

The Question Concerning Comics as Technology

Gestell and Grid

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#algopoetics

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Peter

What is the matter of/with comics?

The premise of this paper is that the comics grid can be understood as a version of Martin Heidegger's concept of the Gestell, or framework, which the philosopher defined as the essence of technology in his essay "The Question Concerning Technology" (1954). That is, the grid is a specific technology of 'revealing' and 'bringing forth' through 'enframing'. We are intrigued by the relationships to materiality that this technology engenders and participates in. For instance, does the comics grid presuppose a material page? And even if it did so once in the form of physical comic books perhaps it is now possible to throw the material support away like Wittgenstein's ladder (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 1921, 7?) and maintain the grid as a "mental form," as Thierry Groensteen calls it, in the age of digital comics. Alternatively, we might ask whether we might throw away the grid itself as an unnecessary vestige of a superannuated technology of production and consumption.

Is The Content of a New Medium an Old One?



<https://jmunney.wordpress.com/tag/the-medium-is-the-message/>

Ernesto

Once the comic can be “lifted” from its previously necessary material supports and turned into code that can be re-cast on a digital display, what happens to the spatial concepts of the grid, the page, the book? Are we in a McLuhenesque situation where an old medium is the content of a new one (“The Medium is the Message” in *Understanding Media*, 1964)? Or does the song remain the same when played on a new instrument?

As long as the grid is the key structure of producing and consuming comics, the art form persists as a relatively undisturbed continuation from its print origins because the grid is always already the transition point between the physical materiality of the book and an abstract, conceptual arrangement of space. As long as we can see it, or even think it, it performs its work. This status does not mean that the grid will persist eternally as the underpinning of comics technology. Indeed, the grid's historical emergence gives rise to the question of what comes after it. Nevertheless, for now, the grid remains the essence of revelation in comics.

The *Gestell*



<http://www.moebelfactory.ch/de/products/19/Regale/204/Gestell-MDF-furniert.html>

Peter

Heidegger's *Gestell* refers to a conceptualization of the world and its resources more than any technological thing or instrument. This conceptualization is one of enframing that orders the world in such a way that it becomes a standing reserve that can be potentially delivered into the technological system for use. An enframed world is one in which everything is extractable and usable, including human beings themselves. Although Heidegger does not actually say this, the *Gestell* appears to depend on the imposition of rectangular multi-frames on the world to order it:

The Country Grid



Peter

consider the demarcated fields of a farm

The City Grid



Plan of the City of New York, 1807.
Wikimedia Commons

Peter

The street pattern of the contemporary city

Peter Consider putting the Mazzucchelli and Karasik after the Jason map page from Hey Wait to demonstrate the uncanny relationship between the comics grid and the city and habitation grids.

The Habitation Grid



Peter

Or the structure of a high rise apartment block

All these grids manage resources through enframing a standing reserve: grain, transit, labour. The grid does not necessarily have to be regular or perfect. It just has to apportion space in a way that creates and fulfills expectations about where one might go within it to find something and bring it out. Every item has coordinates, an address.

The poesis or bringing forth of enframing is the revelation of interconnectedness and potential energy. This interconnectedness is both useful and dangerous for Heidegger because it risks making all revealing technological revealing, reminiscent of the tyranny of instrumental reason Habermas complained of in his 1980 Adorno prize speech "Modernity--An Incomplete Project."

Thierry Groensteen

"The traditional schematic representation of a comics page is nothing more than a grid where the compartments are left empty, the 'skeleton' being only the body of the evoked object"

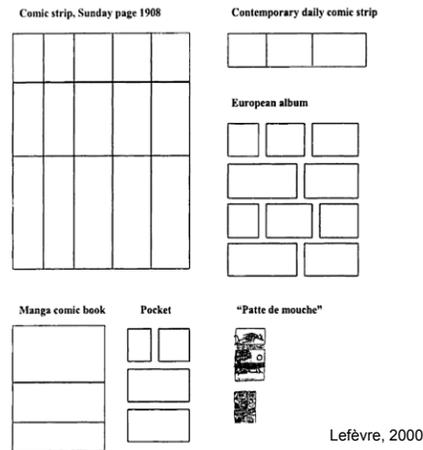
(The System of Comics, 1.2)

Ernesto

It is curious that comics, long considered disposable and ephemeral, is the art form that engages so clearly and strongly with modern technological enframing and revealing. Indeed, the metaphors that Heidegger uses, likening the Gestell to a skeleton, or a book case, are particularly apropos of the comics grid. Furthermore, Heidegger's contention that technological revealing has such a clear yet problematic relationship to the poiesis of a work of art, makes comics the pivot point in the uncanny relationship between the two: the articulation of technological and aesthetic revealing and the intersection of the totalizing "danger" of technology and the "saving power" of art.

With Heidegger's Gestell in mind, the comics grid becomes something other than a neutral element or convention. Rather it is a particular means of revealing space on the page and of connecting the different panels. Consider Thierry Groensteen's remarks on the iconicity of the grid itself: "The traditional schematic representation of a comics page is nothing more than a grid where the compartments are left empty, the 'skeleton' being only the body of the evoked object" (1.2)

The Comics Grid



Peter

The Comic in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

In the terms of Walter Benjamin, the grid denies comics art an 'aura' (Benjamin 1936), not just because the traditional comic book is mass produced but also because the division of space into connected panels detracts from the singular authenticity and mystique of the individual image. As each panel becomes one among many, it becomes a part of the whole. The individual drawing works in service of the larger system of the grid. The grid operates oppositely to the frame around a painting in that its job is to contextualize rather than to isolate. Heidegger's point about the danger of enframing is that it subjects and subordinates as it reveals; that which is enframed is no longer anything special.

As our references to city plans and apartment blocks suggest, the grid is a modern abstraction imposed upon the world to create potential movement or transit through organized space. Like all such grids, the comic participates in all the contested binary relationships of the technologized world: speed and stasis; excitement and boredom; consistency and surprise; abstraction and mimesis. In the case of the comic, the grid paradoxically turns the drawings in the comic into both potential and kinetic meaning, through the relationship among the panels; it creates movement and interconnectedness by holding the drawings static.

Enframing Narratives in *Rear Window*

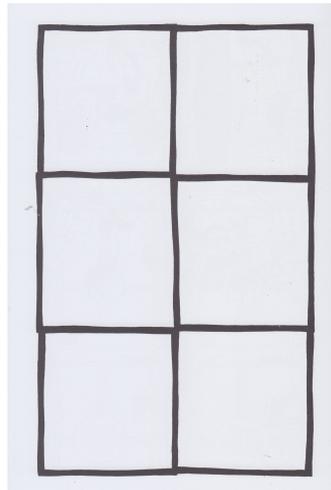


Hitchcock, 1954

Ernesto

Once we create a grid, we can draw things out of it. Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (produced in the same year that Heidegger published his essay!!!) provides a fruitful analogy. Jeff Jeffries' broken leg prevents him from moving so he is forced to look out his window all day at other windows that produce narratives that Jeffries' gaze binds together. The framework of the windows allows us to see not only the murder that transpires behind one set of windows, but the relationship between that murder and what is happening behind all the other windows: all stories of sexual relations between men and women. *Rear Window* stages the the act of looking at an enframed space in such a way that one can extract narratives from it as if they were ore from a mine. This is precisely the way the Gestell works: disparate entities are drawn together in an interlocking way that makes extraction/ revelation more efficient. As Heidegger suggests, the Gestell is the interlocking of what it holds up, presents, and reveals.

The Comics Grid



Jason. *Hey, Wait...*
2008

Peter

The way a comic is gridded has a significant effect on our audience experience. The regularity of the grid is a contract with the reader, a promise of how revealing will occur. Frank Santoro calls the grid a “timing system,” meaning that the number of panels on a page tells us where to look for beats of meaning. If the grid is haphazard or illogical, our reading/viewing experience is too.

To keep things simple, we will focus on the regular six panel grid, a common format used by creators from Jason and Gilberto Hernandez to Julia Wertz. The regularity of this grid makes it particularly effective for discussing revealing through enframing and “the standing reserve” in comics. Just to name one example, Jan Baetens, writing of Simon Grennan’s use of the six-panel grid in *Dispossession*, discusses the significance of “evenness” in its production of meaning. The paradoxical point here is that the constraint of a regular grid, its dullness even, generates rather than restricts meaning: less flexibility makes for more creativity and more potential exchange between producer and consumer. This paradox is the paradox of the Gestell writ large: on the one hand a cage, on the other a release of potential energy and power.

But the regularity of grid only generates energy and power if there is a relationship between the whole grid and its parts in a singular field of view. This is where the materiality of the grid becomes interesting. It seems logical to suggest that this multiframe is specifically dependent on a rectangular piece of paper, but the transposition of comics from the printed page to the pixelated screen suggests otherwise. The question becomes whether the grid is simply a vestige of the printed past or essential and integral to there being such a thing as comics. If we follow Heidegger, the grid is the “essence” of comics technology, the *sine qua non* of revealing in comics. For now, let us say that comics grid simply requires a compartmentalized, singular field of view and that the screen of the tablet or computer continues to provide this field even in the absence of paper.

Is Guided View the End of the Grid?



Jeff Smith's *Bone* on Comixology

Ernesto

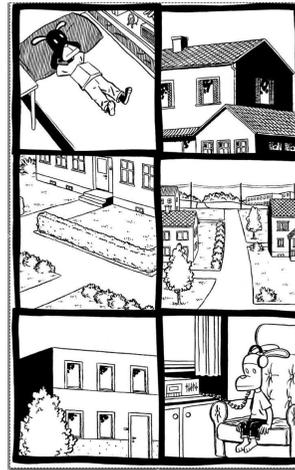
Panel by panel viewing technology arises from the size limitations of cell phone and tablet screens that are too small to present the entirety of a grid at all clearly. The isolation and sequential presentation of panels creates a linear tracking that can inhibit our ability to scan the entirety of the page and move around it in different patterns. They tend to present the comic as a series slides in a powerpoint presentation. And we think we can all agree that if a delivery mode turns comics into the equivalent of a powerpoint presentation, it represents a diminishment of their power rather than an enhancement.

Some viewing systems allow the retention of the panel/grid relationship. For example, in Comixology, Guided View allows us to get a full page view prior to proceeding through the panels one by one, and again once we have reached the final panel on the page. However, we can also bypass the grid by setting up Guided View so that it never gives whole views of pages. In the Sequential app, if we select "Panel View" we never see the grid. What happens then? In this case comics truly do become "sequential art," as we lose the synoptic view altogether.

These systems illuminate how the term "sequential art" really does comics an injustice. In contrast, the Heideggerian model allows us to theorize comics in a way that is not so dependent on such linearity. The question is whether the new way of reading comics will obliterate that theorization. We don't know the answer to that question yet. All we know is that the grid persists for the moment.

N

The Comics Grid and the Standing Reserve



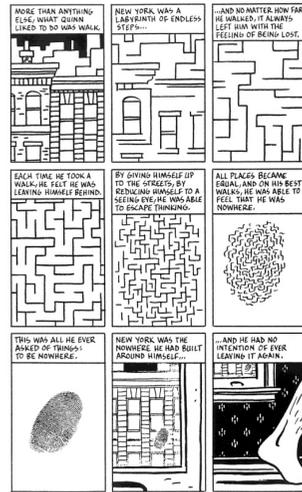
Jason. *Hey, Wait...*
2008

Peter

This page from Jason's *Hey, Wait...* demonstrates how the grid reveals in multiple ways, defying the notion of singular sequence. We can read the page as if the panels were slides in a powerpoint presentation, but doing so would be to lose the complexity of the relationships on the page. For instance, the the character in the top left panel and the character in the bottom right panel call to each other from across the page as if connected by the wire on the white dog's headphones. The building in the top right does the same to the building in the bottom left. These four panels create a visual chiasmus. The middle panels suggest a path between the two buildings and the two boys, reinforcing the previous two relationships. But the boys remain static; only the reader's eyes make the journey.

To think about this page in Heidegger's terms, we might say that the enframing of the page puts every component of the page into a potentially meaningful visual relationship with all the other components. It demonstrates how the dangerous totalizing possibilities of enframing relate to the aesthetic interconnectedness of the work of art. Again, the comics page as standing reserve maximizes aesthetic resources of both creator and consumer. The divergent value of technological and aesthetic interconnectedness--threatening in the one instance but pleasing in the other--suggests an uncanny relationship between them. When we consider that this particular version of the comics grid also contains other grids, such as the habitation grid and the city grid that uncanniness intensifies.

Uncanny Grids



David Mazzucchelli and Paul Karasik, *City of Glass*, 2004

Extracting the Past through Enframing in *Here*



Richard McGuire, 2014

Ernesto

Richard McGuire's *Here* uses the comics Gestalt to reveal time and history. Unlike Grennan who uses a six-panel grid whose simplicity allows him to explore complex rules, McGuire uses the constant image of the corner of a room in a house as the repeating organizational motif (with some exceptions when times that pre-exist the house are depicted). The binding of the book serves as the vertical line of the corner so that when the book is open, everything on the double page spread seems to emerge from it. Laid over this image are frames that depict events or situations that occurred in that space from across centuries. The effect is not that of sequence but of using frames to "look through" the page into the past and, occasionally, the future.

Generally, the frames on any given page relate to each other. For example superimposed on a background page set in 500,000 BCE, three frames depict a different person who has lost something: a wallet, an umbrella, someone's mind. Enframing makes it possible to correlate these disparate moments to create both juxtaposition and continuity, making the past available for use as aesthetic material. And, although *Here* obviously uses synecdoche, the images invoke the whole of time regarding that space, escaping linear sequence and the chronology that goes with it. In *Here*, all times are available at once. We do not have to work our way forward from 500,000 BCE because all times are always already there.

Gravity's Rainbow

“In the days of the gauchos, my country was a blank piece of paper. The pampas stretched as far as men could imagine, inexhaustible, fenceless. ... But Buenos Aires sought hegemony over the provinces. ... Fences went up, and the gaucho became less free. It is our national tragedy. We are obsessed with building labyrinths, where before there was open plain and sky. To draw ever more complex patterns on the blank sheet. We cannot abide that openness: it is terror to us. Look at Borges. Look at the suburbs of Buenos Aires.”

-Thomas Pynchon (Penguin, 1973, 267-268)

Peter

In spite of efforts by Scott McCloud to exploit “the infinite canvas” of the screen as opposed to the limitations of the page, the grid somehow persists in digital comics, whether they be web comics or native guided view comics presented through ComiXology. This persistence is not necessarily because of an inherent conservatism or unwillingness to experiment but rather because the enframing quality of the grid is such a powerful generative technology. Draw the grid and the rest will follow on any platform, medium, or context because the grid is not so much a tool as a meta-tool that allows other tools, materials, and means to come into play.

The multiframe rectangle is the human shape extraordinaire for organizing and interpreting the world. Rectangular enframing dominates our spatial organization and perception. It is our defense against chaos, disorder, untenable openness. Squalidozzi the Argentine gaucho in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* expresses perfectly the back and forth movement between openness and enframing in the human psyche:

“In the days of the gauchos, my country was a blank piece of paper. The pampas stretched as far as men could imagine, inexhaustible, fenceless. ... But Buenos Aires sought hegemony over the provinces. ... Fences went up, and the gaucho became less free. It is our national tragedy. We are obsessed with building labyrinths, where before there was open plain and sky. To draw ever more complex patterns on the blank sheet. We cannot abide that openness: it is terror to us. Look at Borges. Look at the suburbs of Buenos Aires.” (Penguin, 1973, 267-268)

Smooth and Striated Space



http://www.christianhubert.com/writings/smooth_striated.html

Peter

Squalidozzi's complaint refers to the relationship between smooth and striated space in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, a relationship that is worth thinking about when we interpret comics. There is perhaps a dream of the nomad moving freely over smooth space in the promise of digital comics: a desire to avoid capture by the striated space of the grid. But the comics grid is the perfect demonstration of the interdependence of both kinds of space.

The screens that dominate our information-filled lives are rectangular, as are the "windows" within them. Consequently, the movement from the rectangular grid to the rectangular screen is not such a radical one in this context. It's no surprise, then, that the promise of the digital comic's "infinite canvas" is quickly boxed up again. Indeed, this move from an unframed infinite to an enframed finite is perhaps the most significant gesture of the *Gestell* that manages a potentially overwhelming sublime space. Revealing requires limiting, organizing, and constraining the infinite with an illusion of finitude.

Conclusion

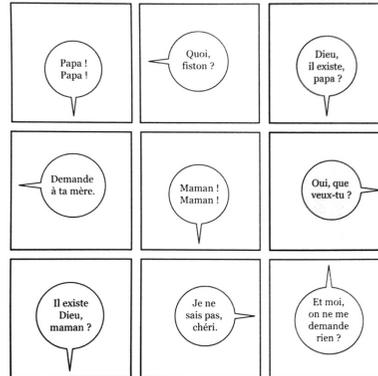


Ernesto

If comics so readily correspond to Heidegger's concept of the Gestell, how do they relate to his notion of the "saving power" of art. Our suggestion is that Heidegger sets up the Gestell's relation to poiesis and revealing as something of an evil twin copy of art. Comics in turn imitate technology as a way for art to recapture the poiesis that technology "steals" from it. Comics are then be a re-staging of technological enframing that makes it possible to imagine controlling the system from a god-like perspective rather than being a pawn within the system. Comics provide us an illusion of mastery just at the point where we are being mastered by technology. Whether the digitization of comics and their apprehension through a computer or tablet affect this illusion in a meaningful way depends upon whether their relationship to enframing reinforces or challenges the grid.

Questions?

Feinte Trinité par François Ayroles



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Poetics of the Algorithm: Narrative, the Digital, and 'Unidentified' Media was an international and bilingual conference organized by the [ACME](#) Comics Research Group and hosted by the University of Liège (Belgium), from June 16 to June 18, 2016. It focused on interactive fiction, apps, digital comics, games, e-literature and other emerging, 'new' media. The conference will host workshops, roundtable discussions, panels, and presentations of papers. More information: <https://poeticsofthealgorithm.wordpress.com/about/>.