COMICS WERE THOSE BRIGHT, COLORFUL MAGAZINES FILLED WITH BAD ART, STUPID STORIES AND GUYS IN TIGHTS.

I READ REAL BOOKS, NATURALLY. I WAS MUCH TOO OLD FOR COMICS!

BUT WHEN I WAS IN 8TH GRADE, A FRIEND OF MINE (WHO WAS A LOT SMARTER THAN I WAS) CONVINCED ME TO GIVE COMICS ANOTHER LOOK AND LENT ME HIS COLLECTION.

SOON, I WAS HOOKED!
IN LESS THAN A YEAR, I BECAME TOTALLY OBSESSED WITH COMICS! I DECIDED TO BECOME A COMICS ARTIST IN 10TH GRADE AND BEGAN TO PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!

I FELT THAT THERE WAS SOMETHING LURKING IN COMICS... SOMETHING THAT HAD NEVER BEEN DONE.

SOME KIND OF HIDDEN POWER!

SURE, I REALIZED THAT COMIC BOOKS WERE USUALLY CRUDE, POORLY-DRAWN, SEMILITERATE, CHEAP, DISPOSABLE KIDDIE FARE--

BUT-- THEY DON'T HAVE TO BE!

THE PROBLEM WAS THAT FOR MOST PEOPLE, THAT WAS WHAT "COMIC BOOK" MEANT!

DON'T GIMME THAT COMIC BOOK TALK, BARNEY!

IF PEOPLE FAILED TO UNDERSTAND COMICS, IT WAS BECAUSE THEY DEFINED WHAT COMICS COULD BE TOO NARROWLY!

A PROPER DEFINITION, IF WE COULD FIND ONE, MIGHT GIVE LIE TO THE STEREOTYPES--

--AND SHOW THAT THE POTENTIAL OF COMICS IS LIMITLESS AND EXCITING!

THIS IS WHERE OUR JOURNEY BEGINS!
"COMICS" IS THE WORD WORTH DEFINING, AS IT REFERS TO THE MEDIUM ITSELF, NOT A SPECIFIC OBJECT AS "COMIC BOOK" OR "COMIC STRIP" DO.

WE CAN ALL VISUALIZE A COMIC.

THE WORLD OF COMICS IS A HUGE AND VARIED ONE. OUR DEFINITION MUST ENCOMPASS ALL THESE TYPES—

BUT WHAT-- --IS-- --COMICS?
MASTER COMICS ARTIST WILL EISNER USES THE TERM SEQUENTIAL ART WHEN DESCRIBING COMICS.

TAKEN INDIVIDUALLY, THE PICTURES BELOW ARE MERELY THAT—PICTURES.


NOTICE THAT THIS DEFINITION IS STRICTLY NEUTRAL ON MATTERS OF STYLE, QUALITY OR SUBJECT MATTER.

MUCH HAS ALREADY BEEN WRITTEN ON THE VARIOUS SCHOOLS OF COMIC ART; ON PARTICULAR ARTISTS, PARTICULAR TITLES, PARTICULAR TRENDS.

BANG!

BANG! EEEK!

BUT TO DEFINE COMICS, WE MUST FIRST DO A LITTLE AESTHETIC SURGERY AND SEPARATE FORM FROM CONTENT!
The artform—the medium—known as comics is a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images.

The "content" of those images and ideas is, of course, up to creators, and we all have different tastes.

"Glug:

"Glug:

--For the messenger.

"Ptu!"

"Gaak

"Wheeezzz

"Kaf! Kaf!

"Glugh Ggh...

"Ahem...

The trick is to never mistake the message--

But for comics, this attention has been rare. Let's see if we can help rectify the situation.

At one time or another virtually all the great media have received critical examination, in and of themselves.

*Eisner's own comics and sequential art being a happy exception.

6
Eisner's term seems like a good place to start.

Let's see if we can expand it to a proper dictionary-style definition.

Any ideas?

There are a lot of different kinds of art. How about something a little more specific?

Okay.

Hey, what about animation?

Beg pardon?

Hmm... good point.

How's this?

Sequential visual art.

I guess the basic difference is that animation is sequential in time but not spatially juxtaposed* as comics are.

Each successive frame of a movie is projected on exactly the same space—the screen—while each frame of comics must occupy a different space.

Space does for comics what time does for film!

* Juxtaposed= adjacent, side-by-side, great art school word.
Anyway, this should make it a bit more specific.

**Juxtaposed Sequential Visual Art**

Does it have to say "art"? Doesn't that imply some sort of value judgment?

*Well...*

**Okay, how about this?**

**Juxtaposed Static Images**

Okay, how about **this**?

*What about words?*

**Now it sounds kind of arbitrary.**

*Okay, how about this?*

*Juxtaposed static images in deliberate sequence*

*Letters are static images, right?*

*When they're arranged in a deliberate sequence, placed next to each other, we call them words!*

*You tell 'im, Bob!*

**No, no. I mean, doesn't that definition describe words?**

**Slow Comic!**
Okay, how does this sound?

Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence

What about Batman? Shouldn't it have Batman in it?

Who let him in?

No, I mean it! And what about the X-Men and... "ow!... hey! Hey! Let go of me! Hey!"

Well, anyway, this should do for now.

We'll just type it up. Add a little bit on the uses of comics, and--

**COMICS** (kom'iks)n., plural in form, used with a singular verb. 1. Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.

2. Superheroes, in bright colorful costumes, fighting dastardly villains who want to conquer the world or at least sensational (and pounding) action sequences.

3. Cute, cuddly cartoon mice and/or affably hairy bears, dancing to and fro.

4. Corruptor of our Nation's Youth.

I admit, this isn't the sort of thing that comes up a lot in casual conversation--

--and in most cases, this is the only definition we're likely to need.

But, with a specific definition under our belts--

--perhaps we can shed some new light on the history of comics.

Most books about comics begin shortly before the turn of the century, but I think we can venture a bit farther than that.

--- Sequential Art ---

1890 1890 1900 1919
Here's just a piece of the epic story contained in a pre-Columbian picture manuscript "discovered" by Cortés around 1519.

This 36-foot long, brightly-colored, painted screenfold tells of the great military and political hero 8-Deer "Tiger's-Claw."

Is it comics? You bet! It is! We can even read some!
FIRST, WE SEPARATE WORDS FROM PICTURES.

8-DEER "TIGER'S CLAW"

(A NAME)

11 HOUSE 12 MONKEY

(A DATE)

GOD Xipe's BUNDLE

(GLYPH FOR PLACE WHOSE NAME WE DON'T KNOW.)

THEN REVERSE IT AND STRAIGHTEN IT OUT (THE ORIGINAL READ RIGHT-TO-LEFT AND ZIGZAGGED) AND BEGIN:

THE YEAR: 1049 AD
THE DATE: MAY 3
THE PLACE: HERE!

OUR HERO, 8-DEER CONQUERS THE PLACE AND CAPTURES THE 9-YEAR-OLD PRINCE, 4-WIND "SERPENT OF FIRE."

8-DEER ALSO CAPTURES THE PRINCE'S OLDER BROTHERS, 10-DOG "EAGLE COPAL BURNING" AND 6-HOUSE "ROW OF FLINT KNIVES" AND PUTS 'EM ON ICE.

(I'M TAKING THE TRANSLATOR'S WORD ON THIS ONE.)

THE FOLLOWING YEAR, 8-DEER AND (PROBABLY) HIS BROTHER, DISGUISED AS TIGERS, ENGAGE IN SACRIFICIAL GLADIATORIAL COMBAT WITH THE PRINCE, 10-DOG, AND ANOTHER WARRIOR DISGUISED AS DEATH.

8-DEER KILLS THE OTHER PRINCE, 6-HOUSE "ROW OF FLINT KNIVES" EIGHT DAYS LATER.

* WE KNOW THE YEAR, I'M JUST GUESSING AT THE DATE REPRESENTED BY "12 MONKEY."

11
HUNDREDS OF YEARS BEFORE CORTÉS BEGAN COLLECTING COMICS, FRANCE PRODUCED THE STRIKINGLY SIMILAR WORK WE CALL THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY.

THIS 230 FOOT LONG TAPESTRY DETAILS THE NORMAN CONQUEST OF ENGLAND, BEGINNING IN 1066.

TRANSLATION: THE BATTLE NAGES

BISHOP OODIN ENCOURAGES HIS SOLDIERS

FAR FROM DISQUALIFYING THESE AS COMICS, I THINK MODERN COMIC BOOK ARTISTS SHOULD TAKE NOTE OF THE POSSIBILITIES OF SUCH WHOLE PAGE COMPOSITIONS AND HOW FEW ARTISTS HAVE MADE GOOD USE OF THEM SINCE!

WHICH ONE IS THE PRINCE?

WHAT, NO HORSES?

PERENNIAL EXCEPTION WILL EISNER.

FINDING COMICS BEYOND OUR OWN MILLENNIUM IS A BIT TRICKIER.

AT FIRST GLANCE, EGYPTIAN HIEROGLYPHICS WOULD SEEM TO FIT OUR DEFINITION PERFECTLY.

BUT MUCH DEPENDS ON OUR USE OF THE WORD "PICTORIAL."

I'M USING IT TO INDICATE AT LEAST SOME RESEMBLANCE TO THE SUBJECT, BUT THESE GlyphS REPRESENT ONLY SOUNDS, NOT UNLIKE OUR ALPHABET.

JUXTAPOSED PICTORIAL AND OTHER IMAGES IN DELIBERATE SEQUENCE?
READING LEFT TO RIGHT WE SEE THE EVENTS OF THE CONQUEST, IN DELIBERATE CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER UNFOLD BEFORE OUR VERY EYES.

AS WITH THE MEXICAN CODEX, THERE ARE NO PANEL BORDERS PER SE, BUT THERE ARE CLEAR DIVISIONS OF SCENE BY SUBJECT MATTER.

DUKE WILLIAM REMOVES HIS HELMET TO RALLY HIS SOLDIERS

HAROLD'S ARMY IS CUT TO PIECES

EGYPTIAN PAINTING IS ANOTHER MATTER. SOME, LIKE THIS, MAY SEEM TO BE CONCERNED WITH SEQUENCE, BUT ARE ACTUALLY SHOWING TWO DIFFERENT LOCATIONS, EVENTS AND CASTS, GROUPED ONLY BY SUBJECT.

I HAD BEEN TRYING TO FIND SEQUENCE IN EGYPTIAN PAINTINGS FOR YEARS WHEN I BEGAN THIS BOOK AND WAS READY TO CALL IT QUITS--

--UNTIL I DISCOVERED THAT THE BOOKS I HAD BEEN USING AS REFERENCE--

--HAD ONLY BEEN SHOWING ME PART OF THE PICTURE!
HERE'S THE COMPLETE SCENE PAINTED OVER THIRTY-TWO CENTURIES AGO FOR THE TOMB OF 'MENNA', AN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN SCRIBE.

GOING UP THIS TIME!

AS WOULD BE DONE 2,700 YEARS LATER IN MEXICO, THE EGYPTIANS READ THEIR COMICS ZIG-ZAG.

* MORE NEARLY COMPLETE, ANYWAY.

STARTING AT THE LOWER LEFT, WE SEE THREE WORKERS REAPING WHEAT WITH THEIR SICKLES--

--THEN CARRYING IT IN BASKETS TO A THRESHING LOCATION. (IN THE BACKGROUND TWO GIRLS FIGHT OVER BITS OF WHEAT LEFT BEHIND. AS TWO WORKERS SIT UNDER A TREE, ONE SLEEPING, ONE PLAYING THE FLUTE?)

PAINTING TRACED FOR BLACK AND WHITE REPRODUCTION.
THE SHEAVES ARE THEN RAKED OUT INTO A THICK CARPET OF WHEAT.

THEN OXEN TREAD KERNELS OUT OF THE HUSKS.

NEXT, PEASANTS SEPARATE THE WHEAT FROM THE CHAFF.

OLD MENNA HIMSELF LOOKS ON.

-- AS LOYAL Scribes RECORD THE YIELD ON THEIR TABLETS.

NOW AN OFFICIAL USES A MEASURING ROPE TO SURVEY THE LAND AND DECIDE HOW MUCH WHEAT IS OWED IN TAXES.

AND AS MENNA WATCHES, FARMERS LATE IN PAYING THEIR TAXES ARE BEATEN.

I'LL GLADLY ADMIT THAT I HAVE NO IDEA WHERE OR WHEN COMICS ORIGINATED. LET OTHERS WRESTLE WITH THAT ONE.

I'VE ONLY SCRATCHED THE SURFACE IN THIS CHAPTER. TRAJAN'S COLUMN, GREEK PAINTING, JAPANESE SCROLLS... ALL THESE HAVE BEEN SUGGESTED AND ALL SHOULD BE EXPLORED.

BUT THERE IS ONE EVENT WHICH LOOMS AS LARGE IN COMICS HISTORY AS IT DOES IN THE HISTORY OF THE WRITTEN WORD.

THE INVENTION OF PRINTING.

*FACE BOLTED OUT BY FUTURE GENERATIONS OF LEADERS
With the invention of printing, the art-form which had been a diversion of the rich and powerful now could be enjoyed by everyone!

Popular tastes haven't changed much in five centuries. Check out "The Tortures of Saint Erasmus," circa 1460. Word has it this guy was a very popular character.

The sophistication of the picture-story did grow, however, reaching great heights in the nimble hands of William Hogarth.

Here is a tiny piece (about one twentieth) of the second plate from Hogarth's six-plate picture-story "A Harlot's Progress," published in 1731.

Despite the low "panel-count," these lush, rendered pictures tell a story rich in detail and motivated by strong social concerns.

*Maybe I shouldn't say "invent," Europeans were a bit late in discovering printing.*
HOGARTH'S STORIES WERE FIRST EXHIBITED AS A SERIES OF PAINTINGS AND LATER SOLD AS A PORTFOLIO OF ENGRAVINGS.

BOTH THE PAINTINGS AND ENGRAVINGS WERE DESIGNED TO BE VIEWED SIDE-BY-SIDE -- IN SEQUENCE!

"A HARLOT'S PROGRESS" AND ITS SEQUEL "A RAKE'S PROGRESS" PROVED SO POPULAR, NEW COPYRIGHT LAWS WERE CREATED TO PROTECT THIS NEW FORM.

THE FATHER OF THE MODERN COMIC IN MANY WAYS IS RUDOLPH TÖPFER, WHOSE LIGHT SATIRIC PICTURE STORIES, STARTING IN THE MID-1800'S, EMPLOYED CARTOONING AND PANEL BORDERS, AND FEATURED THE FIRST INTERDEPENDENT COMBINATION OF WORDS AND PICTURES SEEN IN EUROPE.

TRANSLATION BY E. WIESE.

UNFORTUNATELY, TÖPFER HIMSELF FAILED TO GRASP AT FIRST THE FULL POTENTIAL OF HIS INVENTION, SEEING IT AS A MERE DIVERSION, A SIMPLE HOBBY.

"IF FOR THE FUTURE, HE [TÖPFER] WOULD CHOOSE A LESS FRIVOLOUS SUBJECT AND RESTRICT HIMSELF A LITTLE, HE WOULD PRODUCE THINGS BEYOND ALL CONCEPTION."

-Goethe

EVEN SO, TÖPFER'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF COMICS IS CONSIDERABLE, IF ONLY FOR HIS REALIZATION THAT HE WHO WAS NEITHER ARTIST NOR WRITER --

-- HAD CREATED AND MASTERED A FORM WHICH WAS AT ONCE BOTH AND NEITHER.

A LANGUAGE ALL ITS OWN.
BRITISH CARICATURE MAGAZINES KEPT THE TRADITIONS ALIVE AND AS THE 20TH CENTURY DREW NEAR, THE COMICS WE CALL COMICS BEGAN TO APPEAR AND EVENTUALLY TO THRIVE IN A STEADY STREAM OF WAKING DREAMS THAT HAS YET TO ABATE.

1870 1880 1890 1900 1910 1920 1930 1940

BUT EVEN IN THIS CENTURY, OUR DEFINITION CAN HELP TO ILLUMINATE THE WORKS OF SOME UNSUNG HEROES.

SOME OF THE MOST INSPIRED AND INNOVATIVE COMICS OF OUR CENTURY HAVE NEVER RECEIVED RECOGNITION AS COMICS, NOT SO MUCH IN SPITE OF THEIR SUPERIOR QUALITIES AS BECAUSE OF THEM.

FOR MUCH OF THIS CENTURY, THE WORD "COMICS" HAS HAD SUCH NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS THAT MANY OF COMICS' MOST DEVOTED PRACTITIONERS HAVE PREFERRED TO BE KNOWN AS "ILLUSTRATORS," "COMMERCIAL ARTISTS" OR, AT BEST, "CARTOONISTS!"

AND SO, COMICS' LOW SELF-ESTEEM IS SELF-PERPETUATING! THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE NECESSARY TO COUNTERACT COMICS' NEGATIVE IMAGE IS OBSCURED BY THAT NEGATIVITY.

WOODCUT ARTIST LYND WARD IS ONE SUCH MISSING LINK. WARD'S SILENT "WOODCUT NOVELS" ARE POWERFUL MODERN FABLES, NOW PRaised BY COMICS ARTISTS, BUT Seldom recognized AS COMICS.

FROM WARD'S GOD'S MAN, 1929
 ARTISTS LIKE WARD AND BELGIAN FRANS MASEREEL SAID MUCH THROUGH THEIR WOODCUTS ABOUT THE POTENTIAL OF COMICS, BUT FEW IN THE COMICS COMMUNITY OF THE DAY COULD GET THE MESSAGE. THEIR DEFINITION OF COMICS, THEN AS NOW, WAS SIMPLY TOO NARROW TO INCLUDE SUCH WORK.

FROM FRANK MASEREEL'S PASSIONATE JOURNEY, 1919.

QUITE A DIFFERENT CASE IS MAX ERNST'S SURREAL "COLLAGE NOVEL," A WEEK OF KINDNESS.

THIS 182-PLATE SEQUENCE OF COLLAGES IS WIDELY CONSIDERED A MASTERPIECE OF 20TH CENTURY ART, BUT NO ART HISTORY TEACHER WOULD DREAM OF CALLING IT "COMICS"!

YET, DESPITE THE LACK OF A CONVENTIONAL STORY, THERE IS NO MISTAKING THE CENTRAL ROLE WHICH SEQUENCE PLAYS IN THE WORK. ERNST DOESN'T WANT YOU TO BROWSE THE THING, HE WANTS YOU TO READ IT!
IF WE DON'T EXCLUDE PHOTOGRAPHY FROM OUR DEFINITION, THEN HALF OF AMERICA HAS BEEN IN COMICS AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER.

MEANWHILE, PICTURES IN SEQUENCE ARE FINALLY BEING RECOGNIZED AS THE EXCELLENT COMMUNICATION TOOL THAT THEY ARE, BUT STILL NOBODY REFERS TO THEM AS COMICS! "DIAGRAMS" SOUNDS MORE DIGNIFIED, I SUPPOSE.

FROM STAINED GLASS WINDOWS SHOWING BIBLICAL SCENES IN ORDER TO MONET'S SERIES PAINTINGS, TO YOUR CAR OWNER'S MANUAL, COMICS TURN UP ALL OVER WHEN SEQUENTIAL ART IS EMPLOYED AS A DEFINITION.

IN SOME COUNTRIES, PHOTO-COMICS ARE, IN FACT, QUITE POPULAR.

com-ics (kom'iks)n. plural in form, used with a singular verb. 1. Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.

SINGLE PANELS LIKE THIS ONE ARE OFTEN LUMPED IN WITH COMICS, YET THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A SEQUENCE OF ONE!

FOR ALL THE DOORS THAT OUR DEFINITION OPENS, THERE IS ONE WHICH IT CLOSES.

"Mommy, why ain't I Juxtaposed?"

SUCH SINGLE PANELS MIGHT BE CLASSIFIED AS "COMIC ART" IN THE SENSE THAT THEY DERIVE PART OF THEIR VISUAL VOCABULARY FROM COMICS--
But I say they're no more comics than this still of Humphrey Bogart is film!

They are cartoons, as am I, and there is a long-standing relationship between comics and cartoons.

--- But they are not the same thing! One is an approach to picture-making—a style, if you like—while the other is a medium which often employs that approach.

More on this later.

This same single panel might also be labelled comics for its juxtaposition of words and pictures.

A great majority of modern comics do feature words and pictures in combination, and it's a subject worthy of study, but when used as a definition for comics, I've found it to be a little too restrictive for my taste.

Of course, if anyone wants to write a book taking the opposite view, you can bet I'll be the first in line to buy a copy!

Mommy, why ain't juxtaposed?

If comics' spectacularly varied past is any indication, comics' future will be virtually impossible to predict using the standards of the present.

But our definition can offer us some clues.

And this time, the secret is not in what the definition says but in what it doesn't say!
DADA
BIOGRAPHY
HORROR
ROMANCE
SURREALISM
BLANK VERSE
EPIC POETRY
HISTORICAL FICTION
SOCIAL ALLEGORY
FOLK TALES
ADAPTATIONS
EROTICA
STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS
MYSTERY
RELIGIOUS TOPICS
SATIRE
SEQUENTIAL ART
SUPERHEROES
FUNNY ANIMALS
FANTASY/SCIENCE-FICTION
READER AGE
 SUBJECT MATTER
PROSE OR POETRY

NOTHING IS SAID ABOUT PAPER AND INK. NO PRINTING PROCESS IS MENTIONED. PRINTING ITSELF ISN'T EVEN SPECIFIED! NOTHING IS SAID ABOUT TECHNICAL PENS OR BRISTOL BOARD OR WINDSOR & NEWTON FINEST SABLE SERIES 7 NUMBER TWO BRUSHES!

NO MATERIALS ARE RULED OUT BY OUR DEFINITION. NO TOOLS ARE PROHIBITED.

THERE IS NO MENTION OF BLACK LINES AND FLAT COLORED INK. NO CALLS FOR EXAGGERATED ANATOMY OR FOR REPRESENTATIONAL ART OF ANY KIND.

NO SCHOOLS OF ART ARE BANISHED BY OUR DEFINITION, NO PHILOSOPHIES, NO MOVEMENTS, NO WAYS OF SEEING ARE OUT OF BOUNDS!
Those of you who make comics for a living—or would like to, someday—probably know that keeping up with all the advances in today's comics is a full-time job.

There are so many comics in print today that it would take an army of readers to study them all.

However much we may try to understand the world of comics around us, a part of that world will always lie in shadow—a mystery.

I'll do my best in the following chapters to shed light on that unseen side, but as we focus on the world of comics as it is, it should be kept in mind at all times that this world is only one—

--of many possible worlds!

Our attempts to define comics are an on-going process which won't end anytime soon.

A new generation will no doubt reject whatever this one finally decides to accept and try once more to re-invent comics.

And so they should.

Here's to the great debate!