

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

FONK! HONK! WHAM! OOF!

REPRESENTATION OF EVENTS  
IN CARL BARKS -  
AND IN THE AESTHETICS  
OF COMICS IN GENERAL

FREDERIK STJERNFELT  
AND SVEND ØSTERGAARD

An old issue where aesthetic and cognition meet pertains to how events are represented in language and the arts.<sup>1</sup> A classic articulation of the problem can be found in German radical Enlightenment philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's discussion of the differences between visual arts and poetry. In his *Laokoön oder über die Grenzen der Mahlerey und Poesie* (1766), he writes that as a painting is only able to show one selected moment from the event, the painter must

[...] select the most pregnant on the basis of which the preceding and succeeding is most conceivable. In the same manner, poetry, in its successive representations, may only exploit one single property in the body and has to select that one which evokes the most sensuous image of the body from the perspective from which it is used.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the conference "The Aesthetics of Comics", Aarhus 2011, organized under the Velux Foundation program "Phenomenological and Cognitive Aesthetics".

<sup>2</sup> [...] den prägnantesten wählen, aus welchem das Vorhergehende und Folgende am begreiflichsten wird. Ebenso kann auch die Poesie in ihren fortschreitenden Nachahmungen nur eine einzige Eigenschaft der Körper nutzen, und muss daher diejenige wählen, welche das sinnlichste Bild des Körpers von der Seite erwecket, von welcher sie ihn braucht. The English translation is by the authors.

The decisive insight in Lessing is that the static visual representations of events—unlike the case in dynamic visual media like theatre, film, TV, etc.—must focus upon the event’s especially *pregnant* moments from which a more encompassing temporal sequence is most easily deduced. In a certain sense, the issue is thus semiotical-logical. Indeed, the artist must ask which instantaneous aspects of the event contain the most possible information about the whole of the event structure so that an observer may logically-cognitively shape a conception of the action as a whole.

Our aim in this paper is to achieve a more elaborated understanding of this insight, with the basis in the media of comics. Comics, of course, differs from painting and sculpture by not only displaying one select moment of an event—like the antique statue of Laokoön that gives the title to Lessing’s essay<sup>3</sup>—but also by representing a whole series of such moments in sequential order. At the same time, comics is a mixed genre which, even if basically visual, also makes use of linguistic representation, especially in the dialogue between the characters represented and in the narrator’s introductory and commentary statements.

We have selected, as our empirical material, the work of classic Donald Duck draughtsman Carl Barks (1901-200). Barks worked as a cartoonist primarily from the mid-40s to the mid-1960s, after a career in Disney’s animation studios in the 30s. He was a seminal figure in the development of modern comics, one of the most widely read and influential cartoonists and, on top of that, one of the most artistically ambitious draughtsmen who mastered the complex aspects of the medium’s plot and narration just as well as its purely graphical-visual elements.

We shall investigate which pregnant moments are highlighted in Barks’s representation of events and actions in order to make a number of general hypotheses of the structure of comics event representation. As mentioned above, Barks came to cartoons from a career in animation, and his early, less accomplished cartoons from the early 40s are highly cinematic with many situation jokes emerging from the physical movements of characters. Throughout the 1940s, he gradually develops his own cartoon aesthetics, moving away from physical movement gags towards a more epic and less situation-bound comedy. Yet, there seems to be certain decisive lessons regarding the representation of action that

---

<sup>3</sup> Laokoön is a cleric figure in the *Iliad*. He was a Poseidon priest in Troy and tried in vain to warn the Trojans against receiving the Trojan horse. As a punishment, Poseidon (in other variants Athena or Apollon) sent two sea snakes that killed Laokoön and his two sons. The antique sculpture by the titl“Laokoön” (now in the Vatican) referred to by Lessing displays the culmination of the struggle between the snakes and Laokoön and his sons.

Barks took with him from his experience as an animator, lessons that may have a general bearing on the representation of event in comics.

In animation, Barks began as an “in-betweenner”, that is, the cartoonist at the lower end of the hierarchy whose task it is to fill in the continuous sequence between two event extremes that have already been sketched by the animator on the basis of the narrative story-board:

The in-betweenner was told to take these “extremes”, as they called them, that the animator turned out. [...] The animator would draw Mickey, for instance, with his hand on this glass. That would be one extreme. Then he would maybe draw the glass up in the air where Mickey has picked it up, and that would be the second extreme. [...] Then he would hand it over to his assistant who would figure out the number of drawings that would have to go between [...]. The in-betweenner would take the first extreme and the second extreme and put them on top of each other over a light board, and by flipping these he could see the hand move [...]. (Barks, *Carl Barks* 42)

An obvious strategy, therefore, was to highlight these significant extremes so that the cartoonist might simply leave out the movement between them and render it only implicitly.<sup>4</sup> Barks even imagined keeping only the extreme as the representation of the whole of the action: “You have just one drawing: the climactic moment. That’s the secret of the action” (qtd. in Andrae 64). Here, he emphasizes the climax of the action as sufficient for representing the whole action. What then, we ask, characterizes this climax? And, moreover, is there always only one climax?

## Catastrophes of the Event

A general hypothesis seems to be that those moments of an event where a predictable, continuous flow changes direction are especially significant and are thus apt to be selected as signs that are able to represent the event as a whole. According to the mathematical theory of catastrophes,

---

<sup>4</sup> A vast discussion in comics research addresses the issue of these implicit sequences between panels. A naive conception of comics reading claims that the reader reconstructs, in fantasy, the picture movement that, in animation was the result of the work of the “inbetweenner” so that this movement is played out as “fill-in” in the experience of the reader. It can hardly be refuted that such things may occur, but it seems a more probable hypothesis that this intermediary movement sequence is presupposed by the reader—as that which makes the two extremes of the panels connect—but not necessarily realized as phantazised animation. It is rather a logical relationship: the two extremes are presupposed as referring to the same event string without necessarily being accompanied by quasi-perceptions.

such moments can be described as singularities of the continuum or as isolated, discontinuous points where the continuous process suddenly changes into a new, continuous process. The strength of the concept of singularity in this context lies in the fact that it covers discontinuous event changes from physical events (the collision of objects, toppling, splitting, merging, emission of radiation, ignition, extinguishing, etc.) to biological events (birth, death, injury, consumption, secretion, perception, communication, etc.) to purely human actions (events determined by a conventional set of rules, the emergence and cessation of institutions, etc.)

In all cases, singularities refer to an instantaneous or brief (see below) event that separates slower, continuous developments before and after the singularity. A series of different singularities in the course of an event are possible, including: 1) The onset of the event; 2) A decisive catastrophic point during the course of the event (a collision between two parts, the contact of a tool with the object it is about to effect, an irreversible point after which a certain further development becomes inevitable); 3) The end of the event; and 4) The discovery of the event by an observing subject.

Events, of course, may be represented in different magnifications and granulations. That which in one articulation may appear as a closed event, may, in other contexts, appear as part of a more comprehensive event. While the inner architecture of the event is an objective fact and hardly an



Fig. 32-1. Donald Duck. *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* 126, 1951. © Disney.

effect of description, there is some degree of relativity in the delimitation of events relative to the level of description. But, at the given level of description, the event is determined by singular points. Here, an elementary example of how the representation of a brief, physical event indicates the onset and cessation of the event (Fig. 32-1). The first panel shows the moment when it is irreversible that a tornado will hit exactly into Scrooge McDuck's open money silo; the second panel

shows the moment when the totality of the silo's money contents has been sucked up into the tornado. The whole process of emptying the silo is depicted by means of the two pregnant, singular moments depicting the

beginning and end, framing the intermediary, continuous process of sucking up coins.

Another important event type in narratives regards the special subset of events constituted by an agent's actions. In such instances, a concept may be drawn from biosemiotics, namely that of biorhetorics of action (Kull). In many animal species, the interrupted commencement of an action may count as a sign of the completed action (Zahavi qtd. in Kull).<sup>5</sup> Examples include threat behaviour by means of the display of teeth, claws, fists, etc. accompanied by quasi-attacks suggesting the structure of a proper full-scale attack (Fig. 32-2). Biorhetorics of this sort may serve to display power, so that the stronger of the two individuals may scare away the weaker one and thus evade the fatalities of fighting. Other examples of biorhetorics of action include play where similar quasi-behaviour may appear in the form of pretended threats only, and thus without threatening effects. It is important to note that biorhetorics of these types presuppose that the commenced action sequence is sufficiently stylized so as to appear as easily categorizable as an instant of exactly the type of action implied. This ensures that the cognitive recognition of the action as well as of its unfinished, figurative nature is possible for the individual interpreting the threat or the play action. A similar process occurs at the human level: the use of action onset as the sign for the action as a whole presupposes a knowledge of (central aspects of) the general structure of the action as a whole. In this image (Fig. 32-2), Gladstone Gander—and the reader—understands that the shaking fist of the creditor constitutes a threat about an impending blow. The text, then, provides the alternative of the threat: that Gladstone pays his debt.



Fig. 32-2. “Luck of the North.” *Donald Duck Four Color* 256. 1949. © Disney.



Fig. 32-3. “Donald Duck.” *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* 105, 1949. © Disney.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.zbi.ee/~kalevi/kull.doc.pdf>.

A related example is where Donald as a teacher is instructing a gathering of outdoorsmen to call forth an echo (Fig. 32-3). The instructor fills his lungs with air, pushes his chest forward and draws back his head while making a rounded beak, indicating the moment he is ready to fling out the echo-provoking cry. Just like the threat above, this image is an example of the posture just at the onset of an action; in this instance, it is an explicitly intended communication between instructor and pupils. The posture of action commencement is exaggerated, and thus serves a pedagogical, communicative purpose: both creditor and teacher strive to make themselves as readily and unanimously understandable as possible; in Donald's case not without a certain degree of irony on the part of the narrator about the ridiculous effects of the singular posture. In other cases, the onset of action needs not be communicative as seen from the agent's own point of view addressing other characters within the story; in such cases, it is the narrator who selects the pregnant posture initiating action in order to communicate to the reader.

A decisive point in the course of an action may be the partial sequence where a singularity lets an irreversible change appear. An example is where an instrument meets an object (Fig. 32-4). Here, the panel sets up a synthesis of action onset (see more below) (indicated by the oval go-faster stripe in the middle of the image) and the first climax of action where club hits ball (indicated by no less than four different means: the snapshot position of the club, the end of the go-faster stripe of the club and the beginning of that of the ball, a radiation field, and the onomatopoeia "CRACK"). The singular moment of the culminating exertion of force when the club hits the ball is thus foregrounded, while the effect and aim of the action—whether or not the strike is good and the ball approaches the hole—is outside of the panel and relegated to the future.



Fig. 32-4. "Donald Duck." *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* 95. 1948. © Disney.

Action—event sequences intended and performed by an agent with reference to a purpose—may thus be articulated and sub-segmented into a series of sub-actions serving the purpose. Each of these sub-actions displays singular points that may be the subject of pictorial focusing, as in Fig. 32-15 where Donald's golf strike reaches the hole thanks to a series of sub-actions undertaken by another agent (one of the kids) of which he is not aware.

Finally, one must consider the intended purpose of the action. When Scrooge, Donald and the kids discover the seven fabled cities of Cibola, they are followed by the Beagle Boys who accidentally release a trap (Fig. 32-5). The result, of course, is not intended by the Beagle Boys. Instead, it is the intended result of the constructors of the cities many centuries earlier: if you touch a certain idol statue of emerald which one of the Boys tries to steal, it releases the falling of a giant boulder, leading, in turn, to the destruction of the seven subterranean cities. The frame highlights the decisive, singular moment when the stone rams into the very pillar that suspends the whole of the cave structure, thus completing the intended action sequence of the ancient trap constructors.



Fig. 32-5. “The Seven Cities of Cibola.”  
*Uncle Scrooge* 7. 1954. © Disney.

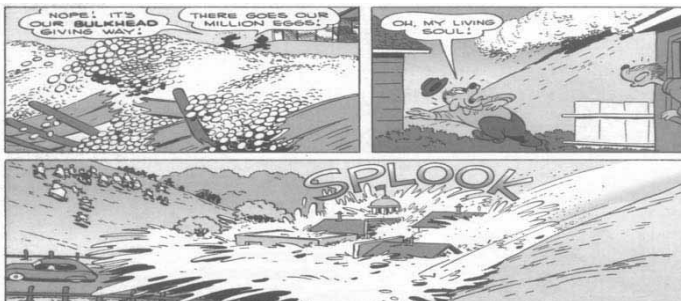


Fig. 32-6. “Donald Duck.” *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* 146.  
1952. © Disney.

Actions, of course, are only a subset of events. Agent-less event courses are also governed by the principle of representation by means of singular phases of events. Donald, Daisy, and the kids take a Sunday drive and accidentally approach the small town of “Omelet” that Donald seeks to avoid. He has to explain why and has to relate how he once had a chicken farm above the town. When egg prices dropped, he stored up eggs behind a fence in hope of price increase, until this sequence of events (Fig. 32-6): Under the weight of the growing amount of eggs, the fence gives in, and the small town is drowned in egg mass. The three panels portray three singular action points in the process. Firstly, the onset of events, the moment when the fence bursts and the eggs begin spilling down the hill, and finally, the action’s end result, when the avalanche of eggs crush, burying the town in an enormous sea of raw egg pulp. Between these two objective end points of the process of a purely physical causal event, a third singular point is interpolated: the very moment when two of the inhabitants discover the approaching egg avalanche and realize the catastrophe. In addition to the objective charting of the event by means of its two end points, seen from afar, the event is subjectified by letting the reader share the viewpoint of two future victims in the very singular moment when the imminent disaster becomes clear to them.

The singular points of an event structure are thus pregnant with information about what goes on in the vicinity of those points. This is what makes it possible for the reader to deduce the event structure as a whole from those climactic points. Certain other rules, however, co-determine which of those singular points are best fitted to information extraction, depending upon the types of events.

### **The Lesson from Cognitive Linguistics**

A possible approach to this issue may be found in cognitive linguistics. As a child, you can learn language without any explicit education or instruction; something similar is the case with the understanding of comics and the visual literacy they require. No child needs special tuition in how to understand the series of frames constituting a comics; e.g. to understand that a series of frames refers to the same event even if in-between states are left out. An obvious reason behind this is that language as well as visual literacy depend upon the same basic cognitive principles of human meaning making. In what follows, we shall investigate this hypothesis in



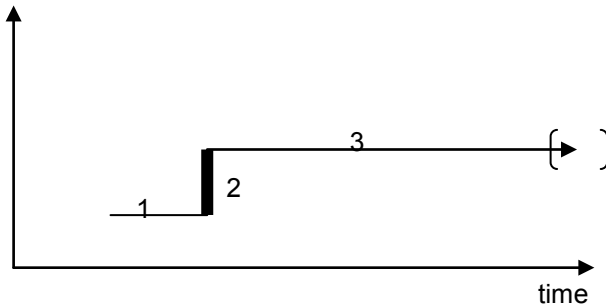
three steps that have been studied in cognitive linguistics, but that are also valid in comics studies.<sup>6</sup>

1. The first example addresses what is known in cognitive linguistics as “window of attention” (Talmy). The idea behind this concept is that language (and comics) does not refer to the world in a one-to-one relation; rather, a series of particulars are left to the receiver to fill in. For example, in the simple utterance “the bucket fell from the cart”, the receiver does not need to be told that the bucket hits the ground and ends up lying there. This final sequence of the event is evident from the receiver’s mastery of simple physics. The parallel to comics is evident: every panel constitutes a window, and what happens from one to the next is “filled in” by the reader. The ability to fill in the blanks between comic panels is based on a more general ability of human beings, and presumably also higher animals, to form a coherent understanding of wholes from isolated inputs. Comics provide a good empirical basis to investigate aspects of this phenomenon in detail.
2. A second, related phenomenon is the cognitive theory of aspect. Here, we shall delimit ourselves to two types of aspect: *limited punctual events* like “Donald hit his head against the door” and *limited durative events* like “Donald pulls the stick out of the soil” (see Vendler). Zeno Vendler refers to limited durative events as *accomplishments* and limited punctual events as *achievements*, corresponding to what we called singularities or catastrophe points above. In an *achievement*, we find an aspectual profile consisting of 1) the state before the event; 2) the punctual event; and 3) the state after the event<sup>7</sup>:

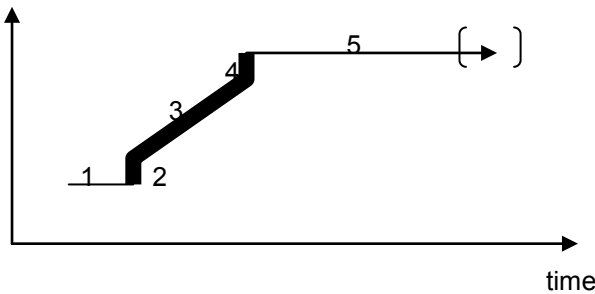
---

<sup>6</sup> Taking Barks as our main source of example places us in classic comics (children’s comics, if you wish, even though Barks also addresses adults). This implies that it is easy to find more avantgarde comics breaking some of the principles we mention. They will not, however, count as problematic counterexamples. Instead, we suggest that they correspond to how poetry displays many examples not satisfying ordinary principles of communication.

<sup>7</sup> The concept of aspectual profile is developed in Croft.



In an accomplishment, we find an aspectual profile consisting of 1) the state before the event; 2) the initiation of process; 3) the process; 4) the termination of process; and 5) the state after the event:



In the following, we shall develop some general principles for which parts of aspectual profiles tend to be represented in comics event representation. Regarding the punctual event mentioned above, we are left to ask if we will be shown the contact between head and door, or Donald's bruised beaten head with pain stars floating around it, or both.

3. Finally, we shall mention a principle relevant for the presentation of new information. It is a hypothesis in cognitive linguistics that one unit of speech intonation contains one new information only (see Chafe). It seems appropriate to attempt to extend this observation to the panels of comics in a hypothesis like the following: only one new piece of information per frame is presented.

## Window of Attention and Aspectual Profile: General Rules

In Barksian comics, much movement occurs. A movement from A to B constitutes an accomplishment involving the five phases illustrated above. Often, the movement depicted is what is called a caused motion, as when a billiard ball moves after the impact of another ball. There are many such examples in “Donald Duck in Mystery of the Swamp” (Fig. 32-7). Here, the movement is found in a duel between Donald and one of the swamp inhabitants whom the ducks encounter: a master fighter by the name of Gnossey, who is able to inflate himself:

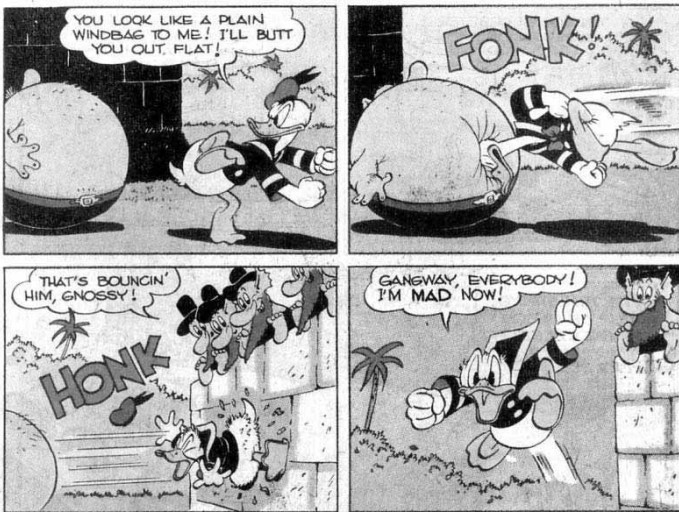


Fig. 32-7. “Mystery of the Swamp.” *Four Color* 62. 1945. © Disney.

In the first panel, we see Donald with his right leg raised, body leaning back, ready to plunge forward. This is the initiation of movement, the second phase of the profile. In the next frame, contact between Donald and his antagonist Gnossey is established. The actual movement between the two is not depicted except in what in familiar comics language is referred to as faster-than stripes (see Fig. 32-8). The contact is phase four of the profile, but the stripes and the contact synthesize phases three and four into the same frame. In the third panel, we see Donald hit the wall as the result of the recoil movement from the inflated Gnossey; his contact with Gnossey is the initiation of a new movement after which Donald hits the

wall. Again, the very phase of movement is not independently depicted, but rather compressed into the phase four frame by means of stripes. In these three frames, thus, two *accomplishments* are presented. The first frame shows phase two of the first accomplishment, the next one presents phase four of the first one which is simultaneously phase two of the next one. Finally, the third frame shows phase four of the second accomplishment. The fourth panel portrays the result of it all: Donald's anger and intention of revenge.

A similar structure may be found in all cases of caused motion. In the tornado example above (Fig. 32-1), the two panels correspond to phase two and four of the temporal process of sucking up the money from the silo into the sky. A classic case of caused motion is the club hitting the ball (Fig. 32-4). In addition to what was said above, we can add that there are two caused motions where the depicted position of the club corresponds to phase four of the club's movement structure, which is simultaneously phase two in the movement of the absent ball whose trajectory is indicated by movement stripes. The same holds for the destruction of the seven cities of Cibola (Fig. 32-5), so that the contact of the boulder with the pillar represents phase four in the movement of the stone towards the pillar, simultaneously presenting phase two, that is, what we may assume is the collapse of the pillar. Generally, of course, phases two and four constitute the singular points in the event profile of accomplishments.

This structure seems to be a candidate for a more general regularity in cartoon event representation. We cannot here support our investigation with empirical statistics, but we shall not hesitate to venture the following hypothesis:

*Rule 1: In an accomplishment which is a caused motion and the trajectory of the object is predictable, phases two and four are shown, but not three, except in the shape of movement stripes appearing in the frame showing phase four.*

If we look again at the town of Omelet example (Fig. 32-6), we once more find phases two and four in the first and third frame, respectively. Here, the second frame might be taken to form a counterexample to our rule because it explicitly shows phase three of the egg avalanche event. This overt depiction of phase three, however, is grounded in reasons external to the event itself, namely, the visual communication of the consternation of the inhabitants that is peaking at the moment they discover the unfolding event.

Rule 1 has a special modification in cases when the object's trajectory is not predictable from our experience of ordinary, everyday physics. The four panels below continuing the duel between Donald and Gnossey show, in the first panel, Donald grasping Gnossey by the feet (Fig. 32-8). In the second frame, Gnossey ascends into the air. Donald's posture and the trajectory indicated by movement stripes makes readers infer that Donald has thrown Gnossey towards the ground after which he—as a ball—bounces back into the air. As in the cases above, we have a case of caused motion, but it is not the initiation of movement which is shown in the second frame, but rather an aspect of the trajectory that Gnossey's body is taking. This is elaborated in the third frame where we find Gnossey high above the crowd of gneezles, still on his way upward as indicated by movement stripes. Finally, in the fourth panel we see Gnossey hitting Donald after his fall. In the next panel, which is not shown here, Donald vacillates about, bruised and confused.

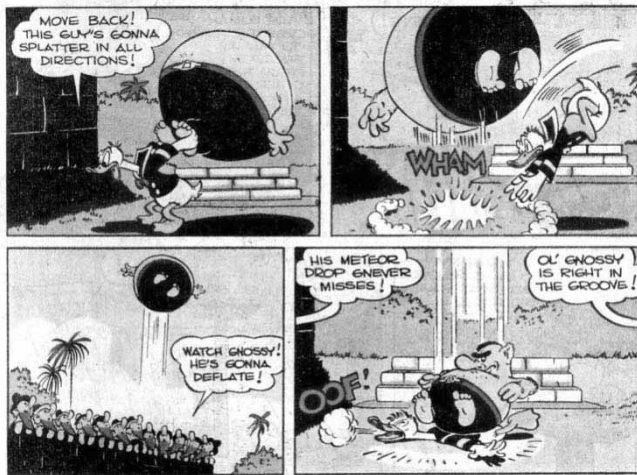


Fig. 32-8. "Mystery of the Swamp." *Donald Duck Four Color* 62. 1945. © Disney.

The relevant modification to Rule 1 may now be articulated as follows:

*Rule 2: If the trajectory of the object, in a caused motion, is singular and cannot be predicted, then phases three, four, and possibly five are represented. Phase two will then be communicated with the use of movement stripes to indicate direction.*

This rule is a special case of a general principle that is always relevant and could be called the economical principle. It stipulates that *everything that can be immediately predicted is not shown while everything that the reader cannot possibly infer must be shown*. To return to our example, the reader could not predict that Donald would grasp Gnossey by the feet, or that Donald would throw him into the ground, for he could have thrown him into a wall or something else. In addition, the reader could not predict that Gnossey would bounce back as a ball, nor, finally, that he would land exactly on top of Donald. From a real-life perspective, this is not a generic event; indeed, the most probable thing would be that Gnossey would land elsewhere. (This may actually indicate that Gnossey is able to direct his trajectory to some degree so that it is not a pure case of caused motion.)

*Rule 3: If we have an accomplishment that is not a case of caused motion, phases three and five are shown in frames. If phase three is an expected action, only five is shown.*

In a caused motion, it is most often the contact points that are pregnant with information whereas the trajectory is predictable. In other actions, the process is pregnant. Consider, for instance, “The Golden Helmet” when Donald investigates the ship (Fig. 32-9). Here, we see how he wriggles a plug out of a beam (phase three); we also see the end result, namely the discovery of the seminal document showing where the golden helmet lies buried (phase five), which is also, of course, a punctual psychological event. From this, readers deduce that he leaves the ship again, even if only his going to the office of the museum director is depicted. These observations are generalized in Rule 3.



Fig. 32-9. “The Golden Helmet.” *Donald Duck Four Color 408*. 1952.  
© Disney.

It is often the case that an accomplishment is motivated by a previous perception. In these cases, only the perception and the final result, phase

five, are shown. That is, the reader sees Donald see something prompting him to an action whose result is then shown, but not the action itself. This process requires that the action be easy to infer. To further illustrate this observation, let us draw from another example form “The Golden Helmet” (Fig. 32-10), where Donald and the kids are drifting around in the open sea in a boat with no sail. In the opening frame, they see the wreck of a ship with sails. This is such a pregnant moment that two panels are devoted to showing the phases of discovery: whereas the first frame of the two-panel series shows them seeing something unspecified (“stuff floating”), the second specifies that they are able to identify the sail (“And canvas! I see canvas!”). In the third frame, the ducks steer happily forward at full sail. All components of the complex process of fitting and rigging the sails on their own boat are not shown. This is, again, the economy principle; it would be trivial to show the work process involving the canvas unless a certain non-inferable point had to be emphasized in the process. The punctuality of achievements seems to imply the following:

*Rule 4: If an achievement depends on the contact between two objects, the event is highlighted in a panel. If there is a special causal effect, this is shown in a panel immediately after the cause.*



Fig. 32-10. “The Golden Helmet.” *Donald Duck Four Color* 408. 1952. © Disney.

In the following example (Fig. 32-11), we see the bridge breaking in one frame; in the next, we see water splashing as the sign of impact from a falling object. Even if Donald is on the bridge in the first frame, he is only implicitly present in the second. There is an intricate connection between the punctual events of achievements and caused motion in accomplishments. The two panels illustrate Rule 4, but we would also say they illustrate Rule 1, so that the breaking of the bridge is phase two of a caused motion where Donald falls into the water. The water splashing is phase four and, according to Rule 1, the intermediate movement is omitted. In any caused movement, the initiation of the movement—typically the contact between two objects—constitutes a catastrophic point, so that in all the examples mentioned—the club hitting the ball, the tornado hitting the money silo, the boulder hitting the pillar, and the breaking bridge—we have punctual, catastrophic events initiating a longer sequence of events (which brings us back to the discussion of granularity above).



Fig. 32-11. “Donald Duck.”  
*Walt Disney’s Comics and Stories* 32, 1943. © Disney.

It is necessary, however, to maintain Rule 4, as there may be other effects of contact between two objects besides movement. Two heads may collide without causing motion, but headache, enmity, or psychological malfunctions instead. Single punctual events are often accompanied by sound effects, written with capitals directly in the frame so as to indicate their objective character. These sound effects—“CRAACK!” and “SPLASH!”—point to a vast semantics of different sounds for collisions, breakings, plungings, splashing, slidings, and different types of contact between different types of materials.<sup>8</sup>

There are other types of punctual events. Vendler’s classic example is “they reached the top”. A type of event playing a role in almost all narrative contexts is the movement through an opening. If it is a trivial and predictable passage, it is never shown. For instance, we rarely see Donald enter or leave his house; we only see him on his way home and then in the house. Generally, the movement towards a place and the presence at the place are shown, and rarely the passage into the place if this is not especially significant.

<sup>8</sup> See Søchting 2007.



When, however, the passage yields new information, there will typically be some degree of hesitation around the passage through the opening that spans several frames, typically at least one frame immediately before the passage and one immediately after. Again, in “The Golden Helmet”, Donald stands dreaming in the Viking ship (frame one) (Fig. 32-12). He then hears a sound from the hull in frame two; in frame three his head is seen almost in the middle of the opening, before he has an overview of the interior of the ship (“must be a kingsized rat aboard”). At this point, his mental state is curiosity. In frame four, his head is so deep inside the hole that he is able to glimpse a person (“A man! Who the blazes”). His mental state is now surprise. In the next panel, his head has completely entered the room along with his right arm in which he is swinging his baton. Donald’s mental state has now switched to anger (“Hey you! Get out here!”).

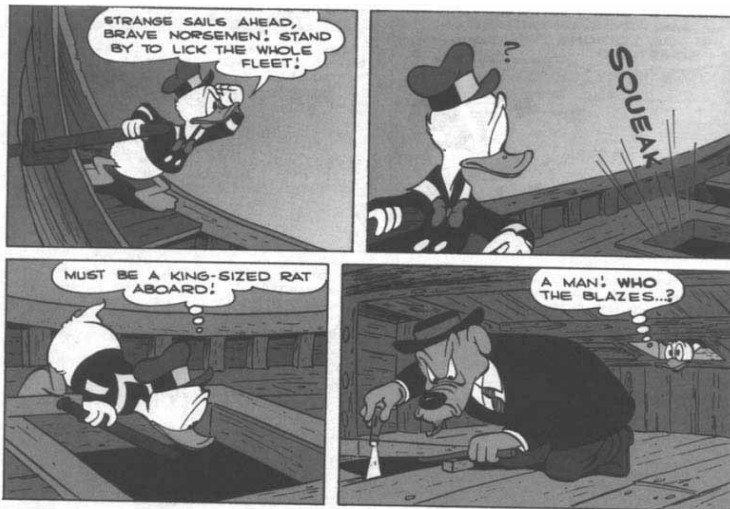


Fig. 32-12. “The Golden Helmet.” *Donald Duck Four Color* 408. 1952.  
© Disney.

Again, the economic principle prevails: every frame reveals new information. The introduction of a frame with Donald’s head before it dives into the interior of the ship is necessary so to underline the information that there is something there, such as an overgrown rat. The information not only relates to outer events, but also to the changing mental states of characters, here Donald’s. To dwell on his unclear suspicion that something may be wrong almost functions as classic

suspense before the result appears in the next frame where open curiosity is transformed into concrete surprise.

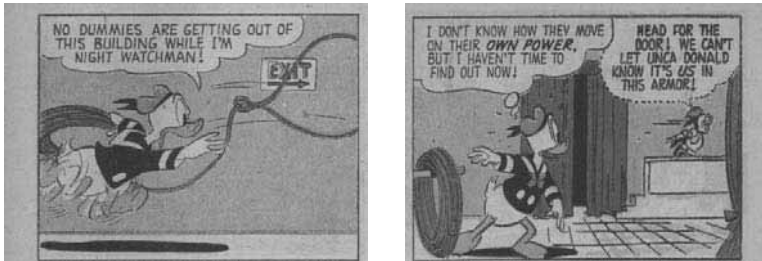


Fig. 32-13. “The Wax Museum.” *Walt Disney’s Comics and Stories* 231. 1959. © Disney.

In general, dispensations from the rules mentioned are motivated by the presentation of unexpected information. In “The Wax Museum”, Donald chases what he believes are wax figures, which are, in reality, the kids in armor and a person disguised as Napoleon (Fig. 32-13). This forms an extended event where all phases are shown. Phase two is visually presented because it implies the introduction of a new object, which is shown to be a lasso in the next frame. In the third frame, not reproduced here, we see the characteristic use of a lasso and in frame four the termination of the process. It is the unusual use of a lasso in a wax museum that motivates the structuring of the frames.

## The Extension of the Moment

Until now, we have used the concept of “moment” about what the content of a frame depicts, without any closer analysis. Many investigations of the cognition and aesthetics of comics proceed as if this moment is infinitesimal, a mere cut in time without substantial extension or, at the very least, a moment of an extension comparable to the closure time of a camera, a temporal extension sufficiently small so that most human actions and mesoscopic events appear as considerably more extensive. This implies that the moment appears as so small a partial sequence of the event that no important development takes place within it. Consequently, for all practical purposes, it can be taken to be infinitesimal, a snapshot, so to speak.

This, however, is a fundamental mistake in understanding the role of the single panel or frame in comics. There are many techniques put to use in comics which, quite on the contrary, serve to mark the extension of the

moment so that several, temporally independent aspects of an event sequence may be synthesized within one and the same panel. This holds for movements where movement stripes may indicate the beginning and end of a whole movement that far exceeds the mere photographic moment, as in the golf example above (Fig. 32-4). The movement stripes, which indicate the trajectory of the movement, may often be supplemented with contour doublings orthogonal to the direction of movement so that what is seen is a compact sequence of temporally distinct object profiles. But, these classic techniques are only the tip of the iceberg of various devices for extending the moment. Another basic device is dialogue, where several characters may contribute lines and remarks within one and the same frame thus temporally extending the time it takes to exchange three to four comments, that is, up to around ten seconds. Barks addressed this panel characteristic to be a whole scene rather than a screenshot:

BARRIER: “Did you think of comic-book panels as frames of film, or as scenes, taking up a longer amount of time?”

BARKS: As a scene. You’ve got your characters on a sort of stage.

BARRIER: But as far as individual panels are concerned, does the action within them take place in an instant of time, or over several minutes, or a longer period of time?

BARKS: That depends on the story itself. But usually, it’s like a movie scene; you tell as much as you can in that one panel, then you make a cut to the next. (*Conversations 70*)<sup>9</sup>

Here, an example of a panel synthesizing a timespan involving several partial events, including lines of a dialogue (Fig. 32-14):

---

<sup>9</sup> For how the panel seems to acquire larger temporal extension in the course of Barks moving from early, animation-like cartoons to the fully developed aesthetics of the mature Barks of the 50s: “BARRIER: I’m intrigued by your stories in the early forties, and the way they changed, and the way you changed from the storyboard approach to the later approach. A lot of the panels in your early stories seem to be almost like individual frames from a cartoon, whereas in your later stories, you seem to have more time within a panel.

BARKS: Yeah, using more dialogue to carry some of the story points. In the early stories, I carried the progression with action a great deal more, and then in later stories, I was allowing the dialogue to carry a great deal of the story progress. (*Conversations 22*)



Fig. 32-14. "The Status Seeker." *Uncle Scrooge* 41. 1963. © Disney.

This opening panel (where Scrooge is on a hunt for the so-called striped ruby) presents no less than three textual levels: an introductory narrator's presentation plus two dialogue pieces, one commenting upon the other. The narrator's introduction is about posh parties of Duckburg and, as such, is not tied to the moment depicted in the frame, but rather relates to a general piece of Duckburg knowledge. The latest dialogue piece, among the two jewellery-heavy snobs in the foreground, is presented first in the left-right reading direction, probably because it takes as its object the earlier dialogue piece between Scrooge and an arrogant waiter. The single panel thus has a temporal extension allowing it to present several temporally disjoint events as three utterances belonging to two different dialogues. All of these lines serve to express one basic piece of narrative information, however: Scrooge McDuck is rejected at the entrance to a fashionable party of conspicuous consumption.

A panel may also integrate sub-parts of an action undertaken with the same goal, synthesized into one scene (Fig. 32-15). Here, the narrator's voice instructs the reading of the picture. The sequence of four ensuing firings from a pea shooter leads to the aim of the action: they guide Donald's golf ball into the hole. Even a master pea shooter could hardly repeat the sequence of loading, aiming, firing, and hitting four times in a

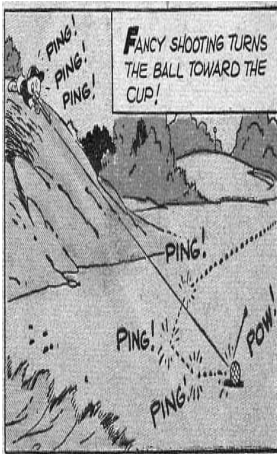


Fig. 32-15. Donald Duck. *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* 95. 1948. © Disney.

row in a shorter time than some ten seconds.<sup>10</sup> Again, the selection of events follows the catastrophe criterion: the discontinuous part events where the pea leaves the shooter and hits the ball are highlighted by sound words; the four resulting part events where the peas change the course of the ball are indicated by radiation circles that signal the exchange of moment; and the termination of the event sequence is indicated by the fact that only the fourth and final pea is depicted as well as its trajectory. The entire purpose-driven event sequences instantiate the classic phenomenological structure of temporality; the first three pea hits are sliding back into the lower grade of distinctness of retention while the future termination of events is glimpsed in protention. The fall of the ball

into the whole can be predicted from the general knowledge of the reader about the behaviour of heavy objects in a field of gravitation.

## The Status of the Panel

The plastic extension of the moment also gives us a key to the general status of the panel in comics. The panel may cover events from the most infinitesimal screenshot to sceneries of around ten to fifteen seconds in duration. Panels summing up historical events may even cover much longer timespans, including decades or even centuries. Panels, it must be emphasized, are not simply equal to snapshots. They are rather analogues to propositions asserted in a text, often by a sentence and sometimes by several. Every panel corresponds to an assertion, claiming that something takes place. In Roman Ingarden's theory of literature, the object of the text is caught in the web of state-of-affairs referred to by the single assertions of the text. Correspondingly, the object of comics—the narrative sequence of events that it addresses, be they fictitious or not—is a more comprehensive process caught within the network of panels. Individually

<sup>10</sup> Consider the eternal discussions about Lee Harvey Oswald's three shots within 10 seconds in Dallas.

taken, each frame claims assertions about the process, forming together a network of assertions that encircles the totality of the process.<sup>11</sup>

As already mentioned, the general assumption of cognitive linguistics is that there is one piece of information per unit of intonation (Chafe). It is tempting to assume something similar holds for the panels of comics, especially for narrative comics to which Barks belongs. In that case we have

*Rule 5: Only one new piece of information per panel.*

The panels represent new information, basically a new assertion per panel regarding the development of the narrative even when the panel synthesizes many different sub-events or a dialogue with several utterances. Rule 5 pertains to the visually presented information and only to what is relevant for the development of narrative. (Of course, any panel, qua picture, entails an enormous amount of information about the appearance of the characters and the scene. However, this is not the kind of information addressed by Rule 5.) Also, it is a regulative idea rather than a precise regularity. It does not preclude that panels with more information may occur, but rather claims they occur rarely or when motivated by special narrative circumstances.

The rule may be illustrated by a sequence in which a dog irritates Donald while he is on the couch watching TV, playing piano, and reading (Fig. 32-16). Every panel contains three pieces of information: Donald's activity, the dog's activity, and Donald's utterance rebuking the dog. These panels, as a consequence, may seem overloaded and difficult to interpret, a situation eased only by the fact that the four panels are structurally parallel. But, the presented series of panels is our manipulative construction because, in the original sequence, Donald's activity is

---

<sup>11</sup> In logic and linguistics, the prototypical representation of a state-of-affairs is, of course, a proposition that again, prototypically, may find expression in a sentence of a natural or formalized language. There is no reason, however, to assume language is the only possible means of expression for propositions. Charles Sanders Peirce's generalized concept of proposition, "Dicisigns", thus implies that they may appear with visual parts also: diagrams, gesture, schemata, pictures, and, of course, comics combining image and text. The single panel simply asserts the Dicisign that the event depicted takes place at the moment in question during the narrative sequence. The panel's character of proposition constitutes the basis for further propositions that may be inferred from the panel. About the Dicisign doctrine, see Stjernfelt, "Signs Conveying Information".

presented in separate panels before the interference of the dog (Fig. 32-17).



Fig. 32-16. "The Dog-Sitter." *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* 238. 1960. © Disney.



Fig. 32-17. "The Dog-Sitter." *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* 238. 1960. © Disney.

Here, every second panel presents Donald inaugurating some activity, and every second panel presents the dog's interruption and Donald's answer. Thus, on the visual level, there is only one new piece of information per panel. We have not made the relation between picture and text the object of special investigation in this paper, but we can say that these panels—just like the “Status seeker” opening panel (Fig. 32-14)—contain an event (the interruptive behaviour of the dog) and a character's linguistic reaction to that event (Donald's speech balloon). It seems probable that—just like sentences may have up to three (in rare cases four) objects connected to the same verb<sup>12</sup> (as in “Donald gives Daisy a flower”)—the events in the panel may include up to three or four significant, independent objects reacting upon each other in the scene presented by the extended moment of the panel. Such a knot of events we shall count as one piece of information—Rule 5 referring to narrative information making the narration progress further. Just like pictures in general, panels of course contain a large amount of implicit information which may be made explicit (“Donald is sitting in a chair”, “The chair is red”, “The dog sits in front of Donald”, etc.). Rule 5, however, only pertains to narratively pregnant information.

The study of comics panels addresses central cognitive and aesthetic issues of which we have here attempted a first draft. They are relevant both for event cognition as such, aesthetics of comics in general, and for the study of how particular artists, like Carl Barks, are able to develop those cognitive-aesthetic possibilities.

### Works Cited

- Andrae, Thomas. *Carl Barks and the Disney Comic Book: Unmasking the Myth of Modernity*. Jackson: Mississippi UP, 2006.
- Barks, Carl. *Carl Barks: Conversations*. Ed. Donald Ault. Jackson: Mississippi UP, 2003.
- . *The Carl Barks Library* 1-30. Scottsdale: Another Rainbow, 1983-1990.
- . “Donald Duck.” *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* 32. 1943.
- . “Donald Duck.” *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* 95. 1948.
- . “Donald Duck.” *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* 105. 1949.
- . “Donald Duck.” *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* 126. 1951.

---

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Peirce and Lucien Tesnière who take propositions with up to the valence of three to be basic, while René Thom who takes tetravalent linguistic expressions to form an independent class.



- . “Donald Duck.” *Walt Disney’s Comics and Stories* 146. 1952.
- . Donald Duck in “The Dog-Sitter.” *Walt Disney’s Comics and Stories* 238. 1960.
- . Donald Duck in “The Golden Helmet.” *Donald Duck Four Color* 408. 1952.
- . Donald Duck in “Mystery of the Swamp.” *Donald Duck Four Color* 62. 1945.
- . Donald Duck in “The Wax Museum.” *Walt Disney’s Comics and Stories* 231. 1959.
- . “Luck of the North.” *Donald Duck Four Color* 256. 1949.
- . “The Seven Cities of Cibola.” *Uncle Scrooge* 7. 1954.
- . “The Status Seeker.” *Uncle Scrooge* 41. 1963.
- Chafe, Wallace. *Discourse, Consciousness, and Time*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1994.
- Croft, William. “The Structure of Events and the Structure of Language.” *The New Psychology of Language: Cognitive and Functional Approaches to Language Structure*. Ed. Michael Tomasello. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998. 67-92.
- Ingarden, Roman. *Das literarische Kunstwerk*. 1931. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1965. [Eng. version *The Literary Work of Art*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973.].
- Kull, Kalevi. “Retorik i biologien” (“Rhetorics in Biology”). *KRITIK* 155-156 (2002): 98-100.
- Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. *Laokoön oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*. 1766. 2004. Web. 4 July 2012.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Collected Papers*. 1931-1958. Eds. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss; Arthur Burks. London: Thoemmes P, 1998.
- Stjernfelt, Frederik. “Signs Conveying Information: On the Range of Peirce’s Notion of Propositions: Dicisigns.” *International Journal of Signs and Semiotic Systems* 1.2 (July-December 2011): 40-52.
- Søchting, Rune. “Bølge, kvalitet, begivenhed. Om lydens natur.” (“Wave, Quality, Event: On the Nature of Sounds.”) MA dissertation, University of Copenhagen, 2007.
- Talmy, Leonard. “The Windowing of Attention in Language.” *Toward a Cognitive Semantics*. Cambridge: MIT P, 2000.
- Tesnière, Lucien. *Eléments de syntaxe structurale*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1959.
- Thom, René. *Stabilité Structurale et Morphogénèse*. 1972. Paris: Ediscience, 1975. [English version *Structural Stability and Morphogenesis*. Reading: Benjamin, 1977.]

Vendler, Zeno. "Verbs and Time." *Philosophical Review* 66.2 (1957): 143-160.