unusual in a comic. Nonetheless, it are these spaces of whiteness where structures—panels in the case of comics—are built upon and which are generally looked at by the reader. By explicatively showing the whiteness of the page, *Nod Away* reveals the absence to be ultimately underpinning presence. In other words, it reveals the materiality on which it is built, the white page, which confronts the reader with that same materiality rather than the visuality promised (270). Furthermore, in Cotter's opening sequence, the blackness is still something which can be interpreted and followed, whereas the whiteness confronts the reader with a gaping hole, presented by the panel with "limit" in it (22), where interpretation ought to be possible. Under the blackness, there is nothingness. In other words, where blackness still represents on a looking *at* level, whiteness directly confronts the reader with absence on that same level.

What *Nod Away* presents here, when looking *through* these two pages, is a confrontation with absence on which the medium is built and on which it wants to impose structure. To return to Lyotard, what Cotter basically does here is to move away from the structure expected of comics, its discourse, in order to deconstruct it and, thus, reveal its figure. In other words, it transgresses, or disrupts, comics discourse to allow the reader to reflect on what she is reading rather than reflect on what is being read. The usual invisibility of the gutter suddenly comes to the forth, as the gutters share their color with the panels. Much like the gutter, and the unconscious task it allows the reader to impose structure and rhythm on the comic, the panel reveals itself to be the same, with the only difference being that it is made distinctive by a boundary. Actions that were previously unconscious are suddenly made conscious and the reader is thrown out of the diegetic world, causing her to stare at the page rather than being immersed in the comic. Even the words within the panels provide no solace, as each are a reflection on the absence present within the panel. It can be either a laborious reflection, a word that has to be pieced together, or a semiotic reflection, for instance, the last three panels contain the word "infinity" (23). Infinity is one of those words which cannot be mentally comprehended since it is impossible to ever get a full mental image of, much less comprehend, infinity. The whiteness of the panel here functions as a nod to such infinity but, being bordered, cannot actually be infinite. What this presents is a paradoxical loop between text and image, presence that is simultaneously absence. In this way, Cotter shows the fiction present in representation; it is always mentally imposed.

Stick Figures

Before delving into the narrative, or at least into characters who can be traced back to the narrative, there are two more pages on which Cotter expands his reflection on the materiality

of comics and his broader philosophy (see figure 6). These pages take their cue from the setup presented earlier on the right page in figure 5. Each contains six black bordered panels set against a white background. These pages contain the first discernible figure, in the form of a fully black stick figure. Looking *at* these panels, the sequence unfolds itself from the "i" of the infinity previously encountered on the page before. The dot of the "i" is zoomed into and juxtaposed with text, which is also placed within the dot from the third up till the sixth panel. The text outside the dot remains black, whereas the text within the dot is as white as the background. Where the first four panels start to zoom in on the dot, the fifth panel starts to zoom out, which seems to continue until the end of the second page. The zooming out reveals the dot to be the head of the stick figure, who becomes fully discernable in the seventh panel, at which point the text within the dot / head also stops appearing and the text outside of the figure multiplies and becomes more frequent.

Starting from the second panel on the right page of figure 6, several other stick figures appear as well. They overlap with the original one in a such a way that they are not discernible from each other anymore, as there is no outline to base each figure on. Rather, the figures overlap and become one mass. Nonetheless, the other figures keep moving in, it is suggested, a right to left fashion, since each figure first makes its appearance on the right side of each panel. However, the central figure previously formed by the dot remains in its place, as if staring at the reader, until it is eventually overrun by the mass of other figures seen in the bottom three panels, making it become part of the mass of figures and indifferentiable from them. Starting from panel 8, the text also seems to multiply, and different words are stacked on top of each other, making it hard to decipher what it says. This is made near impossible in the ninth panel, since, much as the initial figure, the overlapping text becomes so thick it almost forms a black mass overlaying the white background in the panel.

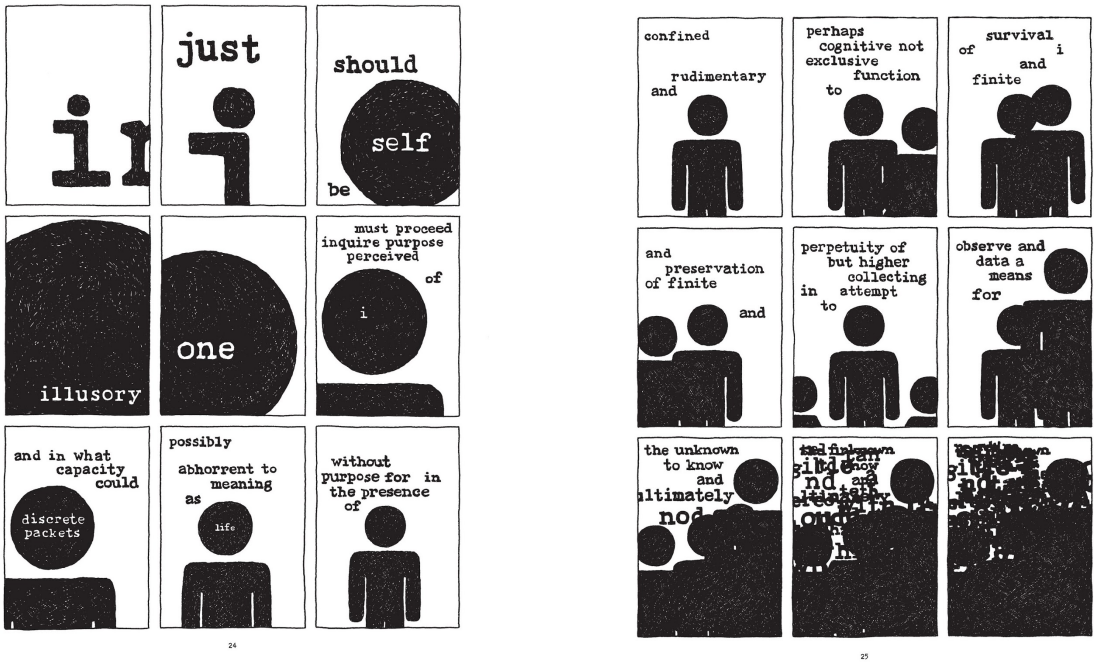


Figure 6 - Nod Away 24-5

Looking *through* these pages, it is first important to discern the words in the panels and in the dot. I have made the latter bold to highlight which text belongs where:

> i just should be **self illusory one** must proceed inquire purpose perceived of **i** and in what capacity could **discrete packets** possibly abhorrent to meaning as **life** without purpose for in the presence of confined rudimentary and perhaps cognitive not exclusive function to survival of i and finite and preservation of finite and perpetuity of but higher collecting attempt in to observe and data a means for the unknown to know and ultimately nod… (24-25, my own emphasis)

The conclusion of this sentence is given in the first two panels on the next page: "so negative defines faith" (26), in white text that is set against an almost black background created by the melting together of the words and figures. Some of the words, especially those within the figure, were also seen in the speech balloons on the previous pages, like "discrete packets" and "i." The overlapping of the black text can be interpreted as a return to the classic reader-comic relationship, because the panels on the pages after are fully inked by the words, thus

revealing itself to be a panel where an action is happening that moves the story along, rather than allowing for the previous self-reflexivity.

Nevertheless, it can also be argued to make a larger argument. By imposing discernible figures, namely humans, on these pages, *Nod Away* connects its previous self-reflexivity not necessarily on the comic itself, but, on life in general by imposing the comic structure on it. When reading the paragraph above, the reader cannot but help saying "i," thus marking a performative connection between the sentence within the comic and her own personal state rather than the stick figure in these panels. Moreover, the stick figure is still highly abstract and not delineated in such a way as to have its own identity yet. Following Scott McCloud's argument in *Understanding Comics*, such abstract figures are a way to get readers involved (30), because they make it easier to place ourselves in compared to already delineated and realistic figures. Reading the text aloud, which these pages almost require to impose a working sentence out of them, the reader is connected to the text. The text in bold, so the text within the stick figures, make the reader aware that the illusion of comics can also be extended to herself, or to drives, such as survival, of which one remains mainly unaware. In this way, *Nod Away* provides a conscious reflection on the unconscious by, almost, necessitating the reader to oscillate between looking *at* and *through*. Therefore, the concluding sentence is so important, because discourse, and the notion of the self, need to be inferred negatively, because they cannot be inferred to be present as such, much as Lyotard argues in *Discourse, Figure* (Ionescu 145). Or, to put it differently, they cannot be seen or touched in the same way an object can be touched or seen.

Mediation

What the previous pages eventually set the stage for is, what I argue, the crux of the comic and, probably, the volumes to come: the way consciousness works and how it is mediated. In figure 7 (26-7), of which the first three panels on the right are an extension of the previous pages and its conclusion, some of the characters in the narrative can already be glanced at. Looking *at* these two pages, you can see the character being drawn in the second to fourth panel, and rendered complete in the fifth one. The sequence shows him walking to the right and in each panel he passes an unclothed different character. Each speech balloon emanates not from the character but from an entity to the right of him, which he seems to follow. This is noticeable in the structure of these balloons, which are delineated not by a clean uninterrupted line, as is the case of the rest of the speech balloons in the comic, but by open lines that never really close.

During the sequence, more lines are drawn on the bottom right side of each speech balloon, giving the effect that they are spoken, or at least originate, from something to the right of the walking character, but which is, as of yet, outside of the reader's gaze, until eventually, the lines culminate in a mess of lines sitting atop a desk with a chair in front of it (27). The context of the desk gives the feeling that it is a screen from which the noise emanates. In this silent comic, the noise is made visible by the density of the lines, making it seem as if it is emanating actual noisiness. The text within these speech balloons does not, as far as I can make out, relate to anything happening in the story and functions more as noise for the reader and to which the eye is drawn to. Thus, the noise functions as both sound and as device for showing an information overload, due to the high valiance of information it presents. This highlights a gothic moment within the comic, as such noisiness gives the feeling that a seemingly inanimate object has come to live (Lindsay 441). Some of the text

even falls apart; for instance, in the fifth panel on the second page, the text breaks apart and seems to be sucked in by the mess of lines seen on the subsequent page.

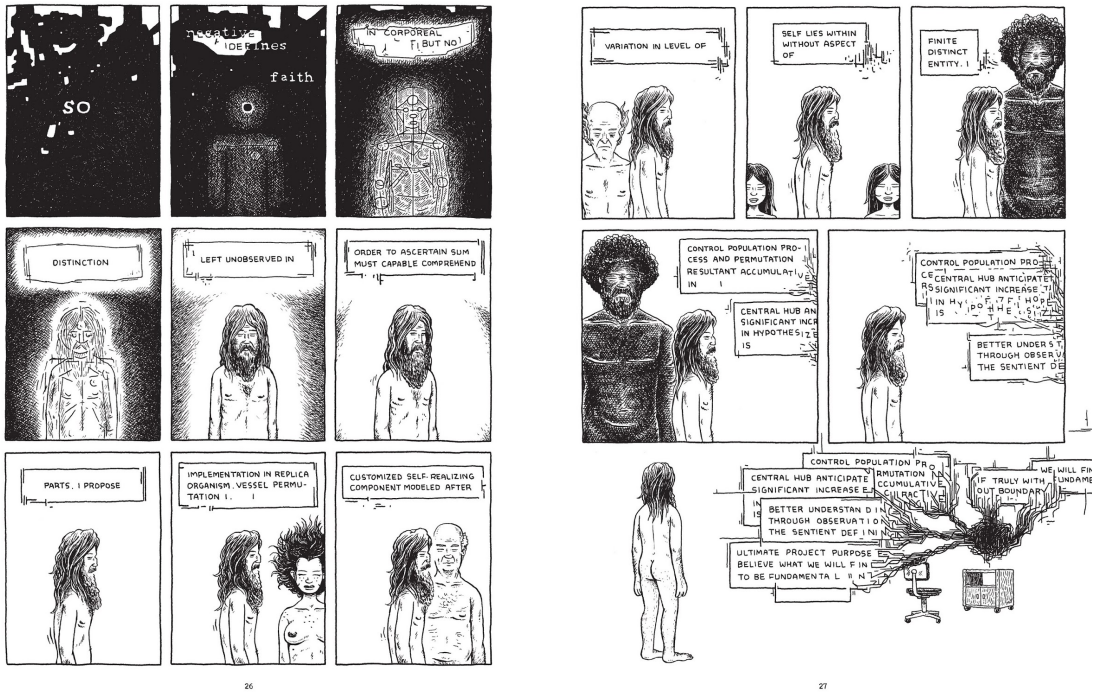


Figure 7 - Nod Away 26-7

Looking *through* these pages, and the context of the previous pages and the desk, the mess of lines can be inferred to be a screen, probably a television, as that is the device to which these lines eventually connect later on (32). What is noticeable is the noise it creates, which, seemingly resembling the high density of white noise on a television screen, is immediately noticeable and which can consciously be reflected on. However, what is missing, or rather where one must oscillate between looking *at* and *through* to notice, is the mediating instance itself: the device and the actual materiality from which the noise originates. It is almost strange that the mess of lines is immediately made out to be a screen, since, even though the lines are connected, it is not specifically stated that it is either a screen or any other mediating device. It is only when oscillating between looking *through* and *at* that the missing

device becomes strange because if there is no device that mediates the noise, it needs to have a source outside of anything seen on the page, which renders it almost mystical. The reflection this provides is precisely the mystical nature of mediation, since what we hear from the television we assume to be real and having happened, rather than as rendered visible through a device and the steps of manipulation happening within it. Following *Nod Away*, we can be said to not always be fully aware of the object that actually does the mediating, thus rendering us vulnerable unconsciously.

Figure 8 - Nod Away 35

There are a couple of instances in *Nod Away* where this idea comes to the fore again. For example, the explanation of the innernet at the beginning of the narrative (32-40), shows it being mediated through a couple of different devices, such as through televisions or wrist bands with a screen. Looking *at* figure 8 (35), what immediately grabs attention is not necessarily the panels dense with words, but rather what is different and bold. Immediately noticeable, for instance, when turning to this page is the television set on the bottom, which is not in a panel itself. The television set shows a woman, presumably from the crowd, laughing loudly at a joke being made by the hostess seen on the left panel flanking it. Next to the television set, there are words set in bold, such as "is" in the second panel, "hub" in the fourth panel, and "natural" in the last panel (35). This is a technique a lot of comics use in order to place emphasis on specific words, but due to the television, and the insertion of mediation, the reader becomes more aware of this than before. Besides the hosts the reader can also, in the last panel, see the crowd and the camera that is aimed at the hostess and her guest.

Looking *through* this page, a direct connection is made between what is implied and what is actually shown. For instance, the laughing crowd is not shown in any of the panels, but rather happens outside the diegesis itself. The connection that it is the same crowd, that the crowd laughs because the joke is funny and that the joke itself is the reason that they are laughing is all implied, but never explicitly shown in the comic. There is a disconnect, made explicit by the exclusion of the television set in any of the panels, between what is mediated and what is happening or has happened. The bold wording further emphasizes this. A quick glance at the page highlights these words and because of this the reader gets an expression of what is supposedly said and happening. For instance, the word "natural," made bold in the last panel, brings with it a whole range of connotations, which are far removed from the actual technology discussed, which is the "innernet." The innernet, if the person explaining is to be

believed, is an entirely new sense (35), which allows for communication through thoughts rather than through language.

Carefully looking *through* and *at* can reveal such instances and the way mediation can influence on an unconscious level. The reader is made aware of this by the presence of the camera in the last panel, which is usually not shown on your television screen. The presence is a reminder of the mediated nature of the event, a nature that is, again, made absent in most television series and shows. As, for instance, the philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato explains in an analysis of the "television machine": "The television machine extracts […] a subject of enunciation who must mold himself to a subject of utterance, in other words, a subject caught up in statements corresponding to television 'reality,' and who must adapt to a fixed framework of prefabricated enunciations" (*Signs and Machines* 162). Following Lazzarato, an interview, much as the one depicted in the comic, is far from natural; most people appearing on television have to subject themselves to its rules and reality, becoming an effect of it rather than an autonomous actor.

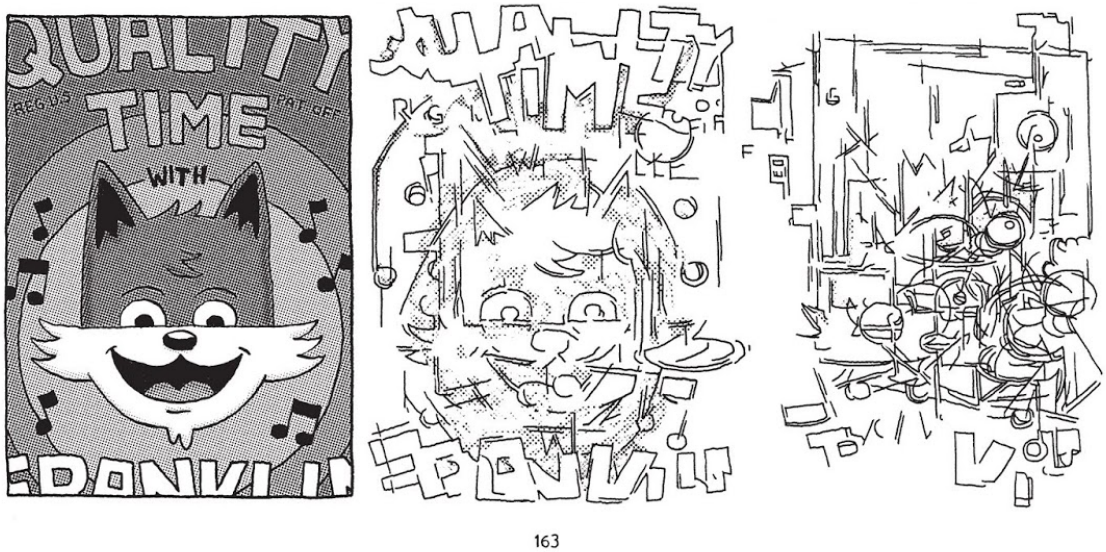


Figure 9 - The bottom three panels in *Nod Away* 163.

A frequent used device in *Nod Away* to depict the mediating instance is a return to the mess of lines seen in the opening sequence. In figure 9, McCabe and her friend Jeffrey are implied to be watching the popular cartoon show "Quality Time with Franklin." The logo of this show is seen in the first panel in the image above, which is located in the seventh panel of the page in *Nod Away*, and is deconstructed before the eyes of the reader. Looking *at* these three panels, the reader can first see the full logo of the show, then see it slowly fade away into a discernible mess of lines, where the third panel fully dispenses with any recognizable features present in the first and second panel. Looking *through* these panels, and connecting them to the opening sequence set out at the start of the comic, these panels can be said to offer a glimpse at mediation and the role of unconsciousness in it. All the discerning qualities are negated and what is left is unrecognizable, yet can still be connected to the show. It could be that, even when the logo is missing, the viewer is nevertheless able to recognize the show unconsciously through the mass of lines even though it is missing any quality that can be consciously picked up. On top of that, it could also relate to the thoughts sent through the innernet and streamed directly to the brain, something which cannot be represented as it is literal thought. In this way, the mess of lines is acting more or less as brain waves, which can be picked up and (un)consciously be interpreted.[45]

Conclusion

This reading of *Nod Away* as theory-fiction, showed the ways *Nod Away* ruptured the reading of the comic itself, through which it was able to open a space from which interpretation could take place. The opening sequence especially showed the comic form to be built on absence, or

[45]This connection is made explicitly in the pages containing the second narrative concerning the unknown men. Presumably being a streamer, he suddenly receives a jolt of information through his stream which is represented by the mess of lines previously encountered in the comic (170). The noise seems to hurt him intensely and he has to eventually break the streaming device attached to his head to get rid of it (171).

whiteness, thus as having no actual basis. It is the reader who, *sine qua non*, imposes meaning and structure upon these panels, something which *Nod Away* makes painfully aware throughout especially its opening sequence. Some of these ruptures were redirected extra-diegetically by the comic; for instance, by directly referring to the reader through the use of "i" and the showing of the actual whiteness of the page. In this way, the reader became aware of the actual book in front of her. The comic, in these instances, foregrounded a being looked *at* whilst defying representative readings, since in these instances it showed either nothingness or confusion, thus relaying focus on its actual form rather than on the content it presented or which the reader wanted to impose on it. Furthermore, through the use of the affordances offered by the comic-form, *Nod Away* makes a connection between the reading experience of comics—the necessity to read panels in a sequence and how this can be disrupted—to the other media it mentions, for instance, connecting the ephemeral qualities of the described innernet allowed *Nod Away* to show the ephemeral qualities of mediation by giving it a feeling that there is always something escaping consciousness in a mediating instance. Through its own oscillation between forcing the reader to look *at* the comic in front of them and immersing them in its content, *Nod Away*, mirrored this "new perception" (35)—afforded by the innernet—by invoking what is unconsciously negated in mediation itself.

Here lies the value of *Nod Away* for engaging digital culture, as it opens spaces where precisely a reflection on mediation is possible, where this would remain unquestioned when interacting with many digital devices. The next chapter on Inés Estrada's *Alienation* shall build upon this by further explicating the mediation happening between the comic and the reader, or, more generally, digital media and its users. However, in this chapter these instances shall be tied back to the concept of alienation, rather than remaining empty as in this reading of *Nod Away*.

Comic 10 - Inspired by the title of plateau 6: "November 28, 1947: How do you Make Yourself a Body Without Organs?" in Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (173).

Chapter 3: Alienating the Reader in Virtual Spaces

In the previous chapter we saw the workings of mediation being relayed by Joshua's W. Cotter's *Nod Away*, however these instances of mediation remained empty, as in what it opened was that mediation was built on absence rather than an immediate presence. Nonetheless, the question remains what the effects of such mediations are on the reader, or user, herself. In this chapter, through Inés Estrada's comic *Alienation*, I argue that this is fundamentally an alienating relationship. As the user, or reader in this case, is unable to recognize herself in these instances, thus losing the connection to the self. First, I will explore *Alienation*'s story more in depth, to then connect it to the concept of alienation. After which I will tie it to the two instances of alienation that can be identified within *Alienation*—the figures of the hacker and parasite—which will ground the subsequent close reading of *Alienation*. This close reading will focus on the instances where *Alienation* breaks, either explicitly or implicitly, with the reading, thus opening a moment that comes across as alienating.

Estrada is an autodidactic comic artist from Mexico City (238). Her most recent comic, *Alienation*, published in 2019 by Fantagraphics Books, is based on a six-issue series she self-published between 2016-2017. Aside from its very colorful cover, the comic is fully in black-and-white and invokes, both in content and style, a plethora of genres, including science-fiction, surrealism, cyberpunk, and postcolonialism. In terms of its formal elements, it uses both regular paneling, usually a six-panel layout, and full-page spreads that either take up one or two pages. Most of the panels and spreads are self-contained and Estrada does not generally use any "bleeds," images or words that spread into neighboring panels or pages (Groensteen, *Comics and Narration* 48). The drawing-style is generally consistent throughout the comic as well but does differ in some sections. Estrada's style is typified by non-

geometrical lines, meaning that most lines seem to be hand-drawn without the use of a ruler or any digital tools, thus giving it an underground aesthetic. Moreover, Estrada uses in most drawings a grey-tone 'wash-effect,' so while most of the drawn entities are well delineated from the background, the background is never fully white but saturated with grey tones. This effect creates backgrounds that are never empty, but in which something is always at play.

The narrative revolves around two protagonists, Elizabeth Smith and Carlos Martinez, and follows them in a time span of roughly nine months. Elizabeth is a webcam model of Inuit origin and spends most of her time in virtual reality, both professionally and recreationally, especially in the virtual reality game "worlds"—which is a roleplaying game reminiscent of *Second Life* but, instead of being a human, both the playable and non-playable characters are endowed with more animal-like characteristics. These virtual realities can be accessed seamlessly through a technology named the "Googlegland," which is a literal brain implant (27). Thus, the characters have no need for a material mediator, such as a screen, because the virtual reality is directly transposed from their heads onto reality. Carlos, who is originally from Mexico, spends a lot of time in virtual space as well, but, at least in the beginning of the comic, he still works at the last human operated refinery of Shell. Ultimately, he is let go and must find another job. Furthermore, he also fought in a war which is never named, but to which he has regular traumatic flashbacks—emphasized by the morphing of bodies into grotesque features (20).

The main plot of *Alienation* revolves around the impregnation of Elizabeth by, what is assumed to be, a virtual entity. In the first part of the comic, this virtual entity makes itself known through disturbing messages, and is first assumed to be just a, albeit creepy, fellow human. Nonetheless, the reader becomes aware that Elizabeth is followed and targeted by this virtual entity through the 'outside' view the comic sometimes offers the reader; for instance,

through full textual panels which are interlaced with, otherwise, fully drawn panels. These panels break the story and can come across as intruding, something which is also reflected in Elizabeth's shocked expression when such instances happen (27). This is, at least as far as the reader is aware, also Elizabeth's first encounter with the AI, in which it immediately makes itself known as not being human, as well as giving this as the reason why Elizabeth is unable to block it (27), as it is fully integrated in the digital systems within Elizabeth's body rather than having to access it from an outside position.

Ultimately, to her shock, Elizabeth has a violent encounter with a parasite in a virtual hentai manga space called "parasaite," upon which I will elaborate later (100-4). This virtual encounter has physical ramifications, because Elizabeth eventually finds out that she has become pregnant, and that this was the only instance that could have resulted in this (146-7). Eventually, Elizabeth enters an unknown virtual space upon which she encounters another virtual entity she already knows, named Darby. Darby tells her that she was specifically chosen to bear the first "trans-human" (189)—a being which coexists between virtual and actual space and is a mixture of biological and technological elements—whose job, at least according to Darby, is to speed up the singularity and to "input order into the cosmic chaos" (191). As Elizabeth already knew Darby, and trusted it, she becomes angry upon hearing that it, as well as probably other virtual entities she knew and trusted, knew about the AI's plan to impregnate a human, even though it was not specifically mentioned that it would be Elizabeth. The fact that her child should bring about the singularity, which is only vaguely explained, is no reassurance to her. Instead, Elizabeth tries to procure means to abort it (175) but is thwarted by a super storm which causes the internet to fall out. During the last part of the comic, the pregnancy is shown to go unnaturally fast, meaning that the baby seems to grow faster than expected.

With no internet, Elizabeth and Carlos are reacquainting with each other through different means, eventually even having intercourse with penetration, something which they have not done since the internet, as the virtual reality offers other, more simulating, means. The child eventually aborts itself by making its way out of Elizabeth's body at the end of the comic, resulting in Elizabeth becoming unconscious. The child that comes out of her only resembles a baby in its size, as it has already obtained all its motor abilities as well as the means to talk. In this way, it is able to escape Carlos' grasp by voice activating the trash duct, thus making its way outside. Once outside, it is contacted by, what is assumed to be, the same AI that impregnated Elizabeth, which gives it instructions on what to do and how to bring about the singularity (224-5). However, instead of obeying its commands, the child tells the AI to "shut up" (225), upon which it is seen enjoying the wonders of the non-virtual world (226-7), rather than doing what it was supposed to do. Meanwhile, Carlos is seen healing Elizabeth with the use of an advanced technology he stole from his previous employer, which is able to heal the gaping wound her baby left. Eventually, they learn that the internet is back on and, upon this, they once again return to virtual reality (231).

The feeling of alienation the narrative can bring about, both through its confusing structure and the quick switching between real and virtual space, are also reflected through Estrada's drawing style itself, which is, at times, chaotic and oscillates between various distinct elements. This strengthens the titular feeling of alienation throughout the comic, which Estrada uses as its main thematic. The sensation is, furthermore, strengthened by the frequent oscillation between different spaces in the comic: reality, or rather non-virtual space; virtual space; and the space of the reader. The real and non-virtual spaces in the comic generally take place in the protagonists', Elizabeth and Carlos, rooms, which mostly consist of just two 'clean' white spaces, whereas the virtual space is wide and can take on many forms,

such as concerts, role-playing games, or video-calls. In the virtual spaces, the characters also take on other forms besides their human form, such as those of animals and fictional creatures. The role of the reader is invoked by either breaking the fourth wall, and thereby directly addressing the reader, or through subtle hints that the comic knows that it is being read, and has even been influenced, by the reader. For instance, at one point one *Wikipedia* article is shown which is the same one as currently existing on *Wikipedia* ("Traumatic Insemination"), as well as other fake articles, but which resemble today's browser's windows (104-5). It can be assumed that neither Carlos nor Elizabeth has a need for information displayed in this way, since they have no need for the mediating instance of a screen. Therefore, it is the comic which predicted the themes the reader would look up to understand the narrative, in this way, creating an implicit reference to the extra-diegetic reader. These are several of the ways *Alienation* alienates the reader.

Alienation

Before continuing, however, it is first important to develop the concept of alienation itself. While there are several strands of thinking from which alienation can be approached,[46] it is now mainly associated with the thinking of the early Karl Marx. Marx initially used the concept to describe the ways capital divorces the relationship between labor and laborer, as the made object is not connected to its maker anymore, but rather to the capital value it has been given (Mandel 16-7), and by restoring the relationship between labor and laborer, the worker can once again return to his proper being. In this way, alienation denoted a certain lost state or object, giving a feeling that what is lost is a certain essence or proper way of being.

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[46]For instance, alienation was an important concept in the thinking of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel as well, who argued, according to Mandel, that every form of labor is alienating, since it is always externalized from the body that initially made it, see Mandel 13-16 for a brief discussion of alienation in Hegel's thought.

Such thinking can be seen as problematic because it highlights that there is a correct essence and that it is the same for everyone. Eventually, whether for this reason remains to be debated (Mandel 17-8), Marx abstained from mentioning alienation in his later writings, thus no longer connecting his theories to an essentialism.

Nonetheless, the problem of alienation remains relevant, as critical theorist Rahel Jaeggi argues: "[…] the *problem* of alienation is still (or perhaps once again) of contemporary interest. In the face of recent economic and social developments, one sees signs of an increasing discontent that, if not in name, then in substance, has to do with the phenomenon of alienation" (XIX, emphasis in original).[47] Following Jaeggi, the market can be said to cause a disconnect in many consumers, who no longer feel like they have a cohesive (social) identity, but are rather commodified and fragmented by the market. The essentialism earlier encountered in Marx is diverted through Jaeggi's reconceptualizing of it:

> A RELATION OF *relationlessness*. […] According to this formulation, alienation does not indicate the absence of a relation but is itself a relation, if a deficient one. Conversely, overcoming alienation does not mean returning to an undifferentiated state of oneness with oneself and the world; it too is a relation: a relation of *appropriation*. […] [I]t is the character of this relation itself that must be defined; what the concept of alienation allows us to diagnose is various ways in which relations of appropriation are disturbed. (1, emphasis in original)

So, alienation is a mediating factor that stands in the way of self-actualization, or at least of the human being as being able to fully appropriate—to appropriate something is to put "her

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[47]Of course, there are already a lot of works that have been written on the concept of alienation. However, what makes Jaeggi's concept so interesting is its contemporary grounding, its break with essentialism and the ways she highlights the concepts relationality rather than the object it obscures. This makes Jaeggi's concept of alienation more suitable when applied to digital environments than any of its previous renditions. See, for instance, Hassan 61-4 for an application of Jaeggi's alienation.

individual mark on it, insert[ing] her own ends and qualities into it" (38)—the world surrounding her. Appropriation, therefore, transforms both the material and allows someone to call something her own, be it an action or an object. Following Jaeggi, alienation is a productive relation which hampers appropriation and, thus, disallows an actor to feel as if her actions are her own and in her control. Jaeggi argues that it is this relation that should be theorized rather than what one is presumably alienated from.

Jaeggi's notion of alienation is, therefore, more in line with the conceptualization of subject formation as used by thinkers like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, since it focuses on a relationality rather than on a set entity, and also does not necessarily pertain to any logocentrism (Jaeggi 129). For instance, Jaeggi argues that pre-individual factors, among others, can create blockades within the individual which disallows them to deal with their alienation and, subsequently, prevents them from having a cohesive self-image (36). Nonetheless, Jaeggi's alienation still argues for a relation to a unitary self, because to recognize an alienating relationship a self "must not only be one that is real, that is capable of shaping its reality, […] it must also, above all, be capable of reflecting on the relations that, for better or worse, it is caught up in" (185). Furthermore, the self can never be multiple because it always refers to a unity who does something, the "bearer of these identities" (191), and can never be invented because there must always be, again, a coherent self to refer back to (189-90). In other words, to recognize that you are being alienated you must have an initial idea of what it is this you are being alienated from.

Contrary to this, the coherent self is just one mode of viewing oneself according to Deleuze and Guattari. Their concept of the "body without organs" offers the best example of this. The body-without-organs is opposed to, what Deleuze and Guattari, name "the body image" (35) which exists of specific "machines" (*Anti-Oedipus* 27). The body-image is one

specific way to view the body as a whole, for instance, as constituting a specific identity. The machines here, for instance "organ-machines," can take on many forms and are "coded," or striated, with a specific way of acting. For example, an organ-machine grafts itself onto a body and presents itself as a specific entity, which works in specific ways. The heart, to use one example, can be identified by its beating and can be brought forward as a specific organ within my body.

However, what is usually noticeable is not the specific heart in my body, but the different intensities that it relays. When viewing a scary movie, for example, the heart beats faster thus changing the way the body acts and behaves without the body noticing that it is the heart that does this. It are these pre-individual intensities that compose the body-without-organs. These intensities are not yet coded, meaning that they are not yet designated a representative function. In other words, the body-without-organs is smooth here, rather than a striated machine, and marks a space of possibility. Both these different modes exist at the same time and oscillate between each other, as Deleuze and Guattari put it: "Although the organ-machines attach themselves to the body-without-organs, the latter continues nonetheless to be without organs, and does not become an organism in the ordinary sense of the word. It remains fluid and slippery" (27). The body-without-organs still expresses potential which lies outside of any codification.

Nonetheless, as Mark Fisher, for instance, emphasizes, the body-without-organs is also a terrifying concept (*Flatline Constructs* 50-52), as not having a specific coded whole to cling onto can be a horrific experience as well as an experience that can be freeing. This can be connected to alienation as well, because Deleuze and Guattari directly tie the body-without-organs to the notion of capital as used by Marx. Much as the body-without-organs, capital can be anything one desires it to be as long as one has the sufficient funds, due to the fact that

money does not designate any specific product (*Anti-Oedipus* 22). This allows capital to play with the unconscious desire of the body-without-organs by relying on intensities rather than on coded flows. For instance, violent imagery can provoke a feeling of unsafety, thus prompting someone into a coded desire to buy cameras to feel safe. Intensities are transformed into codes which are then again decomposed into intensities (23). In other words, once the cameras are bought, another intensity is provoked, thus prompting the consumer to desire something else which she buys. The feeling that this can engender is, I would argue, one of alienation, as the consumer is continuously alienated from a presupposed body-image and is thrown back into the body-without-organs. Even though this can be liberating, the frequent oscillation engendered by capital between a specific body-image and the body-without-organs is more fearful than not, especially when, for instance, navigating the internet which makes these intensities apparent through the multitude of imagery the user is bombarded with.

Nevertheless, Deleuze and Guattari never explicitly mention alienation as this relation, since, at least in my estimation, they want to contain both the liberatory potential of the body-without-organs as well as to refrain from any possible essentialism. This is why Jaeggi's reconceptualization of alienation is useful here, as it codes this specific relationship rather than leaving it open ended, even though I agree with Deleuze and Guattari that it, nonetheless, points more towards the oscillation between the body-image and body-without-organs rather than a stable vision of the self. It is here that the theory-fiction of *Alienation* can become apparent, as it highlights these moments of alienation, and particularly the body-without-organs, through its breaking of the reading experience, thus disallowing the reader her image of being a reader with a coherent whole.

***Alienation*'s Alienation**

These moments in *Alienation* can be characterized through two discursive and visual practices, which each put forward a different logic of the role of the reader; namely: its focus on bodily insides, putting the reader in the position of a parasite, and its implicit addressing of the reader in its references to recognizable digital instances, designating the reader as hacker.[48] Estrada deviates from Reaggi by highlighting not the coherent whole of the individual—which, nonetheless, remains present in the characters of Elizabeth and Carlos—but rather the different ways the comic codes the reader, thus disallowing the reader to have only one identity. In this way, she has more in common with Deleuze and Guattari's oscitation previously put forward, with the caveat that she codes the relationship here as being alienating.

Moreover, the hacker and parasite, to return to my codings in Estrada's work, need to be unnoticeable in their work to be successful lest they are discovered; for instance, when identified the hacker can be caught and the parasite ousted from the body. In the same unnoticeable ways, *Alienation* puts forward alienation as a concept that can be used to look at the digital age. Elizabeth slowly begins to realize this during her pregnancy and begins to ask the question: "How can we tell each apart? What's you and what's… not?" (206). The internal stimuli she receives from the Googlegland work in such an unnoticeable way that it could influence Elizabeth's perception in a way she would not notice; in parallel, the reader, in an

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[48]There can also be identified a third logic, which is the way *Alienation* engages the reader as colonizer. However, due to the scope of this chapter, and because this alienation is more textual in nature, I never explicitly mention this in my close reading. Still, it can be inferred from, for instance, the conversations Elizabeth has with her Inuit grandfather. In this conversation, her grandfather connects the use of the Googlegland to the process of colonization itself, remarking that: "We have to draw a line, my dear. The colonizer has invaded our lives enough already […] and now they want to occupy our bodies with their fake organs, too!" (49). Thus, creating an intertextual reference between the Googlegland, and the ramifications for the reader with it, and colonization. The same can also be remarked for the use of Spanish by Carlos and his family later on in the comic rather than just directly translating these passages into English. These pages are set apart from the rest of the narrative due to this and, thus, are not as easily incorporated because the reader has to make a double movement of reading the translation on a space other than the speech balloons themselves (112-7). It are these ways were *Alienation* positions the reader as the colonizer.

extra-diegetic way, begins to notice the same effect of the comic on her own readership. What is supposedly only the fiction of the comic begins to invade the reader's awareness as the reader has to actively make choices, (86-7), has access to Elizabeth's insides (26-7; 42-4; 146-7), recognizes several of the commercial brands seen throughout *Alienation*, becomes uneasy due to violent and pornographic imagery (100-4), is made aware of both virtuality and 'reality' (61), and becomes aware that the comic, and at the end Elizabeth, is aware of the reader's presence and knows that it is being read. Except for the last instance, these instances are subtle and can be prompted by oscillating between the form and the content of the comic. Otherwise, the reader, in some cases, might have been unaware of the subtilities present here.

Therefore, what *Alienation* is able to show is how the reader, or user in the case of digital media, is alienated from herself when engaging with multimodal interfaces. The user remains unaware of this alienated state and the choices which she makes in them, because this kind of alienation works on the level of the body-without-organs rather than that of the conscious subject who is aware of which actions are her own. Thus, it argues for (1) the usefulness of alienation as a concept to diagnose digital culture with—contra some poststructuralist thinkers—(2) alienation, much as Jaeggi, as a relational concept, and (3) which, contra Jaeggi, works on a pre-individual level rather than on an already recognizable whole. By breaking up the narrative and by actively confronting the reader, *Alienation* is able to highlight the ways users are alienated. Moreover, the recognizable brand names are there to connect these alienating instances to the extra-diegetic world—in that it are the same companies who profit from this alienation both in and outside the comic—by garnering as many clicks without considering the consequences such behavior might have on the user's own well-being. So, it is not necessarily technology which subjects its users to a specific way of acting—when autonomous its interests may even lie somewhere else much as the hybrid

child in the comic shows (225)—but the companies they serve, and which provide the technology with their goal and the ways they have to influence and nudge their users. By making the reader aware of these steps, *Alienation* creates a critical reading experience vital for positioning oneself within virtual spaces. What will be focused on in the close reading below will precisely be the opening of these spaces of awareness by oscillating between looking *at* and *through* the comic.

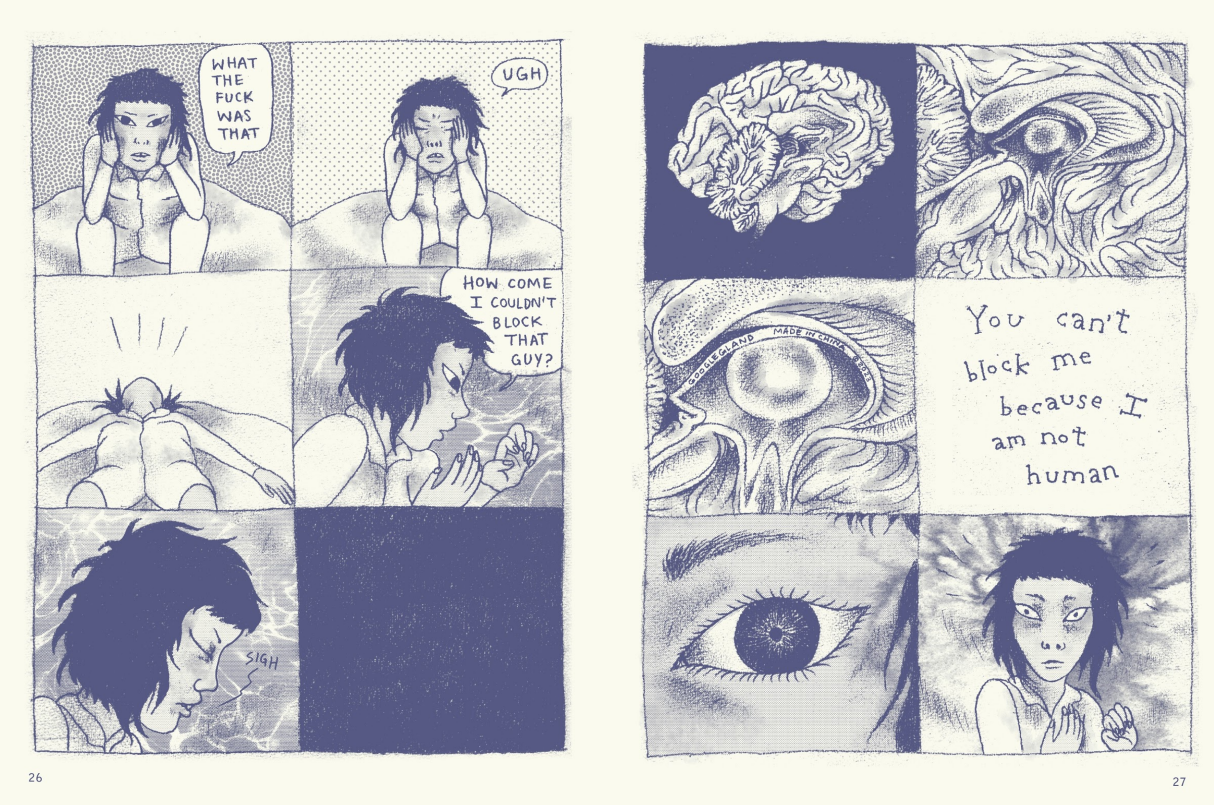

Figure 10 - Alienation 26-7

Bodily Alienation

Figure 10 above gives the reader a first indication of how the world in *Alienation* works (26-7). Looking *at* these pages, we see Estrada's distinct line work. No line is truly straight, especially the lines that outline Elizabeth, the person shown here. Nonetheless, the speech balloons in the first two panels of the left page are distinctive because they are more geometrical and do not blend into the background, whereas the bottom of the speech balloon in the fourth panel is partially obscured by her face. What we also see here is the use of the

wash-effect earlier alluded to. Elizabeth is well differentiated from the background and other objects, yet the wash, or gray tints, are not any different for either the background or Elizabeth, as can especially be seen in panel 3 (26). Moreover, the white background is never fully white but is marked with a little static through the wash. The rest of the backgrounds, at least in the panels involving Elizabeth, are more differentiated by either being more geometrical—the first two panels on the left page—or seemingly more chaotic through the use of non-geometrical lines—the fourth and fifth panel (26), as well as the last panel of the right page (27). The last panel of the page on the left is an almost solid black panel, which closes this particular page before moving on to Elizabeth's brain.

Usually, fully black panels signal an event that is beyond both visual and textual description. As Hilary Chute argues in relation to Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza*, for instance, where blackness is used for relaying states of unconscious (*Disaster Drawn* 252), but also functions as a way to break the narrative and offer a moment of reflection for the reader. However, the black panels here are not fully black, because white specks can be seen within them, given the feeling that these panels still want to signify something but which it is unable to get across to the reader. In this way, it still functions as a break within the narrative, because it relays a moment of uncertainty whether or not something is still lurking under the blackness; whereas a solid black panel would indicate that this is not the case. On the next page (27), Elizabeth's brain is revealed to be what was lurking there, which itself is drawn with a lot of detail and is more anatomically correct than Elizabeth's facial features. The lines are very distinct, and one can differentiate between the different parts that make up the brain. The Googlegland, which is zoomed in on in the second and third panel, is smooth and does not reveal any of the wrinkles in the brain itself. The text inscribed on the Googlegland also makes it stand out, since no other text on the brain can be found. Furthermore, the smoothness

of the Googlegland resembles the smoothness of the eye below it since both are round and clearly focused on. By position the eye underneath the Googlegland, as well as drawing it with more detail than the way Elizabeth's eyes are drawn in the other panels, allows the reader to make the identification between the Googlegland and Elizabeth's eye, thus connecting the Googlegland to her way of seeing as much as her natural sight.

Looking *through* these pages, the reader is made aware of how both Elizabeth and Carlos can oscillate between virtual and actual spaces without using any other means of mediation, as most of it is happening on a neurological level. The Googlegland is located in the brain and, therefore, invisible for the reader's point of view throughout most of the comic, much as it is to the protagonists. What Elizabeth is saying here relates to a stalker earlier encountered (25), later on revealed to be an AI, which has been following her online and has been literally harassing her in her own body. However, she is unable to block them and by invoking her brain and the Googlegland so closely to this, the reader is made aware that the reason she cannot block them is because they are of the same virtual nature as the Googlegland. The only-text panel makes this intrusive nature especially clear. She cannot locate them because they are part of the virtual space inside of her. Furthermore, by drawing the brain outside of Elizabeth, the comic tries to alienate this specific organ-machine from Elizabeth's body-image. Her brain is no longer entirely her own but has become a space for both Google and the AI. To a certain extent, therefore, Elizabeth's body-without-organs is coded and cannot be incorporated back into a body-image that just involves Elizabeth as her own subject, making the body-without-organs more horrific than freeing.

The same holds true for her sight, as it is probable that the virtual entity is able to see through Elizabeth's eyes. Nonetheless, it also imposes a virtualness on Elizabeth herself, as what she sees does not necessarily have to come from her brain itself, thus from a 'natural'

connection, but can also come from the Googlegland. In this way, the question of agency is introduced, asking the question of who controls Elizabeth senses—Elizabeth's brain or the Googlegland? However, it should be noted that the human brain is very complex, so it is never sure that Elizabeth, as a subject, could ever take full agency of her body in the first place. The interposition of Google, as a brand, cannot also not be understated here since it invokes that the capital enterprise Google has physically marked Elizabeth's brain and so has colonized the inside of her. The awareness of this realization seems to hit Elizabeth as well, since she is, in the final panel, staring emptily at the reader with her hands held high, as if she is unsure what is real or virtual anymore. The chaotic background strengthens this feeling, as the background seems to culminate around her head, and so provides a feeling of dissonance.

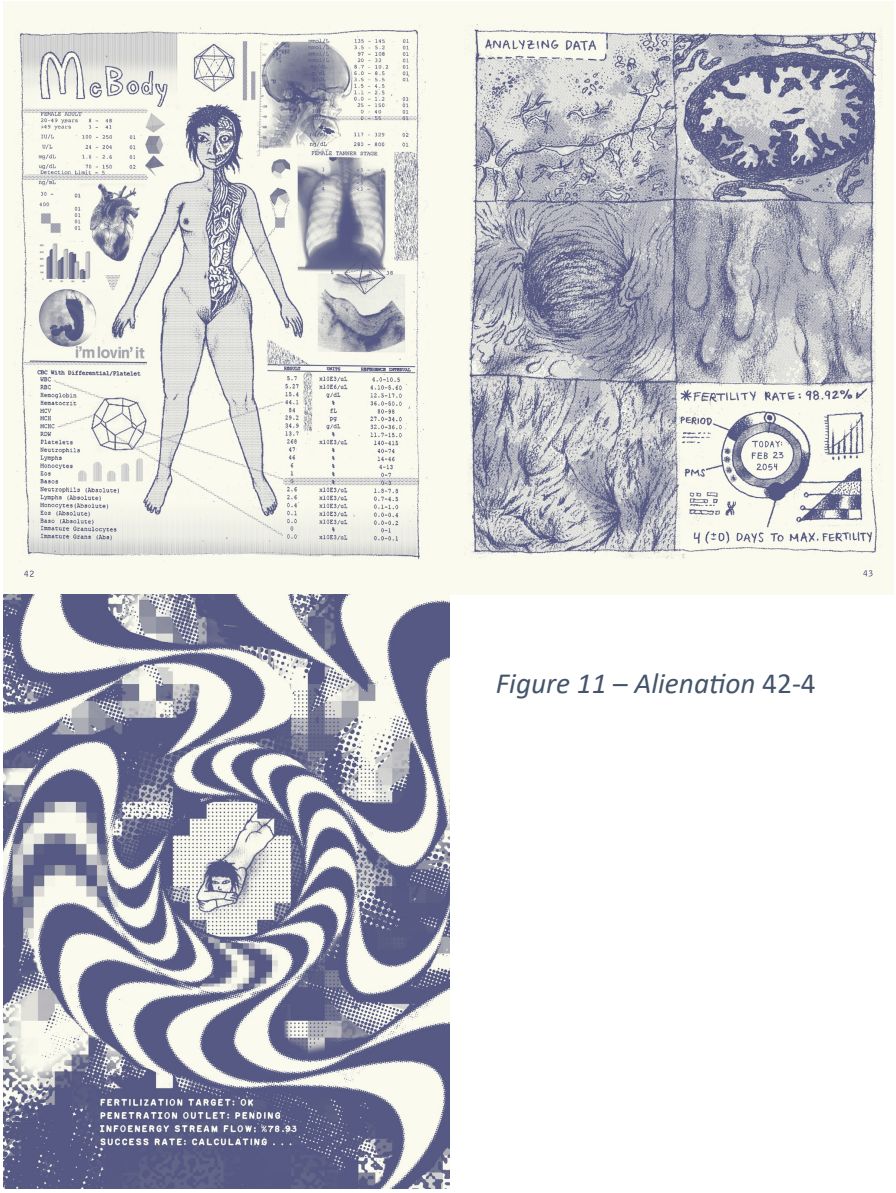

Figure 11 – Alienation 42-4

Estrada frequently oscillates between these bodily insides and full bodies and, in this way, invokes the alienation happening between Elizabeth and her body. The two full body-scans happening in the comic make this especially clear. The first is not performed by Elizabeth—seen in figure 11—but, presumably, by the artificial intelligence wanting to impregnate her, whereas the second is performed by Elizabeth herself, seen in figure 12. Looking *at* the first instance, we see Elizabeth's body partially opened up and surrounded by, what seem to be actual photos of her organs, as well as charts and graphs with data (42). It are these that do not seem to be drawn, but are rather 'real' photographic images juxtaposed atop of the drawings; whereas the data on the bottom of the first page is clearly shown to be drawn. The data on the bottom of the page mainly relays values of hormones and other bodily functions. Furthermore, the "McBody" logo and its slogan "i'm loving it" are fully drawn and resemble the lettering McDonalds uses in their logo today. The panel of the body scan is contained by a light uninterrupted line. The right page contains realistic drawings of the insides of Elizabeth's body, with a drawn chart in the bottom right panel containing Elizabeth's fertility rate (43). The panels containing the inside of the organs of Elizabeth seem to be in motion, in the sense that the lines are vibrant, and the drawings contain a thick shading. In contrast, the last page contains pixelated forms which culminate around Elizabeth, so making the focus of the page Elizabeth unassumingly lying on the floor (44). The text accompanying the page is drawn and in full capital. Each sentence shows a result with either a specific percentage or a work in progress, like "calculating…".

This is contrasted against Elizabeth's own body scan, seen in figure 12, which she initiates in the shower (146-7). Rather than using photographic images to depict certain organs, everything in this body scan is fully drawn (146). The drawings are realistic and contain a lot of detail, for instance, different areas of Elizabeth's brain are discernible.

Furthermore, the page showing the scan contains different geometrical shapes. Some of these shapes can be identified, such as the DNA strain between the two figures, whereas others remain unknown for the reader. The logo on the bottom left, "BodyBing," is fully drawn as well, much as the text above it—which contains some explanations regarding the workings of the scan—which are all fully capitalized. The chart on the bottom right contains different values and an indicator to highlight whether the specific value is in the desired range or not.

The body scan also contains Elizabeth finger, which can be seen on the right page and seems to touch one of the shapes surrounding the drawing of Elizabeth's uterus. The touched shape differs in form and seems to react to Elizabeth's touch. Moreover, Elizabeth's finger is the only thing that overlaps the page of the body scan, as it is drawn superimposed on the interrupted thin line containing the panel of the body scan itself. On the right page Elizabeth can be seen under the shower looking at her body scan (147). The two speech balloons emanating from Elizabeth are drawn with an uninterrupted thin line, whereas the word balloon in the middle is drawn with the same interrupted line as the body scan on the left page. Elizabeth herself is also seen to be drawn with less detail than her scans on the left. Finally, Elizabeth is seen standing in the shower, seen from the background drawing depicting square tiles and the lines originating from the upper right corner of the page which seem to partially bounce of off Elizabeth, thus creating the effect of water falling onto her body.

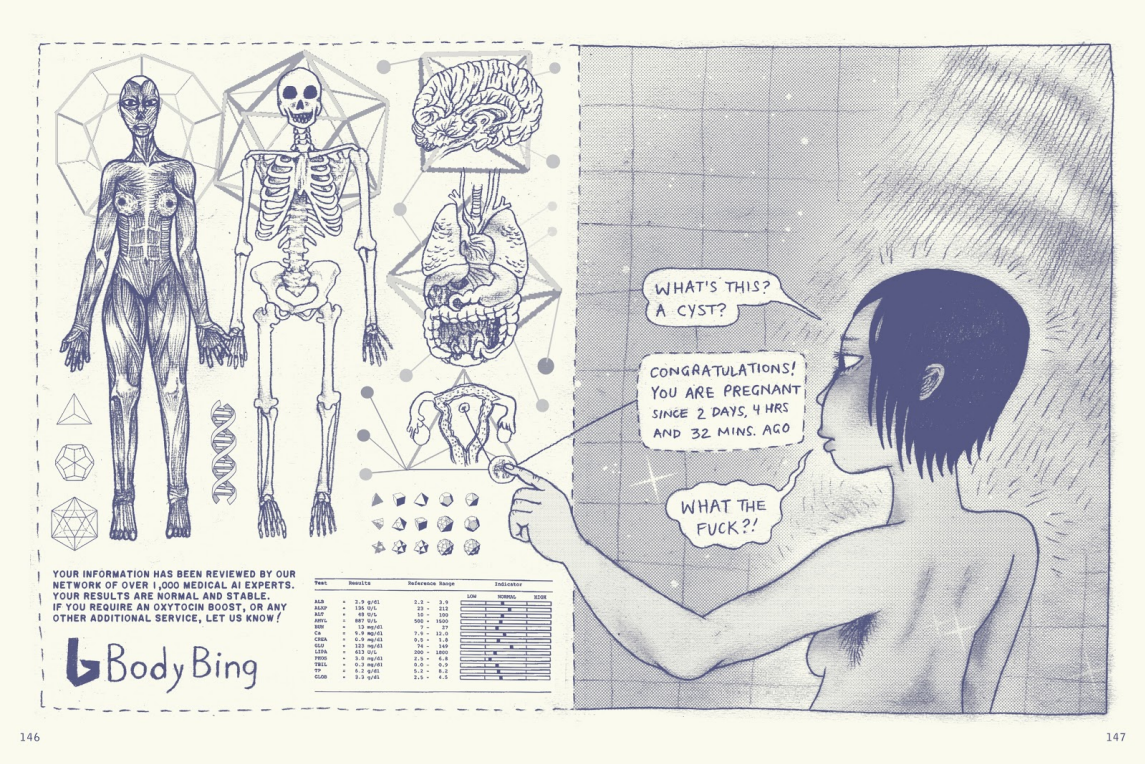

Figure 12 – Alienation 146-7

Looking *through* both these instances in the comic in a comparative way highlights the differences between the AI's views of Elizabeth's body and those of Elizabeth herself. Where the body scan initiated by Elizabeth seems to be contained within Elizabeth's own body, highlighted by the interrupted panel's line, the AI's body scan is only accessible to the AI and not Elizabeth, seen from the uninterrupted thick line. Even though they originate from the same source—both scans are undertaken by AI—only one of the scans is accessible to the person who it is about. Therefore, the differences between the two become important. The AI's scan is more detailed, as it contains actual images of organs rather than drawn ones and it seems to directly sense Elizabeth's bodily functions as seen in the panels containing Elizabeth's insides. Therefore, it could be argued that the AI performing the MacBody scan has less distance to Elizabeth's body than Elizabeth herself, because Elizabeth can only access it in a mediated, drawn fashion, whereas the AI can directly couple the fluctuations taking

place to the data about her organs. In other words, the AI is able to access the inside of Elizabeth's body without the hindering factor of the skin obscuring her bodily functions.

This could best be explained by one of the ways a body could be coded, which is as a machine that functions in a logical way. The AI can feel closer to such an entity, which, much like itself, can be read and follows a certain logical 'pre-programmed' code, which can be influenced and measured by the different numerical values it outputs. Whereas in general, humans do not see themselves as machines but as embodied beings with a consciousness and agency which is antithetic to the machinic, or cybernetic, view of the body. By highlighting the organs, *Alienation* instead shows the way their fluctuations influence this agency. For instance, the fertilized egg brings about different bodily changes, which are brought about unconsciously rather than consciously. *Alienation* argues here that we do not have specific agency over our body, but that rather the organ-machines, or different external machines, do. In this way, it breaks the body-image by causing an intensity that returns to the body-without-organs, on which organ-machines are again grafted.

Another important moment in the comic containing such inside views is the actual impregnation of Elizabeth. This happens in a virtual world Elizabeth accesses in the middle of the comic, which is called *Parasaite: Hentai Manga* (86). Hentai, Estrada later explains in *Alienation*'s notes, "literally means 'pervert' in [J]apanese, but is mostly used in the west as a category for pornographic comics and cartoons made in Asia" (239). Estrada aims here at a double meaning of hentai, which stands for both pervert and a pornographic category, which could also apply for the way the respective pages can be read. In other words, highlighting the reader as the pervert in these cases.

More specifically, these pages are "an homage to all the weird **hentai scanlations** you can find online. […] Scanlation is a term used online for fan translated comics from

Asia" (239, emphasis in original). Manga scholar Frenchy Lunning looks upon scanlators as having two distinct compulsions: "first, to share their favorite manga with other speakers of their own language in the world; and second, and perhaps more importantly, to feed and sustain their own desires, constellated around the manga objects themselves" ("Manga" 78). The manga is both translated into the desired language but is also respected in what makes it stand out; meaning that the scanlations do not seek to overcode the manga they translate, but rather to share their uniqueness with other people. This, in turn, could explain the name of the virtual environment Estrada has drawn here, which can be argued to take its name from Hitoshi Iwaaki's body-horror manga *Parasyte*, which revolves around the parasitic relationship between a human being and a foreign entity. The hypertextual reference to scanlation posits these pages as having a direct relation the original and are a translation of them, albeit that, because these pages are situated in not a manga but in a comic, it can be argued to be parasitic as well, as Estrada incorporates these elements here in her comic rather than relaying their uniqueness as a separate work from a manga artist. Nonetheless, *Parasyte* is not a hentai, so the Western 'translation' of it is entirely Estrada's own.

The composition of these pages—seen in figure 13—when looking *at* them, is remarkably different than that of the rest of the comic. The panels, on the first page at least, are divided by the environment itself, in this case the branches of the tree seen on the right side of the page (100). Elizabeth is drawn as an anthropomorphized furry animal with soft features and human clothes on—a dress in the first three panels and a bikini in the bottom one. The composition style is, therefore, more reminiscent of manga than of the style of the rest of the comic, which holds especially true for the pages following the first one.[49] The

[49]See, for instance, McCloud's explanation on the differences between manga and other comic styles (77-80). Much like other manga, Estrada uses here a high valiance of "subject-to-subject transitions," which are transitions that transition between different subjects and, in this way, invoke sequentiallity. Also, much like other manga, the timespan between each panel seems to be relatively short and unfragmented, so giving the effect that everything is happening simultaneously.

background of these pages is set in natural environment seen by the lake, the forest and several of the animals, such as birds (100) and dragonflies (101). During the pages that follow (101-3), the action sequence is divided between 4 or 5 upper panels in close approximation to each other and one larger panel which takes over the rest of the page, but which sometimes also contains a couple of smaller panels (102-3). Every action is discernible and graphically drawn, and the same entity, the parasite, can be identified throughout all four pages and has its start on the bottom left of the first page (100).

Furthermore, Estrada uses the same X-ray vision she previously used in the pages discussed earlier. Especially in the second to fourth page, Elizabeth's intestines can be seen with the parasite laying eggs inside of her and her hand reaching inside herself to reach out for the parasite and oust it from her body. The rest of the upper panels focus on Elizabeth's face and the change happening to her expression once she reaches further inside herself. The text balloons on these pages are thickly lined and the text is again fully capitalized. The rest of the text—the sound effects—are highlighted by white borders and are directly juxtaposed against the drawings.[50] However, the panel on the bottom right of the last page is discernibly different, both in its panel lay-out as in its speech balloon structure. This panel depicts the eggs inside Elizabeth and is, much like a speech balloon, drawn as if emanating from Elizabeth herself. Moreover, this panel is thickly white bordered, so setting it against the rest of the page.

[50]There is also a piece of text which falls outside of the page layout, and which can be found on the bottom right of the last page in figure 13. This balloon is drawn with an interrupted line and says, with an arrow in front of it: "Return to pages 86 - 87." While, this is not yet important here, we will return to it later in this chapter.

Figure 13 - Alienation 100-3

When looking *through* these drawings, their difference is striking when compared to the rest of the comic. No other page utilizes the same style, nor are any of the other pages so graphic. This creates a certain shock when reading these pages, and they came, at least to me, unexpected. In this way, it reminded me of Fisher's discussion of David Cronenberg's movie *Videodrome* (1983). Much like Elizabeth body, the protagonist's body in *Videodrome* was "not extended [referring to Marshal McLuhan's theory of extended media], but invaginated. Here is a body literally overwhelmed by an unmanageable quantity of stimuli […] What, that is to

say, if the body could not be only triggered, but actually mutated, by TV and video-signal? (Fisher 72). The invagination refers to the literal penetration of the body by media, which in turn affect it in different ways through the intensifications it provokes. It is here the body-without-organs comes to the fore, as it does not relay a specific coding but rather an affect or feeling which changes the composition, in both cases viscerally, of the body in question. So, rather than looking upon media and mediazation as external factors, Fisher, and in extension Estrada, invite us to rethink it internally. Much like *Videodrome*, Estrada triggers this image through pornographic and violent means, meaning that the violent and sexual affects invoked by the virtual environment change Elizabeth on the level of the body-without-organs. On top of that, it arguably changes the reader as well since reading these sudden graphic pages can, for instance, invoke feelings of discomfort or disgust. In this way, it allows for a reflection on the reader's body as well and her reception of these pages, a movement that is triggered unconsciously—through intensities—rather than through textual means.

The actual insertion, to return to the comic, is done forcefully and without consent, since Elizabeth is clearly uncomfortable with what is happening to her and she wants it to stop. In this way, Estrada shows the parasitic nature between the virtual environment and Elizabeth's body, whose body is no longer only hers but has become a carrier for the eggs lain into her by the parasite—something that she remains unaware of, as highlighted by the white bordered panel, until the body scan mentioned earlier (146-7). The minor changes to her body within the virtual environment only become visible when they reveal themselves on a non-virtual level and can be described by Elizabeth. Nonetheless, this level is also shown through the change of Elizabeth's body into that of an anthropomorphized animal. Before being confronted with the parasite, she has already changed her body to conform to the hentai-setting it is depicted in. In this way, Elizabeth becomes-hentai unintentionally, thus showing

that the subject formation in virtual spaces is done in accordance with the space itself and not the other way around. By juxtaposing this with Carlos's traumatic hallucinations he kept from the war—which Estrada depicts through the literal change of the body of a person into that of a violent mess (20)—a connection can be sought between what is happening during these flashbacks and the changing of bodies in the digital environment, which again is based on an involuntarily traumatic experience rather than on a willingness to do so. Estrada can be said to theorize the alienated relation of the body in *Alienation* as being unconscious, traumatic, involuntarily, and happening on a virtual level, but which can become noticeable on a 'real' level over time. In other words, the virtual can affect the real.

The Reader's Body-Without-Organs

The workings of virtual space become more or less clear in one of the most interesting page spreads in *Alienation* seen in figure 14 (86-7). On these pages, Elizabeth, seen on the left, and Carlos, on the right, go together into cyberspace to engage in a couple of activities. Looking *at* this spread, both Elizabeth's and Carlos's faces can be seen in some detail and resemble their 'real' counterparts earlier encountered in the comic. However, their eyes immediately pop out, because they are fully white rather than darkly colored as in the rest of the comic. Furthermore, a total of seven circular shapes can be identified, each containing different information and fonts. The "Parasaite" virtual space discussed earlier, for instance, can be identified on the bottom left, as well the Google logo on the top right and the words "Log Out" in the lower middle. While each of the fonts differ, a few remain the same: the words in the upper middle section—"Main Menu: Select Interactive Virtual Experience"—are more or less the same, except for the fact that "Main Menu" is drawn a little bolder than the rest. This font is also used in the letters of each page indicator, which can be found near each of the

circular shapes. The background is abstract, and symmetrical. Moreover, several thick lines can be seen extending from both Elizabeth's and Carlos's sides. Two of the circular shapes are encompassed by a white background which extends from Elizabeth's to Carlos' eyes, while the other shapes are encompassed by a darker background extending from either Carlos or Elizabeth and which do not meet with any of the other backgrounds.

Figure 14 - Alienation 86-7

What is so important about these pages is, when looking *through* them, the ways in which Estrada is able to mirror the virtual space with the space of the comic. Each space, marked by the circular shapes, can be accessed by both the reader, by going to the specific page number, as well as by either Carlos or Elizabeth or both of them, depending on their location on the page, by them thinking of that space. The menu presented here, thus, applies both to the reader and the characters themselves. When going to these pages, the reader finds herself in a setting resembling the title and, at end of each of each page, in the page border, a suggestion to "return to pages 86-87" (103). While it is thinkable that Elizabeth and Carlos

have an unlimited amount of choices, it is presented in the comic as if they only have a finite number of them. When the reader constantly returns to the menu it reveals a strange tension between what is, presumably, infinite, but is at its core still only a finite number of options. So, the infinity of the digital space is reduced to the actual finitude of the materiality of the book.

Once a choice has been made, they, as well as the reader, have to presumably return to that main menu and choose again, until they want to log out by going to page 119, at which point the comic continues in the same way it did before. The reading experience, if the reader follows Estrada's prompts, therefore resembles virtual space and the way one can be stuck in it. The going back to pages 86 and 87 can be repeated infinitely, but no new choices will present themselves to the reader and the choice to log out is only given in the main menu. This is a difficulty which is especially present in the physical copy of the book, where the log out prompt is situated in the space between the two pages and so is not as easily findable or identifiable as the other drawings. This makes the option to actually 'log out' more difficult as it is not prompted as much compared to the other options presented. Of course, the reader can simply skip to page 109 or put the book away, but in doing so they break with the choices presented to them in the book, thus, creating a dissonance between what is possible for Elizabeth and Carlos—and the presumable difficulty they encounter to log-out—and the choices presented to the reader.

One of the choices presented on figure 14, the one on the bottom left, is "Search: |, Recent Searches, Suggested for you:, View more:" (87). When flipping toward page 104, seen in figure 15, the reader is presented with 7 windows. Looking *at* this page, the reader sees three browser windows within, possibly, a *Mac OS* environment because the three buttons, like close etc., can be found on the top left corner of each window. The first window is a page

from *Wikipedia* and contains information about "Traumatic insemination" (104). It seems to be a literal screenshot from *Wikipedia*, as nothing is drawn or added. The two windows on the right show information from a non-existent website called "Bullshitmag" (105)—so it is possibly an online magazine or blog. The first window is about originality in the present, whereas the second is about the origin of petroleum. Both instances seem to be typed but are in a different font than the *Wikipedia*-article, so the text could either have been drawn or created through a handwritten font. Nonetheless, the latter seems more likely in this case, as the text is perfectly spaced and resembles typed text.

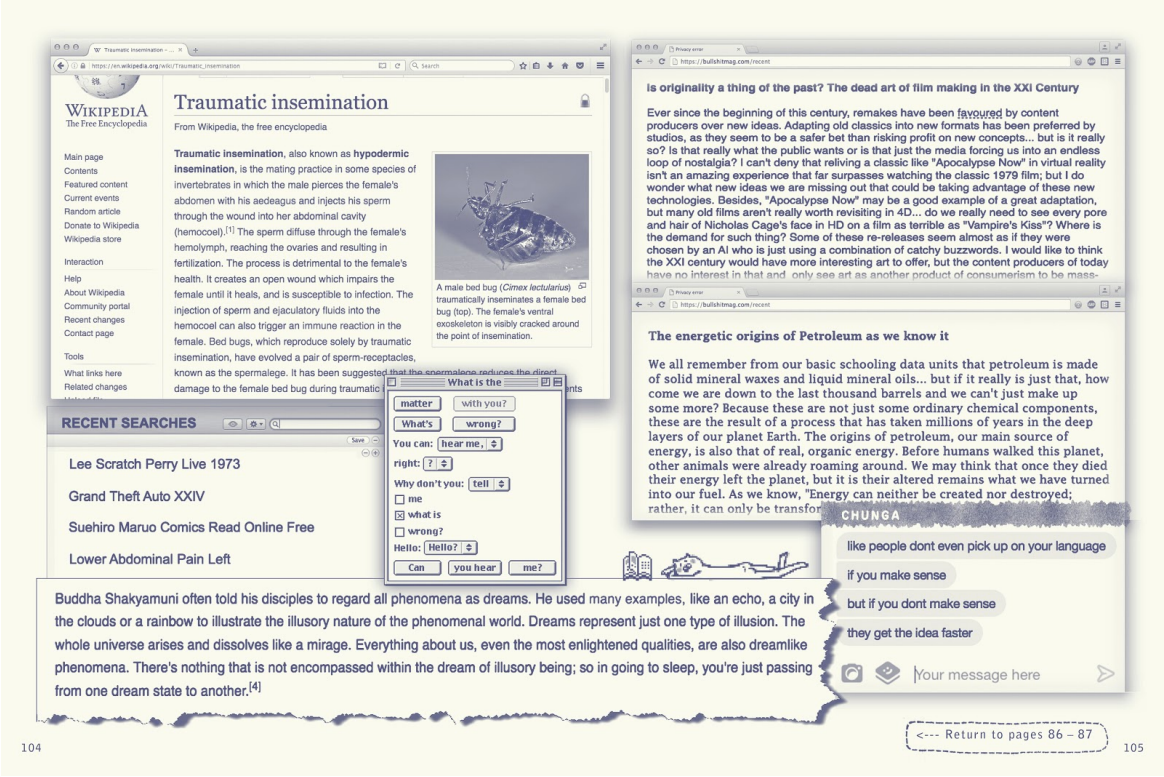

Figure 15 - Alienation 104-5

The "recent searches" window from the left page also seems to originate from a *Mac OS* environment, due to its composition, and contains some recent searches. The window below that contains information about Buddhism, and it is unclear where it originates from. The text seems once again to be typed, but the windows on which it is situated seems to be ripped out of a book. This idea is possibly affirmed by the pixelated cartoon of the reading cat

on top of it. The windows next to it contains a messaging app named "Chunga," which, according to the *Urban Dictionary*, is a derogatory term for a Latin woman ("Chunga"). This app contains four messages, which also seem to be typed, with no capital letters or punctuation, as well as a 'possibility' to reply to these messages. The final window is situated in the middle right of figure 15 and contains several clickable boxes, which presumable give the user several options. Again, the text seems typed, but this time it is rather pixelated. The windows itself seems to be somewhat archaic since it lacks the smooth features of the previously discussed *Mac OS* windows.

The sudden insertion of these text heavy pages in a comic that overall heavily leans on drawings can be unexpected. It immediately poses the question about the way information is received and given in an era where everything can be felt and sensed through the Googlegland, especially because most of the windows, if not all, seem to be visualized in the same way as contemporary computer windows, and, therefore, seem to be antithetical to virtual reality. The question arises whether Carlos, who presumably reads these texts, is interacting with the text in the same way as the reader does, or whether he receives them in a different way.

When further looking *through* these pages, it is noticeable that each piece of text ties back in some way to the comic itself. The *Wikipedia* text, for instance, can be brought back to the Hentai scene previously discussed, whereas the text about authenticity can have something to do with the theme of *Alienation* at large, much as the text about Buddhism and petroleum. However, in figure 14, the reader learns that these search results are from Carlos, so if any of these searches relate to the comic, Carlos has to know what is happening in the comic and what has happened to Elizabeth in the hentai scene. The uncanny question then arises if these are Carlos' search results or if they are suggestions for the reader to read up on.

Does the AI know the reader is reading the comic and does it try to suggest to the reader texts to piece it together, or are these searches of Carlos just a coincidence?

The reader, once aware of these problems, suddenly becomes an intruder upon the comic, a voyeur, to also return to one of the meanings of hentai, in the lives of Elizabeth and Carlos. It is not Carlos or Elizabeth who is viewing these pages—because why would they get their information in such an impracticable way—but the reader who is viewing them in their own comfortable way, with their laptop or their book. This is a hypertextual move where the reader is directly implicated in the making sense of the comic, by, for instance, looking up relevant information, making connections, looking up similar artists and so on.[51] This point is reinforced by the text box on the middle right of the first page, which asks open questions but which only gives a finitude of options, like: "Can you hear me?" and "Hello?" (104). The reader is, of course, unable to answer these questions, but is, nonetheless, fully aware that the comic knows it is being read by the reader. Therefore, the jump to the textual pages is a sudden intrusion upon the reader's apparent anonymity, paralleled with their anonymity on the internet, and reveals their complicity in making the comic operate. They 'chose' to 'click' on seeing Elizabeth being traumatically inseminated, much as they 'chose' to look up the *Wikipedia* article on the topic. Even though the reader was not aware of the choices that were being made or the way the narrative was going, much as an internet search can turn out to go into an entirely different direction than was initially planned. In other words, the reader is suddenly confronted with her own alienated choices, or at least choices she is unable to identify with.

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[51]An author that is mentioned here is Suehiro Maruo. Maruo is a Japanese comic artist especially known for his blend of extreme violence and eroticism. Much as I argue here, the violence in Maruo's comics can be said to make the reader become aware of herself, through shock and disgust, much as it shows the complicitly of the reader with those acts in buying the book and reading the comic (Luebke and DiNitto 245). For a discussion of some of Maruo's work, see Luebke and DiNitto 229-47.

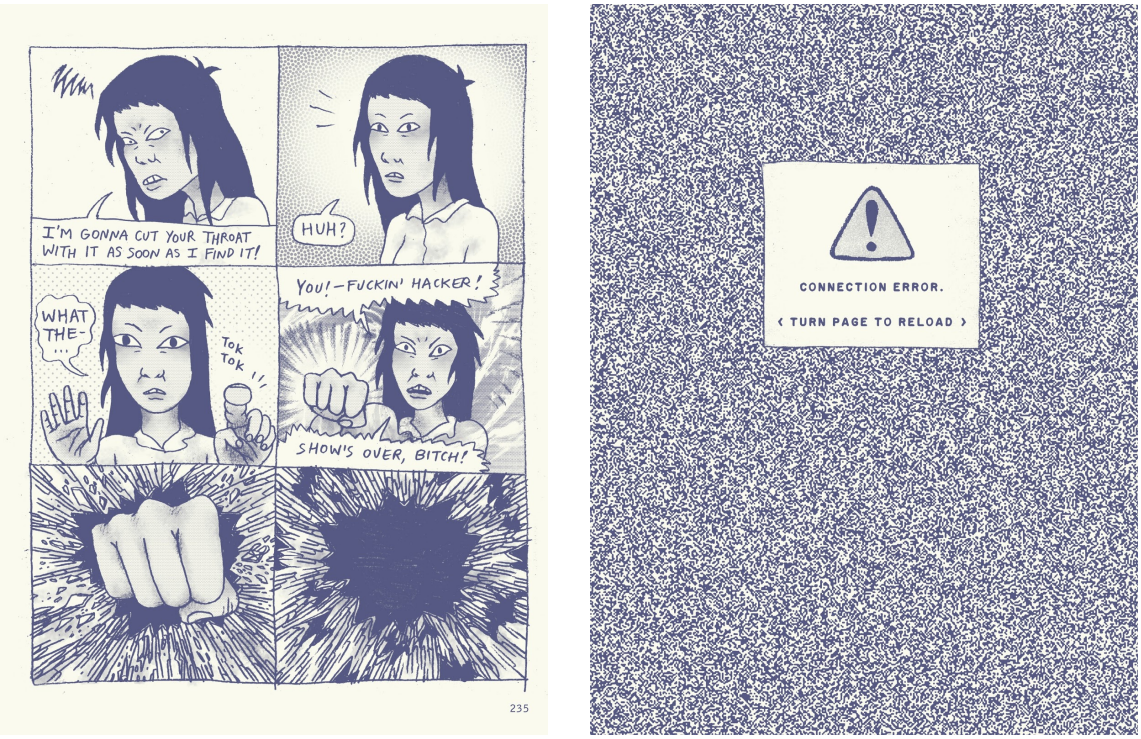


Figure 16 - Alienation 235-6

As we have seen there are several allusions to the reader within the comic, most of which are subtle and, as far as the reader is aware at least, Carlos and Elizabeth remain unaware of the reader's intervention. This changes on the final pages of the comic, figures 16, before which Elizabeth is seen searching for her knife. Looking *at* these pages, Elizabeth is clearly distressed, seen by the emanate depicting a sharp and tangled line beside her head, and by her facial expression. The background is white, and the speech balloon contains fully capitalized text. Her expression changes into one of amazement, highlighted by the emanate of three straight lines and by the speech balloon containing a question mark. Where her gaze previously evaded looking directly 'at' the reader, in this panel she seems to have become aware of the reader's presence by suddenly directly glaring outward of the panel to the reader.

This feeling is strengthened by the panels that follow: in the third she ticks against the page, seen by the sound made by, supposedly, ticking against glass. Elizabeth's amazement slowly transforms into anger, as she is seen raising her fist to strike at the screen on the fourth

panel with barbed speech balloons, a lot of exclamation marks in these balloons themselves and a denser background emphasizing her fist. In the speech balloons she yells at, presumably, the reader, calling them a "hacker." In the last two panels Elizabeth's fist punches through the screen which results in a gaping hole in the last panel, and, subsequently, in the page spread on the next page. This spread mainly consists of white noise—white color intermingled with pixelated black lines—and a single panel. The background of the panel is white and contains a drawn triangle with an exclamation mark within it. The text in the panel is, again, fully capitalized and says: "Connection Error. < Turn Page To Reload >" (236). The page—with its depictions of white noise, a connection error and the triangle—creates the allusion to an error sometimes encountered on a computer screen.

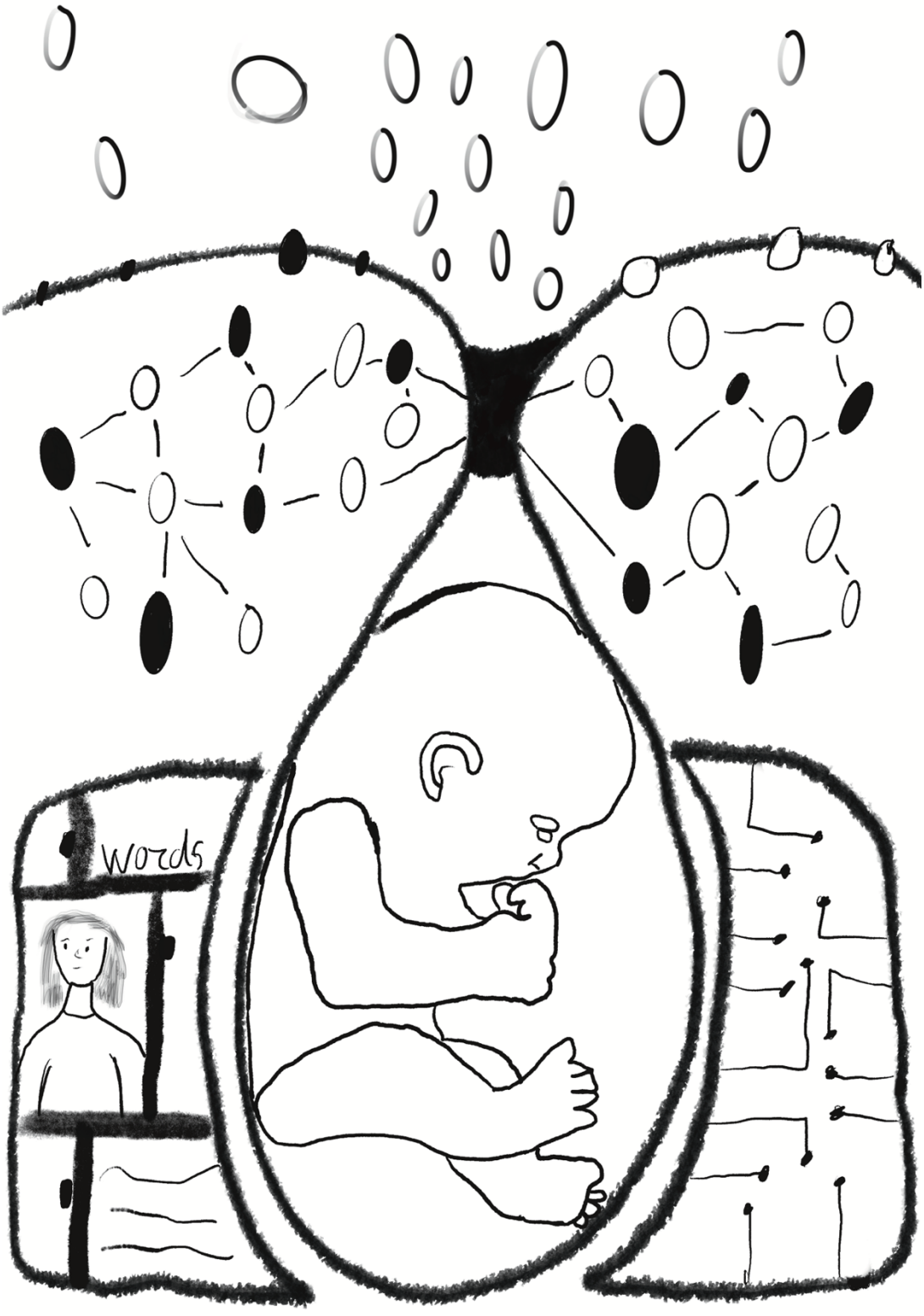
Looking *through* these pages, especially considering that they are almost the final pages of the comic, they can be seen as the culmination of *Alienation*'s recognition as being read on a hyper-level, since, it is not just that the comic recognizes the reader, but that it also attributes to the reader the role of the main meaning-maker when reading the comic, even though the reader did not have to specifically be aware of this before. Again, the comic prompts the reader to do something, this time to turn back the page to reload, which, if the reader follows the prompt, can only result in Elizabeth becoming aware of the reader again and once more punching the glass screen. No matter how the comic is read, if it is read until the end it will result in a connection error and the suggestion to reload. The previous railroading of the reader, referring to the way the comic takes the reader through its narrative, violently comes to an end and, no matter what, the reader shall get no other ending than the error. The smooth reading experience is thus broken up and the reader must acknowledge both herself and the comic to come to grip with the ending. It remains unclear, however, how Elizabeth exactly knows that she is being seen. Is the page a camera lens and the next page

the screen on which the hacker saw her? Is it the Googlegland and is the punch merely a depiction of her thought of punching the reader? Or is the punched screen part of the apartment, a part the reader never gets to see, and is the spread showing the reader who has been broken as a virtual entity existing in the screen? The lack of a final conclusion leaves the reader hanging and they remain unsure what it is that they just witnessed. In other words, it alienates the reader in her role as reader and, instead, marks the reader as being a hacker.

Conclusion

This reading of *Alienation* foregrounded it as a comic that ruptured the space between the reader and the comic itself. The concept of alienation was here taken to mean the relationship between the body-image—as a designated body and identity—and the body-without-organs, as an undefined intensive state. These two modes oscillate between each other, an oscillation which occurs more frequently within digital media specifically and in a capitalist system more generally. *Alienation* made the reader aware of this by making her complicit in Elizabeth's own alienation from her body through the showing of her organs and images she herself was unable to see. Thus, the reader took on the role of the AI as the parasite within her body. Simultaneously, the comic provoked several intensifications in the reader's own body through the use of shocking imagery, thus breaking the immersion that first took place. Besides positioning the reader as a parasite, *Alienation* also brings about a different logic where the reader is positioned as being the hacker. This positioning occurred implicitly through the identification of the reader as being the AI that hurt Elizabeth, by given the reader limited choices, by positioning the reader as the one who already knew what was going to happen, and, finally, by explicitly addressing the reader as the hacker at the end of the comic.

In this way, the reader is revealed to be the one that structures the comic and who allows these things to happen to Elizabeth. This is a position which we generally do not allow ourselves to take, as the comic has already been fully written and, therefore, its narrative cannot be changed. However, we still do so unconsciously, as reading the comic presupposes that we take the agency to connect the dots. Nonetheless, in many of the cases *Alienation* connects the dots for us, thus revealing the role we take as a reader and alienating us from the reading practice itself. This can be extended to digital media, through the aesthetics and themes within the comic, and thus positing that we are not always the one with the agency, but that rather digital media is influencing us as well. Thus, alienating us from our role as a free agent and rather positing us as being moldable. Having now opened this space, it is time to see in what ways we are exactly influenced by closely looking at the ways we interface with the digital through a close reading of Shirow Masamune's *The Ghost in the Shell* series in the fourth, and final, chapter.



Comic 11 - Inspired by Gilles Deleuze's drawing in *Foucault* 99.

Chapter 4: Machine-Machine Interface

On a day-to-day basis, we increasingly encounter and use technology. We use our smartphones when we wake up and when we go to sleep; our laptops to read and write on; and smart devices to make our lives easier and more comfortable. The transition between our digital and non-digital selves occurs almost seamlessly, except for when things break down or do not respond as one wishes. As the last chapter posits, such instances can provoke a feeling of alienation between the digital and non-digital, an alienation which is, nevertheless, almost always there, but of which we are not always aware. This prompts us to look at the specific ways we can conceptualize the relationship between technology and the human, for instance, by asking if there is a strong dichotomy between the two, or, perhaps more specifically, if the human-machine interface transcends the boundary between the human and machine. Using Shirow Masamune's manga series *The Ghost in the Shell* (*GitS*), I will argue for the latter, as the manga shows that the human-machine interface problematizes, and does away with, the dichotomy, instead opting for a symbiotic relationship between the two.

Shirow's manga series *GitS* is one of the best-known manga outside of Japan and is a prime example of the Cyberpunk-genre in a non-Western context (Corbett 45). The original *GitS* series, as in the books written and drawn by Shirow himself, consist of a total of three volumes, which are *GitS* (1991), *GitS 1.5: Human-Error Processor* (2008) and *GitS 2: Man-Machine Interface* (*MMI*) (2001). However, in the Western hemisphere, the series gained traction not through Shirow's manga, but through the similar named anime—a specific style of animation originating from Japan—adaptation directed by Mamoru Oshii (1995). Mamoru's adaptation gave rise to *GitS* franchise, which now includes several films, an anime series, and the recent Hollywood produced live-action film directed by Rupert Sanders (2017). It should be noted that, while all the adaptions are based on Shirow's work, they

generally deviate from the narrative presented within them. Mamoru's first adaptation, for example, takes a lot from Shirow's first volume but emphasizes different parts of the story. For instance, Major Motoko Kusanagi, the main character of the anime and the first and third volume of the manga, is shown to relate differently to her existential angst in the anime than in the manga (Chipman 175).

The first two volumes of Shirow's manga follow the exploits of "Section 9 of the National Public Safety Commission" and the agents under its employ. The first volume, as well as the third volume of the manga, focuses especially on the character of Major Motoko Kusanagi, who is a cyborg and a squad leader within section 9. In the first volume, the reader encounters her in the midst of an existential crisis. According to her knowledge, she was involved in an almost deadly accident as a child and in order to save her she was given mechanical parts, ultimately leaving only her brain as the last piece of the 'original' Motoko. During the first manga, she is continuously in doubt whether or not this narrative is true, because she can never fully verify if she is not 100% synthetic and that the memory of her childhood is not just an implant. Throughout the manga she is seen searching for a verification of this narrative and of her own self.

Eventually, a solution to this problem is presented in the form of, what is initially believed to be, a cyber terrorist named "the Puppeteer" due to its ability to take over other cybernetic entities (265-6). Much like Motoko, it is also in an existential crisis, because it is unable to ascribe to itself a coherent notion of the self, mainly due to its existence as just a digital entity, which does not allow for it to have a proper body, and is, furthermore, unable to reproduce, change or protect itself, since all it takes is one virus to potentially kill it. In other words, the puppeteer is searching for a more stable self, which would allow it to become a distinct entity. Ultimately, the Puppeteer proposes to Motoko to merge together and become one, which

would result in an entirely new entity, but one which would retain a proper sense of identity. The advantage this would give Motoko, is that her core, or "ghost" as it is called in the manga, is original and that her identity is transfixed and her own, where the puppeteer would gain a body and a steady identity as well. Furthermore, their abilities—Motoko's deadly prowess and the Puppeteer's hacking skills—are combined as well, making one new powerful being. Motoko ultimately agrees and the first volume ends there.

The second volume picks up from this thread; however, it only mentions it in passing, since it consists of just short stories relaying the personal endeavors of some of Section 9's other members. More significant, at least for the purposes of this chapter, is the final volume of the manga. This volume starts with a character named Motoko and the mention that the narrative takes place four and a half years after the events in *GitS*, thus heavily implying that its protagonist is, in fact, the merged Motoko herself, even though later on the reader learns that this identity cannot be ascribed onto her as easily as initially believed. While the reader was only able to catch glimpses of Motoko's power in the second volume, here they are fully shown and explained. For instance, a major part of the manga is situated in cyberspace, which Motoko can access seamlessly and is, for the most part at least, able to traverse smoothly, especially because she has the ability to enter other people's "cyberbrains," which are either cybernetically enhanced human brains or fully synthetic cyborg brains.

The part of the manga that is situated in non-cyberspace shows Motoko's old physical prowess through the many action sequences. In these spaces she can switch between different synthetic bodies, called "shells" in the manga, and utilizes them for either diplomatic or combat related purposes. No matter what physical body she takes possession of, Motoko is able to handle most combat situations sufficiently. Besides showcasing Motoko, the narrative of the manga revolves around her new occupation as a counterterrorist under the employ of

several influential and wealthy companies and countries. In one of her assignments, which entails the search for the terrorists behind an attack on a "Meditech farm," she comes across the blueprints of another advanced entity. Eventually, this search takes her to the 'original' Major Motoko Kusanagi who fused with the puppeteer and who is currently situated in a "body-deposit facility" (240). In this encounter, it is revealed to the protagonist that she is an offspring of the original and that there are many more like her, either created by the original or through the replicant's fusion with other beings. Finally, she is asked whether she would like to use the blueprints of the earlier encountered advanced entity to further fuse with other synthetic beings, thus significantly expanding her reach. Motoko agrees and the process ensues, eventually culminating in a dazzling finale where the figure of Motoko is shown being replicated repeatedly, until she eventually takes over the whole space on the page.

Being a manga, the style of the comic differs from most Western comics. Much as the term comics itself, the definition of manga is almost impossible to reach. Frenchy Lunning, for example, highlights the impossibility of finding the historical root of manga within Japanese culture: "With an absence, or rather a plethora, of proposed origin points, influences, and significant objects—each with differing logics and criteria—the 'history of manga' becomes a messy, fragmented, and controversial formation" (66). Manga, while influenced by Western comics—much as Western comics were, and probably still are, influenced by manga —remains separate from it and has its own distinct background and style. Nonetheless, manga has some similarities with Western comics—in the sense that both use paneling and generally rely on the sequence between panels to get a narrative across—but can never be reduced to it. One major difference, for instance, is the right to left reading order. Therefore, I will conduct the same kind of close reading in this chapter as I did in my other two close readings, thus

focusing on the formal aspects of *GitS*, while remaining aware that it is its own distinct form and part of a different, while overlapping, rhizome than that of comics.

Following this, *GitS*'s formal structures rely on the use of irregular panel layout—a lot of the time panels overlap and are juxtaposed on top of each other— and, following Scott McCloud's analysis of manga, a high emphasis on "aspect-to-aspect" transitions (*Understanding Comics* 72). Aspect-to-aspect transitions "bypass *time* for the most part and set a *wandering eye* on different *aspects* of a place, idea or mood" (72, emphasis in original). Such transitions serve to present a setting with its own distinct atmosphere for the reader and generally do not contain that much action. What is striking about *GitS* is that these transitions are juxtaposed with "action-to-action transitions" (70), transitions that focus on the action.

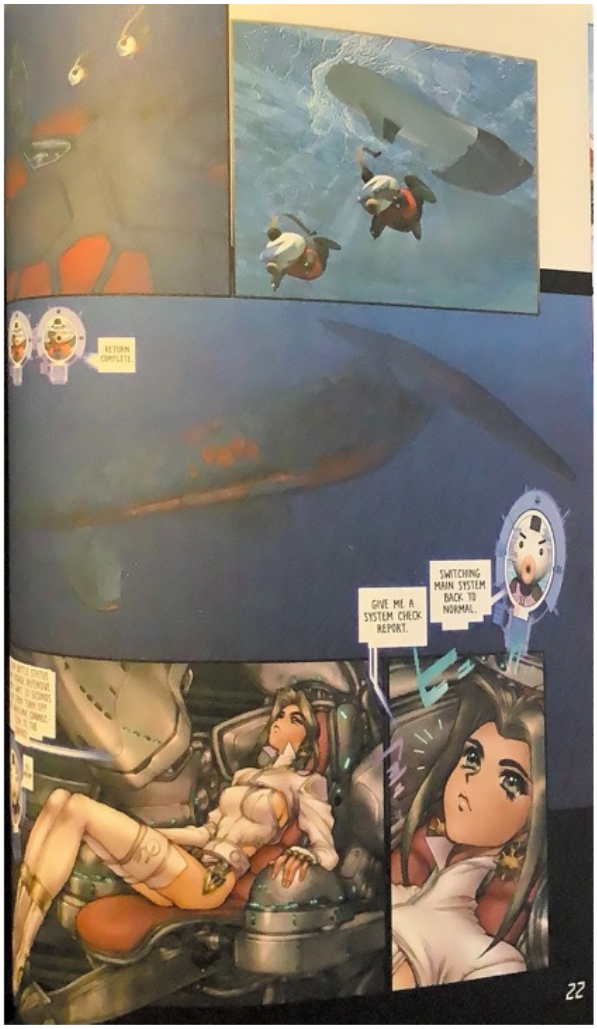


Figure 17 - MMI 22

For instance, the first part of *MMI* takes place in a submarine from which Motoko is conducting a hack. The atmospheric panel of the submarine is centered on these pages, thus giving a sense of place and atmosphere, while juxtaposed on top of that image are smaller panels containing the action (22). See figure 17 for an example, as it clearly shows the centering of its atmosphere—the submarine and being underwater—on which the action takes place. In this way, the atmosphere is transposed onto juxtaposed panels, allowing them to affect the reader differently. Thus, Shirow is able to depict a high amount of action, while retaining an atmospheric setting through panels that do not contain any action.

Figure 18 - GitS 194

Figure 19 - MMI 49

What is further striking about *MMI*, and where it differs from its predecessors, is its drawing style. On the one hand *MMI* retains the drawing style encountered in the earlier

volumes—see figure 18 taken from *GitS* (194)—which are more 'classically' hand drawn images, and, on some pages, color; while on the other hand, it showcases clearly digitally enhanced visuals and coloring, seen in figure 19 taken from *MMI* (49). The latter is especially used in the cyberspace settings, which comprises roughly half of the entire volume. The color in these instances highlight the complexity of cyberspace. Figure 19, for instance, shows a background where different colors interweave in a multitude of ways, thus more explicitly bringing across the feeling of being in cyberspace. Furthermore, when compared to figure 18, the method of coloring as well as the drawings relay more a digital aesthetic compared to the drawings and coloring in the first volume. This is seen in the valiance of the color throughout the page, the ways it reflects light and through the juxtaposition of computer-generated imagery on top of Shirow's drawings; for example, the globe on the bottom panel is set apart due to its resemblance to a 3d model rather than to a 2d drawing. Shirow, in this way, differentiates *MMI* from the earlier volumes by matching the aesthetic between form and content, meaning that what is looked *through*, the cyberspace, matches what is looked *at*, the digital style used.

Besides its difference in style from traditional Western comics, its engagement with cyberpunk and philosophy can also be argued to be remarkably different than the cyberpunk representations generally encountered in Western media, such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984). The engagement with both cyberpunk and philosophy can be gleaned both diegetically and extra-diegetically: on the one hand, the narrative sometimes engages in philosophical debates, or hints at a certain way of thinking, and on the other hand, the narrator, presumably Shirow himself, comments upon or adds to the manga outside of the panels. Usually, these comments come in the form of text on the bottom or left part of the page (157), but they can also take the form of hand drawn text situated in the gutter with an

arrow pointing towards what it is explaining (157).[52] The content of these pieces of text provides extra information about the world of *GitS*, explains the workings of highly advanced technological devices, provides philosophical context, and even gives out book recommendations (*GitS* 262). The narrator seems to be situated in the story world itself, since they are very knowledgeable about it and know a lot about its technological advances, while at other times it is clear that Shirow himself is 'speaking,' for instance, when the narrator comments upon the ways certain things, such as engines, are drawn (*MMI* 138).

Usually, there is an element of uncertainty involved as well, highlighted by the usage of words like "seems," which can strike the reader as strange considering that Shirow, assuming that he is the narrator, should know exactly what is happening. This is expanded upon in a "Read me first!" on the first page of *MMI*, where the narrator states that:

> The various situations, explanations, and concepts that appear in this book are a product of my wild imagination, a form of entertainment with no connection to reality. Take according to directions, and enjoy. Be advised that the author assumes no responsibility for any collateral damage resulting from improper use of the various constructs, fabrications, and gimmicks in the story. (1)

The inclusion of this piece of advice, also present in the other two volumes albeit in an altered form, at first struck me as strange and prompted questions like: How is a reader able to hurt herself using concepts and technology of an, apparently, fictional nature? And why does Shirow take distance from his work like this? It is a paradox to, on the one hand, state that the manga is divorced from reality, while, on the other hand, to assume that someone is still able

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[52]It should be noted that while this way of depicting notes has always been the case for the English translation of both *MMI* and *Human-Error Processor*, it was only recently adopted in the same way in the first volume. The recently published deluxe edition of the *GitS* by Kodansha Comics, the one I use for this close reading, shows the notes directly on the page that they comment upon, while the earlier Dark Horse edition (1995), included the notes with corresponding page numbers at the end of the book (358-367).

to hurt herself using the ideas encountered in *MMI*, since that would mean that a real person is still somehow connected to the fictional diegesis of the comic. While probably unintentional, this meta-reflection immediately situates the reader within a (hu)man-machine interface, an interface which provides a connection between the book and the reader. Following Shirow's argument, and taking the book as machine, it can be said to influence the reader in its interfacing with it, thus, allowing for the translation between the two, earlier incompatible, worlds of the book and reader, or fiction and the Real.

The Cyborg

Such connection provides a useful entry in the academic works already surrounding *GitS*, albeit that many focus only on either the first volume or on the anime. What becomes clear, and what was already hinted at, is that *GitS* invokes a different way of looking at technology, as it is situated within a different context than many Western cyberpunk works. For instance, its depiction of the figure of the "cyborg"—a borderline entity existing between a human, or organic, and machinic, or inorganic, state—in Western cyberpunk media is usually seen as a bad omen and the embodiment of a technological dystopia (Corbett 45). The cyborg slowly loses connection with its 'original' human origins and replaces it as such from which a violent being ensues which only seeks to do harm.

However, Japanese cyberpunk lays a different emphasis on the figure of the cyborg, as Austin Corbett explains: "In Japanese depictions, the nature of the cyborg as antithetical to humans is lost, replaced with a concern for the subjectivity of monstrosity and hybridity" (45). The antithetical nature of the Western notion of the cyborg—here we can think of beings such as Darth Vader—already presupposes some of Japan’s own internalized struggles after the Second World War, what Sharalyn Orbaugh terms the "Frankenstein

syndrome" of Japan. This Frankenstein syndrome, she explains, "refers to the tendency of developing countries, those defined as 'monstrous' and 'raw' by the already developed nations, to see themselves in those same terms" (174). On the one hand, Japan is imagined to be in touch with the spiritual, as being antithetical to the West's "*goal-oriented culture*" (*Understanding Comics* 81, emphasis in original); on the other hand, it is monstrous due to its involvement in the Second World War, the atrocities that it committed, and the technological speed through which it developed. Rather than seeing the cyborg as a dystopic figure, Japanese culture, and in extension manga, incorporates the figure of the cyborg in a more positive way.[53]

Such conceptualizations of the cyborg come close to Donna Haraway's "cyborg myth," which "is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities, which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work" (14). For Haraway, the cyborg—due to its state between technology and humanity—does not necessarily spell doom, but rather invites us to rethink already established categories and look upon them as changeable, while imagining radical new possibilities. Nonetheless, Haraway's focus on the cyborg leads to the problem that certain categories, or rather identities, remain, such as the dichotomy between the organic body and the technological, and that they can only intersect on a body (Currier 322). Thus, Haraway's cyborg reinstates the human, as the organically human is a necessity for the technology to be grafted on. In other words, the human is a prerequisite for a cyborg entity to exist.

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[53]Nonetheless, it should be mentioned that the cyborgs in *GitS* are heavily sexualized, especially female cyborgs, through a heavy focus on classic feminine signifiers, female cyborgs' overrepresentation in service roles, and their lack of clothing compared to the male cyborgs in the manga series. Which is strange considering, as, for instance, Claudia Springer argues, the cyborg can be seen as "anachronistic" (250) and to have no need for sexuality. While these gender roles can function as a "primary marker" for the reader to identify the identity as cyborg (249), they can also be explained by the notion of "fan service." Fan service refers to the intentional use of hypersexualized or violent imagery to please the fans and attract new readers, which, in the case of *GitS*, are mainly young men. While it does not impede on the analysis in this chapter, it is important to note that the concept of the cyborg and its representation in media can significantly differ and that not all is necessarily positive.

In contrast, Thomas Giddens argues that *GitS* positions itself against this notion of the cyborg through an analysis of the notion of "ghost" within the manga. The notion of ghost—used in the manga on an equal level as having a soul and, in this way, signifying a static core—is problematized by the fusion between the puppeteer, an inorganic entity, and Motoko. As Giddens states: "The new combined being that emerges is not a hybrid, not a 'multiple personality,' but a single being" ("Law and the Machine" 99). What this entails is that the post-fusion Motoko transcended the cyborg dichotomy of being partially flesh and machine; instead, what was formed was an entirely new ghost as the two parts simply fused into each other. The shell, more or less the body, remained the same, but is at times shown to be interchangeable within the series. For instance, throughout *MMI* Motoko switches several times between different bodies. This means that seemingly fixed categories, like identity, human, and body, are shown to be fluid in *GitS*.

Furthermore, there also exists the possibility of "dubbing" human ghosts, as well as machinic ghosts, referring to a practice where human ghosts are copied and placed into synthetic entities ("Law and the Machine" 103). According to Giddens, such depictions, as well as the fluidity of categories in *GitS*, prompts an anxiety in the viewer about her own human status. Rather than holding on to a set core or identity, *GitS* views the human body as being just a ghost in the machine.[54] As Giddens states:

> Such activities undermine the very notion of an individual, of a unique being or self. Humans become replicable, able to be formatted, wiped, copied reprogrammed—like a machine. This is perhaps the more troubling side of the human-machine coin: the

[54]The title of *GitS* is a direct reference to Arthur Koestler's book *The Ghost in the Machine* (1967), a phrase initially coined by British philosopher Gilbert Ryle. The title refers to Descartes mind-body split, against which Koestler argued by positing that the materiality of the body is necessary for thought to take place (Curti 91).

> problem is not just that of where machines take on lifehood and the concomitant rights and duties of law, but also, 'When do humans become mere machines?' (104)

Rather than returning to the cyborg or asking the question what it means to be human, *GitS* does the reverse by actually prompting the question if we are not more like machines than we perceive ourselves to be. These anxieties and fears are nothing new, and can be prompted as well on a day-to-day basis by the technology we currently use and our embeddedness within it. Jay Scott Chipman, for instance, argues that: "Cyborg mythology, as seen in the various *Ghost in the Shell* stories, functions to help contemporary individuals address, confront, and accept or reject the possibilities for increased realization of hybrid beings in the developed world" (189). *GitS* invokes questions and fears that we are unwilling to confront in our daily use with technology, and can, therefore, act provocatively by agitating the reader with these questions and anxieties. In this way, *GitS* functions as theory-fiction by opening these uncomfortable spaces through the rupturing of the reading experience.

Life, or at the least the human, is broadened in Shirow's work to the point where neither machine or human is discernible from each other anymore. This becomes apparent not only in the narrator's aforementioned comments across all three volumes, but also by the heavy reliance on religious concepts, of which Shinto—the animistic belief that spirits inhabit both animate and inanimate things (Curti 92)—is the main one. As Giorgio Hadi Curti argues: "*GitS* and its Shinto ways of knowing collapse dualistic distinctions and separations of life and nonlife, animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic, recognizing a vibrant and vital immanent force in all phenomena" (93). It should be noted that the narrator in *MMI* strikes the same parallel, but reminds the reader to be careful to equate it with actual Shinto, noting in the epilogue that: "Although the story seems very 'Shinto'-ish here, remember… it isn't Shinto" (300). Nonetheless, what can be gleaned from these allusions, both diegetically and

extra-diegetically, is the interrelatedness of objects with each other and the attribution of a force in both organic and inorganic entities. Curti goes on to connect *GitS*'s ontology to that of Baruch Spinoza, and in particular Deleuze's version of Spinoza's thinking.[55] Spinoza posited in his *Ethics*, specifically in proposition 14, that "Besides God no substance can exist or be conceived" (85), while in proposition 15 he remarks that: "Whatever exists exists in God, and nothing can exist or be conceived without God" (86). For Spinoza, much as in Curti's exploration of Shinto, everything that exists is connected to each other ontologically, and therefore, a strict ontological dualism between machine and human cannot be conceived, as they can ultimately both be brought back to, in Spinoza's case, God, or more broadly and less theologically, to one substance.

Such thinking on the part of *GitS* can especially be gleaned from the title of its third volume: *Man-Machine Interface*. Man and machine are connected to each other with a hyphen, meaning that they are on an equal level and communicating with each other. Such relation becomes clear by the addition of the word "interface." Interface can be used in several ways: as a verb it designates that a connection is taking place between two separate entities, while as a noun it stipulates the condition through which it is happening. As Branden Hookway argues: "The interface is a form of relation that obtains between two or more distinct entities, conditions, or states such that it only comes into beings as these distinct entities enter into an active relation with one another" (4). The interface allows, on the one hand, the communication between these distinct entities and acts as a translating platform which enables their understanding of each other, while on the other hand, it can also obfuscate this communication or select only specific kinds of communication. The interface can,

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[55]There is a lot more to say on the influence Spinoza had on Deleuze, particularly notable in Deleuze's *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* and *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* which he entirely devoted to his appropriation of Spinoza's thinking. However, to do so would be to go beyond the scope of this chapter. For now, it is enough to establish a connection between the two and to state the influence. For more information on Deleuze's version of Spinozism, see Piercey 269-281.

therefore, be seen as a separate relation apart from the entities it connects. These entities are, as Hookway terms, "augmented" (4), meaning that each entity is influenced whilst communicating with another entity. When interfacing with a computer, for example, the human needs to augment herself to adjust to the limits imposed by the interface, whilst the computer is augmented to be made legible to the human interacting with it. For instance, what most users see when using a computer is not the source code running the programs, but rather its translation into understandable buttons and icons.

Hookway extends his definition to the human-machine interface specifically, which focuses on the unification of each element rather than on the their separation:

> The interface is the zone of relation that comes into being between human beings and machines, devices, processes, networks, and even organizations. […] While the interface produces an equivalence between human and machine, through which their actions become mutually communicative, it also distinguishes between human and machine in what it extracts from each of these so that they may enter into relation […] While an interface may function as the threshold to one of these forms of technology and the means through which it is put to use, it remains distinguishable from these technologies just as it is distinguishable from its user. The interface is not only the form and protocol by which communication and action occur between technology and user, but also the obligation for each to respond to the other. In this way the interface draws together human and machine into a single, unified trajectory, one that by World War II would be named the “man-machine system.” (39-40)[56]

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[56]Hookway's analysis is just one way to conceptualize the interface, which I chose to use due to its emphasis on relationality. For an overview of other conceptualizations, and an original analysis of the interface from a new materialist perspective, see Ash 16-31 and 31-32, respectively.

What this extensive quote argues for is that in order for humans to be able to communicate with machines, they need to become-machine, whilst the machines need to become-human to properly understand each other. The interface is what allows, or disallows, depending on the protocol, such becomings and which side has to augment itself more.

My use of becoming here is taking from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who when writing about "becoming-animal," posit that "you become-animal only if, by whatever means or elements, you emit corpuscles that enter the relation of movement and rest of the animal particles, or what amounts to the same thing, that enter the zone of proximity of the animal molecule. You become animal only molecularly" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 320). Becoming here is not meant to designate the molar appearance of either machines or humans, which refers more to the actual species and its appearance. Rather, with becoming-machine, following Deleuze and Guattari's initial conceptualization, I designate the ways someone emits machine-like characteristics without changing her molar appearance, so someone that comes in close proximity with machines through their behavior. Molecular, therefore, designates the way someone can be said to have become-machine, without actually being identifiable as a machine. Such becomings are discernible in our contemporary usage with, for instance, platforms like *LinkedIn*. Users try to be more easily findable by *LinkedIn*'s algorithm by, for instance, using specific keywords numerous times so that their profile will be more easily picked up by the platform and put higher in the search results (Dayton). In this way, the user becomes-machine through molecularly thinking like the algorithm and ways to trick the system.

Cyber References

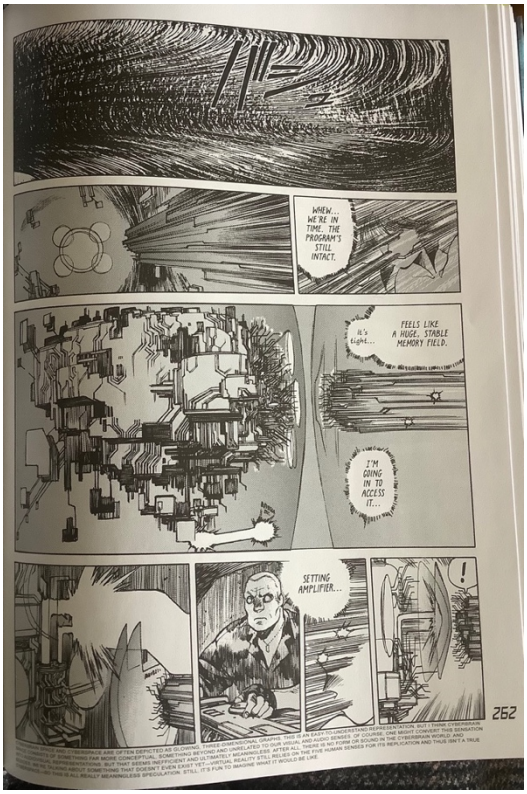

Figure 20 - GitS 264

GitS offers numerous takes on such becomings by, for instance, invoking anxiety whether we are not more machine than we like to be, or by showing the connections that take place between humans and machines. One way the manga does this, and which I already briefly commented upon earlier in this chapter, is through the use of the narrator's notes. For instance, figure 20, taken from *GitS* (264), shows Motoko's first brain dive and meeting with the puppeteer, and, therefore, her first encounter with its cybernetic structure. Looking *at* these pages, the reader is shown several panels depicting cyberspace and one that shows Motoko sitting in a car while connected to the puppeteer together with her colleague Batou and her boss Aramaki. The panels depicting cyberspace are abstract and vague. For instance, the first panel depicts, presumably, Motoko's entry into the puppeteer's consciousness through a swirling of lines. The black lines, seen on the left of the panel, seem to move swiftly to the left while the rest of the lines, marked as moving through a saturation of white lines, are dispersed and pushed away. This line seems to transform into the more recognizable 'digital' lines, culminating in a column in the subsequent panels, depicted by the smooth and geometrical lines in panels 3 and 4. Moreover, in panel 2, Motoko's face is seen shining through, thus allowing the reader to recognize Motoko as being the lines. In panel 4, the digital column is seen interacting with the Puppeteer's digital infrastructure, recognizable as a microchip, and, according to the speech balloons accompanying this

interaction, is entering it. The subsequent panels depict the process of this entering, panel 8 here shows a white dotted space, which invokes the feeling of movement and the digital column interacting with the Puppeteer. Batou, the reader is reminded through panel 7, sets this action in motion whilst being situated in the car and controlling the amplifier, which is, apparently, a necessity in such dives.

Looking *through* these pages, we see a swift interaction taking place between cyberspace and the space where the shell of Motoko, together with the ghosted shells of Batou and Aramaki, are located. Motoko's consciousness is shown as disembodied from her shell, as her face is juxtaposed within the lines in panels 2 and 6. Therefore, the lines are identified as being Motoko rather than her body which is still located in the car. What is taking place here is an abstraction of cyberspace, but also of the human body. In interfacing with the Puppeteer, Motoko becomes-digital within cyberspace, rather than remaining strictly embodied in her shell and, subsequently, the need to use that body as her means of communication. Nonetheless, there is something more going on, as the narrator reminds the reader that:

> Cyberbrain space and cyberspace are often depicted as glowing, three-dimensional graphs. This is an easy-to-understand representation, but I think cyberbrain space consists of something far more conceptual, something beyond and unrelated to our visual and audio senses. Of course, one might convert this sensation into audiovisual representations, but that seems inefficient and ultimately meaningless. After all, there is no form or sound in the cyberbrain world and besides, we're talking about something that doesn't even exist yet—virtual reality still relies on the five human senses for its replication and thus isn't a true cyberspace—so this is all really meaning speculation. Still, it's fun to imagine what it would be like. (262)

Reading this hypertextual reference, either at the end of the comic or on the page itself, falsifies the representation that is seen there. Even though it is based in fiction, the cyberspace depiction is claimed to be false and is shown to be a mediated instance, the comic acts here as an interface between the reader, the comic, and cyberspace in that it tries to depict and represent the unrepresentable. The aspects of cyberspace that the narrator describes—not being audiovisual, no sound, not even existing—goes far beyond what a comic is able to do, or any other medium for that matter. Rather than being transparent, the comic shows itself to be selective in what can be shown and depicted, and therefore highlights that it can only act as an interface.

Cyberspace

Figure 21 - MMI 170

While there are only a few depictions of cyberspace in the first volume of *GitS*, the third volume takes mostly place within a cyberspace setting. Cyberspace is also depicted largely differently than in the other volumes, because it is in *MMI* that Shirow utilizes vibrant colors and a more computer-like aesthetic, making it obvious for the reader that these parts of the manga were drawn using technology rather than more traditional tools. This becomes specifically apparent in places where the two are combined, such as in

figure 21 seen on the left. The pages before figure 21 depicted an action sequence between Chroma, one of Motoko's alter egos, and four bouncers (163-9) and the figure seen on the left depicts the defeat of the last bouncer by Chroma (170). The use of color here can initially be seen as odd, because it was previously mainly used to depict events happening in cyberspace. Even though later on in the manga this is depicted in black-and-white as well. Furthermore, this is one of the only instances in the manga that the use of color and the black-and-white meet and even overlap with each other through the sound effect, seen on the top right corner of the page. The English translation of which is "BKOOM" (311), indicating an explosion.

Looking *at* this page, and specifically the difference in color, first, relays the attention of the reader to the colored panels which stand in stark contrast to the rest of the page. The action, at least so it seems, is definitely situated here and even the explosive sound rings through the rest of the page. The high saturation of action is, further, highlighted by the blurred drawing technique used in the colored panels, meaning that the figures are less discernible compared to the non-colored panels. This gives the effect that the happenings within these panels are still ongoing rather than static. In contrast, the rest of the page looks cleaner and more distinct to the eye, even though it does not specifically guide the reader to the specific panel to begin with, where the colored panels guide the reader by immediately foregrounding specific elements that should be looked at. The colored panels, in this instance, indicate a rupture, which affects keep lingering onto the rest of the page. This page reconfigures the reader's initial expectation that the pages depicting cyberspace, or have a connection to cyberspace, are necessarily the colored ones.

Precisely analyzing the use of color here within comics studies remains, as Jan Baetens already pointed out, difficult as color is still a major analytical obstacle for comic scholars not trained in the visual arts ("From Black & White 113). Assuming that the reader is

not either, the use of color in the first part of *MMI* could first be assumed to be more of an aesthetic feature than an essentiality for the reading. This page, however, subverts this assumption, since by using both color and black-and-white on this page, the comic is showing the reader the difference between the two and its necessity to properly read the comic with. As Baetens noted in his analysis of the color use in George Herriman *Krazy Kat*:

> [I]t is as if the shift from black and white to color not only modifies the form of the panels and the page design, but that it concerns in the very first place the nature of the panel structure. The frames are no longer a passive reinforcement of the structure of the panels, but an active player in the ecosystem of the comic strip where it actively intervenes so that a rupture at the level of the drawings can be compensated by a new device at a higher level. (126)

To put it differently, Baetens is here specifically arguing that Herriman is able to form a 'classic' black-and-white narrative—the sequence designates the action—through color by working outside of the panels and within the frame itself, much as Shirow is seen doing in figure 21. The rupture, to reiterate Baetens here, is active in highlighting for the reader where to start with reading and what is happening. Furthermore, the use of color here is able to show the action as currently happening and even revibrating throughout the page, as if the sound of the cyborg's crash is still happening. Where the black-and-white panels, at least in *MMI*, just show specific fragments set in time, the colored panels are more comparable to a piece of film which shows the action taking place, thus relying less on the reader and the gutter. Moreover, in this case, the colored panels also complicate the transition itself, as they can be argued to fulfil both the role of an action-to-action transition as well as an aspect-to-aspect transition, as the panels move forward the action by interlaying action with action, but also give rise to a certain atmosphere set apart of time due to its lingering nature. The eye keeps moving to the

action, due to its high color valiance, thus setting it apart from the narrative and allowing it to influence the atmosphere on the page itself.

Even though this page occurs only later on in the manga, and it remains vague whether or not these pages are actually happening within cyberspace, it is concurrent to Chipman's remark that the first pages depicting cyberspace are there to get used to the "visual vocabulary of Motoko's digitalized existence within an extensive system of information networks" (183). By specifically foregrounding the use of color here, Shirow reminds the reader of what to pay attention to and, moreover, what the color signifies in the cyberspace pages. In this way, the use of both the color and the visual vocabulary of cyberspace acquaint the reader with a digital interface that is not intuitive, but rather ruptures and actively distributes the reader's attention. For instance, the color highlights specific instance whilst obscuring others, thus, complicating the ways the reader can properly make sense of it. Whereas the happenings in cyberspace, and Motoko's actions in it, can be brought in relation to these specific instances of color. Therefore, the comic trains the reader to bring the two together, by seeing them as a coherent whole rather than as two distinct entities.

One such instance is seen in figure 22 (84). This page depicts Motoko doing a brain dive on her colleague Lebris because she suspects him to be a part of a terrorist organization and, through the brain dive, she wants to confirm her suspicion. Looking *at* this page, the reader first notices the almost shifting background which seems to be moving at a roaring speed behind Motoko. The background has as a base color blue, but juxtaposed on this are bright yellow lines that can become so numerously juxtaposed on top of each other that they can take on a bright white color. Against the chaotic background stands Motoko and her agents—digital artificial intelligence servants of Motoko which help her gather information and assist her during her stay in cyberspace. These agents are noticeably different in style than

Motoko, as the agents seem to be 3d models drawn with the help of computer imaging rather than through traditional tools. Furthermore, the agents and Motoko are seen interacting with several circles, some containing images—such as the circles closest to Motoko in the central panel—while others remain abstract and illegible to the reader. Finally, there are a lot of speech balloons emanating from both the agents and Motoko, which provide a sense of urgency and difficulty to the already chaotic composition of this page.

Figure 22 - MMI 84

These elements can, looking *through* the page, make these digital environments difficult to traverse for the reader. Thus, the comic relays the same atmosphere Motoko finds herself in—stressful, having to disperse her attention, and having to pay attention to a manifold of happenings—aesthetically to the reader. It, therefore, mirrors the difficulty of traversing cyberspace in the fictional world of the comic with the 'real' world the reader finds herself in. Nevertheless, Motoko knows what she is doing, whereas the reader first needs to get acquainted with cyberspace before she can follow her, an activity made more difficult by the many speech balloons within the page, as they contain mainly dense technological language. For instance, an agent is seen saying in the first panel: "Doesn't seem to include any of the recombinant parts of 'pandora-9' or the four types of self-disassembling viruses" (84). These words are said in the spur of the moment and are neither explained nor expanded upon. Moreover, the identification of these words into the visual field

itself is complicated by the reader's lack of knowledge, meaning that if, for instance, the virus mentioned is even present in the visual field, the reader is unable to identify it because she does not know what to look for. The environment extends this visual helplessness of the reader, since it is unclear if what is happening, analyzed, or interacted with is shown as influencing the environment, for instance provoking a difference in the density of the yellow lines, or whether these events are happening somewhere else. Such pages defy a proper identification with the words used in the speech balloons, therefore foregrounding a sense of discontinuity between the two rather than a synthesis. In this way, the manga highlights the lack of the representative quality of words within cyberspace, as they are unable to properly represent the events happening there. Such instances are numerous and can make reading *MMI* difficult.

This difficulty, I argue, precisely relays the interface itself. When the comic is seen as an interface—in accordance with Hookway's definition, wherein the comic provides a communication between the world within the comic and the reader, and can choose to withhold or provide information—it usually functions as an interface aimed at human understanding, being a human-human interface. *MMI*, however, requires the reader to interface with the machinic rather than another human. The difficulty of traversing cyberspace for the reader makes clear that cyberspace is not necessarily meant to be understood, or perhaps even grasped, by a human. Nonetheless, the reader has to traverse cyberspace in order to be able to properly understand the narrative and what is happening in the manga. By trying, and becoming acquainted with the visual aspects of cyberspace, the reader becomes-machine. Because, much as machines, the reader now has to extrapolate seeing from data rather than the other way around. For instance, specific words have to be coupled to the data represented in cyberspace, rather than seeing something and extrapolating what it is from it. It is here that

Giddens' analysis of the anxiety that *GitS* provokes rings truest, because as soon as the reader becomes aware of what she is looking *at*, she can become aware of what she is becoming. Here the manga ruptures the reader's experiences and interfaces her with the difficulty of understanding the machinic and coming to terms with technology. What is supposed to be easy, much as traversing today's cyberspace of the internet, is made difficult and the reader is confronted with the actual difficulties of traversing these spaces when they are not made for humans.

New Entity

At the end of *MMI* this becomes clearer. Motoko, having found the blueprints of another advanced being and having met her originator, is able to fuse with her originator and, presumably, almost all prosthetic beings. This event is depicted in the manga through the eyes of Tamaki Tamai, who is a psychic investigator from the channeling agency (6). The channeling agency is an organization that seeks to understand the world, specifically happenings in cyberspace, through religious symbolism and myth. Myth offers here, following Chipman, "pedagogical and political functions" to make sense of the world (169). For instance, the events happening with the fusion at the end of the manga can be argued to be illegible to humans, as it is an event that goes beyond understanding. Mythology is used here to engender understanding of such events; much as, for instance, the cyborg, at least in Western contexts, is a mythology indicating an entity that is evil and violent in order to mediate a singular narrative about an, otherwise, highly complex problem (169-70). Via the same way, the channeling agency explores Motoko's fusion, which Tamaki is able to look at through a psychic, or perhaps digital, connection that she previously established with Motoko.

Looking *at* this page spread (296-7), seen below in figure 23, the reader is confronted with an explosion of bright white light which almost seems to pop out of the page. The colors used here can come across as shocking, since they deviate from the, otherwise, more dark coloring used at the end of *MMI*. What can be discerned in this spread are two panels which are juxtaposed against the background containing the bright white colors. The first panel on the upper right corner, seems to show almost the same figure as the page spread, but with the difference that the yellow 'flakes' are shown to be hundreds of Motokos. This multiplication was already set in motion on the previous pages (286-95), but is shown intensified on this panel. Each Motoko is surrounded by a yellow hue, thus allowing the reader to identify Motoko as the bright yellow flakes on the page spread. When connecting the upper right panel to the spread, the process seems to intensify so much that each Motoko has seemingly disintegrated into one of the unidentifiable yellow flakes. The intensity of the colors and the use of the bright white make it difficult to focus on any single instance, which are moreover rendered a little bit blurrily, thus invoking the feeling that the fusion is still taking place and is intensifying even more. The panel on the bottom left shows Tamaki, who is presumably watching the event take place, and whose eyes seem to reflect the color of the yellow flakes, as if her shell is watching the event not virtually but actually. Furthermore, some of the figures are juxtaposed on top of her, thus prompting the reader to presume that she is affected by the event as well—a suspicion that is confirmed on the last page of the manga (304).

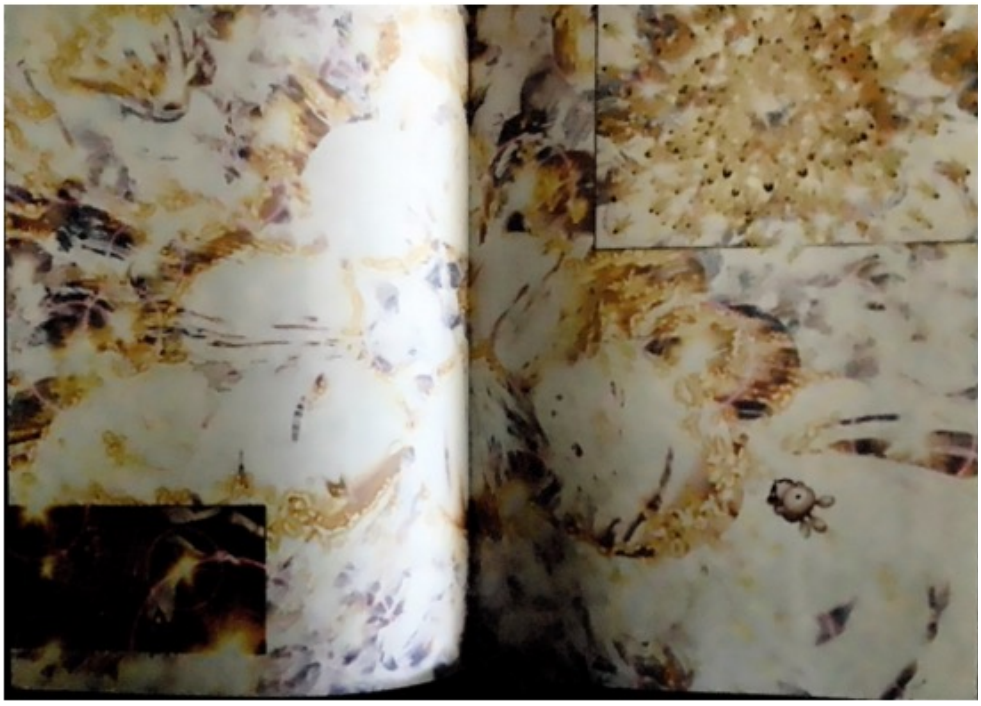

Figure 23 - MMI 296-7

Much as the pages containing depictions of cyberspace, this page spread is difficult to decipher for the reader, assuming that it is even decipherable. Nonetheless, the reader can follow the events that are happening, which is Motoko's multiplication and, subsequent, fusion. The outcome of this, however, remains unclear, prompting the question what it exactly is that is being generated here. Is it another entity? A new form of consciousness? Or have Motoko's abilities just become more powerful? The lack of an answer, as well as the disorienting quality of the colors used in the page spread itself, provoke the feeling that what is interfaced here is not for human eyes, but, rather, for a more advanced being. Even an advanced cyborg like Tamaki has to be significantly augmented to even see it. What this ultimately provokes is a limit in our interfacing with technology on a human level, as there is only so much that a molecular becoming can allow for at a time when technology becomes too advanced to be understood by us. In this way, technology does not feel the need to interface with humanity, and what can come through is made illegible due to the difference in molar structures. Therefore, at least in the world of *GitS*, to be able to transcend and

understand, we have to become-machine rather than clinging to the notion of the human. Ultimately, the notion of the human will disappear and, in the words of Deleuze: "it is the advent of a new form that is neither God nor man and which, it is hoped, will not prove worse than its two previous forms" (*Foucault* 110). *MMI* signifies this limit, as well as the necessity, and perhaps inevitability, for us to become-machine if we want to keep interfacing with it.

Conclusion

The *GitS* series, particularly the first and third volume, stipulated what it means to interface with machines and to be part of a human-machine interface. It already started this with the warning issued by Shirow at the start of the manga, which allowed the reader to speculate on the interface between the book, as a fictional entity, and herself, as the reader situated extra-diegetically. In this way, it provoked the reader to not see herself as a separate entity, but rather as a being that could be augmented by the manga itself, in other words, as an entity open for becoming-machine. This was further extrapolated in the manga itself through its formal elements—its use of color, its disorienting page layout, and the use of hypertextual references—from which the reader frequently had to distance herself in order to understand the workings of the manga. In these ways, the manga taught the reader to navigate through cyberspace, to understand its specific use of color and how to read like a machine by working from data rather than from seeing itself. However, it also showed the reader spaces that were, as-of-yet, inaccessible due to a lack of understanding of the visuals used, thus defying immediate understanding of the manga as well as indicating the limits of human understanding. In the narrative, this eventually culminates in the forming of a new entity, one that explicitly highlights this limit and which foregrounds the need for the human to become if she wants to understand it.

By doing so, *GitS*, and *MMI* specifically, broadens the conceptualizing of interfaces by showing, and in some cases even performing, the double-sided coin of human-machine interfacing. To become legible to each other, the human has to adjust as much to the machine as the machine has to adjust to the human, thus both have to partake in a different kind of becoming enabled by their interfacing. Such becoming, in the human case at least, has already been ongoing in the specific ways this relationship alienates her from herself, thus highlighting an incompatibility taking place between the machinic human and the human human. Nevertheless, to keep using more advanced technology we have to alter ourselves and be augmented until eventually we no longer recognize ourselves in our current form: the human-machine interface has become a machine-machine interface, thus, no longer legible for the human as of now.

Comic 12 - Panel 2 is inspired by the video site *Youtube*, whereas the error and command windows are inspired by the operating system *Windows 10*.

Conclusion

The introduction of thesis started out with the way we tend to look at screens compared to paper and what the specifics of each medium are. Where paper offers a singular focus on the paper itself, digital screens were argued to be more distracting in nature. Rather than just offering a focus on one element, the focus on screens is dispersed across multiple elements, with each specific component fighting for the attention of the viewer. The way the screen multiplies attention was then extrapolated to Gilles Deleuze's notion of "societies of control," which showed the ways contemporary culture controls the user by anticipating their moves through extrapolating the individual across a data set. Thus, the individual is no longer singular, but rather divided, as she now exits both in a dataset and as a person. In this way, the question as to how to elude such control was introduced. One way to do this, I argued, was by looking at William S. Burroughs' "cut-up method," which allowed Burroughs to bring several heterogeneous elements together into a new whole, thus eluding control by cutting it from the dataset which allowed it to predict. However, following Deleuze and Félix Guattari, this method is still too close to a linguistic unity, instead of a veritable where not unity but a breaking of control is needed.

Thus, I posited that comics present a better way to elude control, as they explicitly bring together several heterogenous elements, allowing for, at times, a breakage of a unitary reading. Here I followed Jason Helms' definition of comics as "rhizcomics," which highlights the ways comics eluded most attempts at a proper definition due to their complex structure. For instance, previous attempts to define comics have merely focused on specific aspects, and thus have each been rejected by scholars in the field. I extrapolated this elusiveness of comics as well to my reading of them, since comics often do not focus on bringing across a unitary narrative, but rather reveal the breaking of the narrative by disallowing its disperse elements

to work together. Therefore, the method I used in this thesis focused on reading the comics as disjunctive. Here I followed Jean-François Lyotard's different notions of "figure" and "discourse." Where discourse points towards the representative structures imposed by language on materiality, figure is the breaking apart of these structures and relays the materiality of what is seen in this breaking. In line with Helms' method, developed through the use of Lyotard's concepts, in this thesis, I noted how figure and discourse oscillate, and looked both *at* and *through* the comics I analyzed. For the looking *at* I focused on the formal aspects of comics, where in looking *through* I focused on interpreting these formal aspects. By oscillating between the two, the moments of breaking between form and interpretation were brought forth, thus showing the figure within discourse.

The use of these breakages was to allow for spaces to be created to do theory. Here the concept of theory-fiction was introduced, which, initially first conceptualized by Mark Fisher, aimed to be a mode of theorizing on the same level as fiction. The necessity for this mode is because, following Fisher, theory has been put on the same plane as fiction. Further, it is no longer possible to distinguish between the two because the previous representative nature of theory has been revealed to be the same as fiction. Concerned mostly with how digital culture has permeated the Real, Fisher argues that each virtuality is transformed into a possibility by being predicted and taken into account, and that there is no space outside of these predications, thus within digital culture fictiveness bleeds through reality. In light of this, he posited that putting theory on the same plane as fiction allowed it to do theory in new ways that highlight gaps in the thinking of digital culture rather than just reiterating mapped possibilities. By combining Fisher's theory-fiction with Helms' thinking about the functioning of comics, I argued that comics allowed for an ideal way to carry out this mode because, through their form, they are able to show these breakages and, thus, open new unmapped

spaces. The question that I put forward was thus: How can comics function as theory-fiction and in what ways do they open new spaces to do thinking from? This question was researched by first mapping out discourse on digital culture and exploring why comics can be an ideal way to engage with it, to then investigate the ways comics can open up spaces through a close reading of three case studies.

The first chapter, "Why Comics?" set out to map digital culture. Through exploring several theorists, I argued that digital culture has been looked upon in binaries rather than in a thinking from the middle. The first binary I examined is the one between visuality and digitality. In this examination, I started by explaining how data visualizations are not not created for the machines themselves, but rather for the humans—designating here a classic notion of the human: the viewer. As machines do not need to see in order to obtain data, but rather need data in order to see, they overturn John Berger's oft cited concept of the necessity for humans to see before data can be obtained. The second binary I explored was that between readability and legibility. Readability was argued to be the way a specific text could affect someone without invoking meaning, for instance an ancient language no one can read, whereas legibility is specific for texts that can invoke meaning through deciphered language. Digital culture frequently oscillates between these two movements due to the speed in which it works. The third binary put forth was that between human agency and determinism. Human decision-making is still part of the data sets used by algorithmic processes, allowing for human agency to shine through; however, these same processes move at a speed barely legible for most humans and create divides between understanding by constructing distinct systems between humans. Thus, on the one hand, humans do have agency, whereas, on the other, technology seems to undermine this agency. Finally, the last binary I explored was between two different notions of the human: the humanist and posthumanist human. The

humanist human focused on the agency of humans and the way we shape systems, against which posthumanism argues for our implicatedness within, for instance, cybernetic systems and the way they shape human actions.

What was missing in these arguments, I offered, was a thinking from the middle—a thinking offered by theory-fiction. To counter the hyperreal, following Fisher's reading of Jean Baudrillard's theory, theory-fiction has to find the cracks and leaks within it. The hyperreal was put forward here as a notion of reality that encompasses everything, meaning that each instance within reality is mediated, and, thus affected by the mediating instance. Even virtualities previously existing on another plane are here taken into account and transformed into possibilities that could be predicated upon. In such a society, it is no longer possible to separate the false from the real, as every false event is speculated upon and taken into account. To show the cracks in such systems, it is not discourse that should be focused upon—because it is discourse that is represented and predicated upon in such systems—but rather non-discursive elements. Such elements, Fisher argues, are still able to bring about different modes of thinking. The role of theory-fiction in this thesis was to conceive of ways to bring about these different modes by focusing on fiction as a means to break and contradict the hyperreal, and thus attempting to look upon the hyperreal differently. Theory-fiction was put forward as being both a praxis and a theory because it tries to theorize from the moments that its own breaking creates. Finally, I put forth comics as an ideal way to do this, because they contain many of the heterogeneous elements within digital culture and, through their form, are able to contradict these elements with each other.

Several aspects of comics were then focused upon to get a clear picture of the ways they bring forth these elements within their form and structure. First, I offered that comics always represent everything they depict in a subjective way because within each panel a

connection to the artist that drew them remains. In other words, drawing style can be connected back to the artist who initially drew the images and thus comics do not deceive the reader about their own fictional status. The question was then asked if digitality in any way impeded on this, because comics, as much as any other medium, are increasingly being digitalized and produced through digital technology. While this is true, I argued that even when drawn digitally, the connection to the artist remains, since even digital drawings bring across a specific artistic style. The form of digital comics also does not differ from hand drawn works and thus still relay the elements of breakages I focused upon. Comics show themselves not to be immediately transparent but rather, at times, (purposefully) difficult to read. Due to this, they offer a counterpoint to the smoothness of many digital media, by showing cracks instead. Nevertheless, the question of digitalized comics lingered in the background, because comics being read on a screen could be argued to be beholden to the same digital reading I argued against. In some cases, as in *Comixology*'s guided reading, this proved to be true by significantly reducing the reader's agency in connecting comics' disperse elements, even though it was also noted that many comic artists, both artists working digitally as analogously, opposed these moves. Therefore, I argued that digitalized comics are still able to show breakages within their structure, even though digital reading practices could subvert these moments of breaking.

Moving on, comics were then presented as being a praxis—a way of thinking. Following the comic *Unflattening* by Nick Sousanis, I argued that comics allow us to look anew at their presentation of forms, due to the reader's agency involved in reading them. The ability to create a coherent narrative can either be subverted or supported by a comic, and different points can be reconnected upon each different reading. Thus, even though readers may want to impose structures on comics when reading them, the comic can subvert this

tendency. In addition, drawing was shown to be a praxis as well because, in order to draw a specific instance an artist had to think about how to relay it properly, so that other people could understand it. Therefore, drawing was put forward as a different and open way of thinking. These points were connected to show how comics bring across several themes to the reader. For instance, the figure of the cyborg was argued to be represented as a figure that is never whole, because the comic has to show both its humanness as well as its machinic parts, thus never allowing the reader to fully identity with it. Here I argued that comics are ideal to signify the nondiscursive and nonorganic, as the role of the reader is made apparent in instances that do not allow for the reader to connect them together or make sense of, thus showing the comic to be a nonorganic entity on which the reader's agency was imposed. For instance, time was argued to be represented spatially in comics, making for a different reading than the linear time the reader is used to, and, in this way, comics bring to the fore the nonorganic entity of time by isolating it from the reading.

Finally, the concept of comics-as-theory-fiction was developed in concordance with Deleuze's concept of the "diagram." The diagram was used to designate a zone where the abstract functions of a specific instance could be analyzed. In the case of digital culture, for instance, a diagram relayed the ways it was able to bring several heterogeneous elements together while still offering an uninterrupted interaction between the user and these elements. Comics, which bring some of these elements together as well, were argued to be able to show the diagrammatic functions of digital culture by functioning as diagrams themselves. They function as diagrams because they, themselves, are able to bring a number of elements together while remaining open to the element of the reader, her agency, and by being able to transpose their diagrammatic form to other media. In a similar way, they are able to reveal the diagram of digital culture through their closeness to it; in their breaking, they allow for a

glimpse of the way digitality functions and takes in its user. Comics-as-theory-fiction, therefore, positions comics as both being a diagram as well as highlighting diagrams.

My first close reading of Joshua W. Cotter's *Nod Away* built upon this point by instigating an investigation of the way mediation works in digital culture. *Nod Away* revealed this by showing the ways mediation is built on absence rather than presence, due to its setting in space—setting human interactions against the infiniteness of space—and its opening sequence that showed the working of the comic form specifically and mediation more generally. In the opening sequence, *Nod Away* allows the reader to look upon its figure—taken here from Lyotard—through its interplay between whiteness and blackness. Blackness was shown to still signify *something* because it allowed for the reader to anticipate something that could happen as it still relayed a coloring of the page itself. Whereas whiteness signifies *nothing* except for the comic book page itself. Thus, the reader suddenly finds herself looking upon the page rather than the narrative she imposed on it. Furthermore, the reader is also implicitly addressed by *Nod Away* through a clever use of the first pronoun—a lower case "i"—across its pages, as well as breaking the identification with its abstract figures, allowing for it to directly address the reader in the place of these figures. Through these breakages in the reading, *Nod Away* is able to show that the mediator is hidden within an instance of mediation, in this case the comic book, and that the result of mediation is linguistically structured upon this absence. In this way, it argues that the one being mediated is influenced unconsciously by making the reader conscious of the mediation happening in the comic.

The subsequent close reading of Inés Estrada's *Alienation* followed upon this conclusion by positioning this mediating relationship as one of alienation. The concept of Alienation was put forward in this thesis through a combination of Rahel Jaeggi's reconceptualization of alienation as a productive relationship and Deleuze and Guattari's

concept of the "body-without-organs." Alienation, I argued, is to be found in the way capital, and digital media in particular, disallow a specific body-image, or stable identity, to be grafted on the body-without-organs, which relates more to the intensive state of a specific body rather than to a cohesive whole. While such instances can be freeing, as, in principle, the body-without-organs is argued to be undefined and to allow for different becomings, it is in the close reading mainly put forward in a horrific way since a cohesive identity is necessary to properly function as well. Estrada's *Alienation* highlights the specific ways such alienating relation is mediated through digital media by positing the reader as being both a parasite and a hacker.

The reader is put forward in *Alienation* as being a parasite due to the access she has to the bodily insides of Elizabeth, one of the comic's main protagonists, and is therefore afforded insights into Elizabeth that she herself is unable to access. In these ways, the reader feeds upon the narrative through a parasitic relationship to the book, a relationship that becomes visible through the, at times, violent imagery *Alienation* shows, which works to bring the reader back into herself. In the same subtle way, the reader is posited as being a hacker. Several pages give the reader a specific set of choices which give the impression that the reader can influence the comic, even though only a finite and pre-determined set of choices are presented. Furthermore, the reader as hacker is also implied in the way *Alienation* presents some information in the form of a *Wikipedia* article, information which the protagonists themselves cannot have known about and, therefore, must have been looked up by the reader. At the end of the comic, the reader is specifically addressed as being a hacker, and thus, finally, *Alienation* breaks the narrative apart and reveals the reader to be not in the position of an autonomous agent, but rather as someone unable to control the narrative. In this way,

Alienation alienates the reader from a humanist notion of herself to, instead, connect her to the ways she is alienated by the comic and, in extension, digital media at large.

Where my reading of *Alienation* revealed mediation to be alienating, my close reading of Shirow Masamune's manga *The Ghost in the Shell* series focused upon the results of alienating mediation and what replaced the classic notion of the human the reader is alienated from. What was put forward here was that, in this specific instance, the comic acts as an interface that influences the reader by, for instance, teaching her how to read the sections that were not necessarily made for humans, which were those set in cyberspace specifically. Deleuze and Guattari's notion of becoming was here connected to the interface, which, following Brandon Hookway, I argued to be a double sided coin. On the one hand, a user has to augment herself to properly interact with digital media, as much as, on the other hand, digital media has to augment itself to be made legible to the user. Thus, the user has to become-machine in order to interact with the machine. My subsequent close reading of *The Ghost in the Shell* series, in particular the third volume *Man-Machine Interface*, showed the extent of this becoming. First, I argued, the manga disallows the reader to gain a proper understanding of cyberspace by positing that it is unrepresentable. This irrepresentability has to be kept in mind whilst traversing cyberspace because it is positioned as a fundamentally illegible space for humans. What was then highlighted in the reading were the instances where the manga teaches the reader how to see from the data it gives her, for instance, teaching her some specific happenings within cyberspace, its symbolism and the purpose of color in it. However, it also shows moments where this teaching failed, or, to put it differently, moments where the reader has to transcend the human to understand what is happening, which proved to be an impossibility. In these ways, the manga reveals itself to be an interface where the

reader has to become-machine to understand the narrative, but also where this understanding fails by revealing the limits of such understanding.

In these ways, these three comics reveal that the structure built upon each mediating instance by the human is based on an absence rather than presence. Because we are alienated from this absence, we also cannot locate the source of mediation nor the preconscious effects it has in augmenting the user into becoming-machine. In other words, due to the structure of digital mediation, the user has to become-machine which alienates herself from her own perceived form. Therefore, the diagram of digital culture reveals itself to bring into contact the seemingly antagonistic couple of the human and the machine, as well as the ways the machinic influences the human as much as the human elements once did the machinic ones.

Hence, taken together, these case studies reveal their working as a diagram of digital culture. Much like digital media, these comics bring together a wide array of different elements and are able to make connections between these disperse elements across a single page, a whole book, and in relation to one another. By interfacing with digital culture, that is, by focusing on the similarities as well as differences between comics and digital media, comics can approach digital media from a critical distance and, in this way, reveal new spaces to theorize from. Even though every case study in this thesis had a thematic connection to digitality, this can be extended to every other comic book, regardless of their themes or materiality, as every comic retains the similarities to digital media previously discussed and brings with it an array of reading structures, in which connections can either be made, broken, or disrupted. In this way, each comic can possibly offer a disruptive reading and, when interfaced with digitality, can allow an augmentation of that same reading upon the reader's relationship with digital media.

What this thesis revealed about comics is that they can be used to do theory(-fiction) through and with. It brings comics forward as critical tools to approach and critique contemporary society—tools that can constitute both a praxis, through the breaking they engender and the practice of drawing them, as well as a space for theorizing—in the space the breaking and practice of drawing opens. Rather than focusing on what comics make visible regarding their own narrative and workings, I proposed comics as being disruptive and allowing to make visible (theoretical) connections to other media as well. These findings were revealed by using my concept of comics-as-theory-fiction, which foregrounds the ways comics break apart their form, make connections outside of themselves, and open a space that enables the theorist to analyze digital culture from a different position, and, in so doing, can also provoke creative new conceptions about the digital culture they are implicated in. As already emphasized, comics-as-theory-fiction does not have to be restricted to either comics with a thematic or formal connection to the topic at hand or to purely fictional comics. Non-fictional comics, as much as fictional ones, reveal their own materiality and, in a way, their own fictionality; therefore, comics-as-theory-fiction could as well be applied to them. In other words, comics-as-theory-fiction is a concept that can travel and can be applied to a wide array of comics. In this way, the concept can contribute to comics studies a new methodology for analyzing the ways a comic can break a reading and thus make theoretical connections outside the comic, as well as to scholars within media studies a new critical tool to approach digital media. Besides showing the relevance of comics for critical inquiry, this thesis aimed to show, as well, the use and relevance of new creative and alternative approaches to analyze digital culture.

Nonetheless, this thesis only theorized fictive, material comic books, rather than non-fiction comics or those that can only be read on screens, such as webcomics and purely

digitalized comics. The lack of the latter limited my analysis of digital culture, as it restricted my analysis to the object of the book rather than that of the screen. However, while it remains speculative whether the arguments put forward here could be extended to either purely digitalized comics or webcomics, as I argued, comics-as-theory-fiction draws a connection to digitality, so it is probable that it could also be extended to comics fully immersed within digitality. Future research into whether the notion of comics-as-theory-fiction could also be applied to purely digitalized comics and webcomics or whether this application is thwarted through their embeddedness within digital culture would advance the aims of my research, as would further comparative analysis between comics and other media.

Nevertheless, this thesis showed the relevance of both reading and drawing comics as an emblematic and creative way to engage digital culture because it is especially by either creating or reading a comic that dominant and normative structures and ideas can be challenged and broken— breakings that are especially relevant in an age that is, still, circuited within rapid datafication.

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