

SEEING AND NOTHINGNESS: MICHAEL NICOLL  
YAHGULANAAS, HAIDA MANGA, AND A CRITIQUE  
OF THE GUTTER

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Figure 1. Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas in *The Gutter*.  
Reprinted with permission of the artist.

## THE ARGUMENT

The argument begins with the graphic essay reprinted above: “Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas in *The Gutter*.”

I love Michael’s work—for its beauty, for all it has taught me about an unexpected and powerful option within sequential art, and for the farthest reach of its implications. As well as considering his work, I have also had the pleasure of many conversations with Michael over the years, the most intense of these coming during his Writer-in-Residency at Calgary’s Mount Royal University. “In *The Gutter*” is an example of Haida Manga, Yahgulanaas’s term for a form that blends traditional Haida visual representations of the kind painted or carved into wooden masks, stand-alone sculptures, and reliefs, with the dynamics of the manga that Yahgulanaas first saw when he was a guide for Japanese tourists visiting Haida Gwaii (formerly the Queen Charlotte Islands). Yahgulanaas’s experience of American-style comics was very like  
 52 my own as a child: an art form disparaged by the culture that produced it in abundance. The way that the Japanese respected, even revered, the form and its makers gave Yahgulanaas a way to see comics as a complicated visual and narrative art form, as well as one rich in history, philosophy, and politics.

Such a view is common now. I teach comics and graphic novels at Mount Royal, and while a few students express surprised delight that *comics* are on a university curriculum, there are always a few who feel a bit of disdain for them, or tell me of their parents’ or grandparents’ bemusement at a credit course on “garbage.” But such opinions grow fewer every year. The foundational arguments of Will Eisner and Scott McCloud for the artistic legitimacy of comics and the codifying of their language have made their case. Sequential art, comics, the graphic novel, are part of our culture’s literature; studying them is now a form of the sanctioned geekdom known as scholarship; and that scholarship is rooted in the icon-alphabet of the Egyptians, the calligraphic evolution from shape to sound in Chinese picture-writing (Eisner 8-9; McCloud, *Understanding* 14-15), in medieval woodcuts and on through comics’ “high art” precedents in Hogarth’s series paintings (McCloud, *Understanding* 16).

The study of comics as a print medium finds its modern history, everyone seems to agree, with Rodolphe Töppfer’s “Picture-Stories,” then on to Outcault’s *Yellow Kid* and through Herriman’s *Krazy Kat*, and from there to a North American evolutionary tree that every day continues to ramify with each branch taking on particular national or regional characteristics. Join that work with the study of manga, a combination of earlier temple-drawings and the comic books the Americans brought with them to post-War Japan that inspired Osamu Tezuka (among many others), and there it is: the history, shape, and meaning of an art form. The rest, it seems, is the needlework of scholarship finely observing and debating the implications of reading comics through various literary and psychological theories of production and perception, the different styles and approaches of various schools and communities, connecting the established truths of comics in general to the particular questions that the

content of comics addresses, such as morality, religion, sociology, the psychology of superheroes and villains, or the paranoia of apocalyptic zombie fantasies. Many new layers of meaning and analysis have been added, not without continuing controversy, to the fundamental structures of page and panel at the foundation of comic analysis, but that foundation has remained one of the more stable defining features of comics as a form of art.

The year I taught Yahgulanaas's Haida Manga graphic novel *Red*, I focused the class on the question of whether, beyond the fact that Canadians made them, there was something that could be called the *Canadian* graphic novel—something that Canada as the location of creative activity offers to the art as a whole. Our short answer was yes, and that yes was a hybrid of the qualities of the work and the qualities of the country. Politically, socially and artistically, Canada is a nation both Western and Indigenous, but not both at once. As such, a key element of Canadian identity lies in the way in which the term “Canadian” can apply (and often does) both to one thing and its opposite—among the qualities which, taken together, define the nation, there are contradictions that cannot be reconciled in the sense that they are dissolved, but must, in the end, sit side by uneasy side. Though there may be no single figure that represents “Canadian,” there may be a collection of such figures; perhaps “Canadian” only makes sense in the plural: to be Canadian in one part of this plurality is to have qualities that contradict those of something equally Canadian in another. As the study of *Red* suggested, one of those contradictions is the tension between the Indigenous and European concepts of space and time—both of which are represented in comic art, not by drawings within the panels, but in the structure of comics themselves. And the key to that structural difference lies in the gutter.

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And if the relationship between gutter and panel is the visual representation of differences in views of time and space, differences in the comic page between the swirling layout of *Red* and the rectilinear paradigm considered by McCloud and others also expresses the contrast between indigenous and European cosmologies—conceptions of how part and whole are related to one another in a universe. For the European side, mapped along the grid of content-displaying panels divided by empty gutters, the identity of the whole is assembled by the mind that views its individually discrete parts; for the Indigenous worldview, the whole is everything and everywhere: it extends to each individual its identity as a fraction of itself. These views contest across not just our reading of comics, but our reading, too, of history. Such a view only opens more avenues of inquiry, but my class's short answer, in a way that I think is a Canadian trait and hope is a Canadian virtue, is that it is a yes that poses more questions than it can answer and thus keeps the discussion alive.

## READING *RED*

I first encountered Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas in the book *Raven Travelling*, the

Vancouver Art Gallery's photographic collection of Indigenous art. Although his was not the only comic art in the book—there is a large and growing number of Indigenous artists using graphic novels to tell their stories, both fabulous and historic—the single-sentence comment that Yahgulanaas made in *Raven* that comics, like music, (and unlike pure-text art forms like the novel and poetry, and even, I would venture, most film), was “a universal language” focused my thinking anew. As a writer, I saw comics as story-telling. As a painter and sculptor who also made comics, Yahgulanaas saw comics as a story-show. I took him to say something compatible with the idea that even though the content of a word balloon might be in a language one does not speak or read, the information embedded in the picture-language of the comic can still be understood. If what Eisner and McCloud say is true, that there is a transcultural code in the comic language of bodily gestures and facial expressions, then it is a code can be *unlocked* across cultures. In that unlocking, comics are comprehended with their emotional, intellectual and aesthetic impact intact as well.

- 54 Yahgulanaas's sentence was also another among those about comics that went well beyond the defensive: instead of being “just as good” as so-called high literature, his was a claim that comics could do something that other literatures could not.

When I met Michael in the fall of 2009 at Calgary's International WordFest, he was promoting his first (and so far only) graphic novel, *Red*. *Red* is a historically-based cautionary tale about the temptations of justice as violence, which makes it a compelling and relevant story; what makes it a compelling study is its format. Like “in *The Gutter*” above, *Red*'s paneling is not in the established American tradition of the squared or straight-edged panels separated by white space. Instead, like many manga (and some mainstream North American graphic novels and comics since around 2000), the inter-panel space in *Red* is black. But it is not the same black found in the products of the large commercial houses, which is a black that looks opposite to white but serves the same purpose: to be nothing but the image-free spaces between what the readers see.

The darkness surrounding the panels in *Red* is a substantial darkness, a sinewy, winding torque that cannot be interpreted or mistaken for a black-or-white vacancy—and the hash marks within the gutter of “in *The Gutter*” demonstrate that, as much as any other visual element in a comic, this gutter is meant to have shape and mass, the exact opposite of the convention. This gutter's influence does not stop at the panel borders. It extends through them, blending sometimes with the background, sometimes with the lines that define the characters, and sometimes again with the objects that either restrict or enable those characters to act. In the three example images from *Red* reprinted in Figure 2 below, the gutter forms part of the drawing of the caught fish (73), and the silhouetted trees (97); more significantly still, erasing even more the difference between picture and frame, it *becomes* the bow in Red's hand in the climactic scene in the book (103). The gutter here is a presence that surrounds the panel, shaping it, confining it, drawing it out or narrowing it down. Whatever is going on *within* the panels, whatever we imagine is the relationship *between* them,



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**Figure 2: Three Faces of the Gutter in *Red* (clockwise from top left):**

1. The gutter as part of character definition within the panel (73);
2. The gutter continuous with the panel background in the treeline (97);
3. The gutter as object in the story—the stick that becomes the bow with which Red brings the story to its conclusion (103).

the gutter here is a third party that does more than both divide and join; it *participates* in the story. All along, we realize, this gutter has worked in this graphic novel like a bloodstream, right down to the capillaries that are the black lines within the panels: it is a visual representation of a worldview for which individual action is always an extension of the greater forces that join all things together.

That relationship between individual and whole established as we read through *Red* the book is then discovered to be something more again in *Red* the mural: inside the back of the dust jacket is revealed what happens if you were to take the book apart and assemble the pages according to the flow and contour of that dark surrounding presence (See figure 5). The whole of *Red* is a single wall-sized story; it is possible to view the protagonist Red's entire life at once. Jamie Witham, a student of mine studying *Red*, asked herself what would happen if Red's story were removed from that picture. She took this dust jacket image and erased panels, leaving only that surrounding visible (Figure 3).

- 56 Clear of the representations of the particular story inside it, the mural calls up the images found in traditional Haida bentwood ceremonial chests which, in their mixture of abstractions and representation, evoke the dynamic of land, forest and ocean key to Haida spirituality. But to say it is *just* that is to mistake it for an ornate version of what, in squared-off sectional terms, would be seen as only another static frame. Even if the shape of the overall presence reproduces an earlier, sacred shape, it is only as a glimpsed moment in a constant movement of energy and force—glance at it quickly and it *looks* like that. As much as the content of each panel is a still picture designed to be animated by the imagination of the reader at the pace of the dialogue balloon, sound effects, speed lines and so on that are part of the commonly understood visual vocabulary of the comic, the gutter is also a *something* that engages with the reader to come alive—to share in the life of the reader through its relationship with that life.

## GUTTERS STATIC AND MOTILE, EMPTY AND FULL

I have said that Yahgulanaas's gutter is the opposite of the standard, but I also see that it could be argued from my description that it owes at least part of its life to the reader's contribution and if so, then it seems to stand in the same relation to the reader that the standard "empty" gutters do, that Yahgulanaas is using a different convention to the same purpose that the blank gutter serves in the customary comic page—or if he is not, I need to show why. As Scott McCloud states several times in both *Understanding* (65-69) and *Reinventing Comics* (1), the gutter—and he means the eighth-of-an-inch-thick straight-edged empty (i.e. white) gutter—"plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics" (*Understanding* 66). In *Reinventing* he summarizes the longer argument: the gutter is "the heart of comics" (that phrase again) "where the reader's imagination makes the still pictures



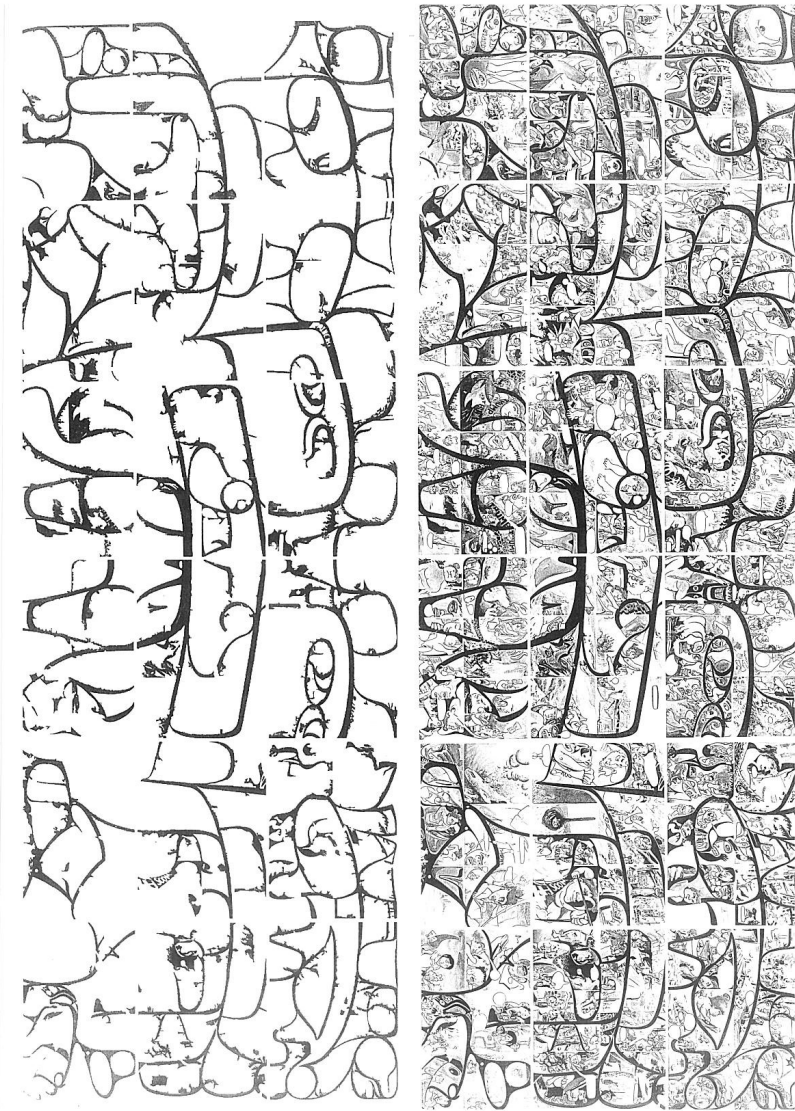


Figure 3. (Right) *Red as Mural* (from the inner dust jacket of the book);  
(Left) *The Gutter as Image*. Courtesy of Jamie Witham.

come alive” (1). You will note that “in *The Gutter*” Yahgulanaas quotes McCloud from *Reinventing* on that point. Note also, his mix of quotation and description of McCloud’s claim: we hear both McCloud and how McCloud is heard in Yahgulanaas’s description of his thought: the gutter is “the empty space” (Yahgulanaas), “the important stuff (Yahgulanaas)... “the heart of comics...in the space between the panels’ (McCloud, *Reinventing* 1) where readers find ‘life’” (Yahgulanaas).

Now if McCloud and Yahgulanaas could still be said to be saying the same thing in different ways, at least in terms of the relationship between reader and gutter, the temptation would be to see any disagreement between the two positions as a problem with a semantic solution. But, as I hope to show, and as I think Yahgulanaas would agree, there is a big, possibly permanent, difference between the description of a space as the location of “making” as opposed to “sharing”—a difference with not just aesthetic implications, but historical, philosophical, and given the role that that difference has and continues to play in the text-and-treaty-based relationship between

**58** Canada’s Indigenous peoples and the country’s governments, life-and-death ones as well. Intriguingly, and I believe uniquely in terms of comics and comics scholarship, this difference plays itself out not in terms of the more common question of cultural stereotypes or of violence within the narrative, but in the representation of narrative itself. The debate is not centred on what comics say in terms of the topics they treat, but in what comics say when they say anything.

For Yahgulanaas, then, the standard gutter is to comics what barbed wire fencing is to landscape: the product of politics and history brought *into* the form and conditioned by the way that the culture that uses it conceives of space and time. And *that* conditioning exists, in the mainstream North American context, in an organic relationship with the originating European culture’s history of “discovery of,” migration to, and appropriation of North American land: the kind of appropriation that displaced the Indigenous people not as the act of one civilization taking from another, but as the act of one people claiming as their own land no one owned—empty land, or “terra nullius.” Extended discussions of this complicated “legal fiction” and its implications from both white and Indigenous points of view can be found at several online sites: see the Reconciliation Project’s “The Doctrine of Discovery is Less of a Problem than Terra Nullius” and Angela Pratt’s essay, “Treaties vs. Terra Nullius” as examples.

On the reading Yahgulanaas shares with many legal scholars, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, by European convention, land deemed to be “terra nullius” was land available to be claimed by parties to that convention: one crown making land claims not against any title held by the Indigenous populations, but against other crowns, against others of its own kind. Or, to think in terms of text, one document-producing people making claims against other document-producing people over *undocumented* land. The conventional gutter is, then, to Yahgulanaas, a picture of European self-granted permission to imagine *into* space defined as empty whatever it wanted, and to imagine *out* of that space whatever it wanted to as well. In terms of aesthetic theory drawn from that cultural practice, then, at least some of the clarity



which comic scholarship has achieved in codifying the empty gutter as one of the conventions of comics may well be describing what Western-dominated comics have so far put into some comics (so far) thinking they were traits “at the heart” of all.

It is a polemic reading, and a serious one. In the graphic novel, Yahgulanaas answers the white strips of terra nullius with the dark density of something the eye cannot wish away in order to “get on with (its own) story.” It takes a while to get used to reading *Red*, or “in *The Gutter*.” Even though it is commonplace for artists to break the rectilinear regularity of the standard comic book or manga page with bursts of irregular paneling, such change-ups are short-lived. They disrupt the normal reading pattern, but do not replace it. In *Red*, there are no straight edges; all is variation. And like every variation or change of form, Yahgulanaas’s paneling forces us to pay attention to it, and thus it slows down the pace at which we take in the art. There is the kind of play and role reversal between figure and ground of the sort that makes Escher’s work so intriguing. Take those eyes in the top right of “in *The Gutter*”: at first they seem to be the floating eyes of an unseen being, the sort of thing that Steve Ditko did in his *Doctor Strange* work in the 60s that made the good Doctor popular among those, particularly those on campus, who saw in his renderings of mystic experience the psychedelic and drug-culture readings to which floating eyes and disembodied hands readily lent themselves. Then the broad oval of the panel behind the eyes becomes the face of the creature, a solid mass. And then there is that little head that pops right up out of the border to express its emptiness. There is a puzzle: that little face is an individuated consciousness most connected to the great whole that surrounds everything; yet it is the one most alone: why? Because it has been told that life is empty, its heart a void, and it pales not with the truth of the claim, but because such a claim has tremendous power. How can we be, it says, disengaged from the universe of which we are, in fact, a part? The answer: We *think* ourselves out of it—and words lead our thoughts.

Yahgulanaas’s main argument here, though, is based on what his own art will not let us ignore: the gutter, an ignoring made easy by the gutter’s usual slender emptiness, and an ignoring which makes McCloud’s argument necessary in the first place. Indeed, while McCloud is content to explain that the gutter is *not* as empty as it looks—and one of his great contributions is to get us also to slow down and look at what the gutter means—neither McCloud nor his argument challenges the *visual* message of a space defined by straight lines with nothing represented in it; they only explain it. And Yahgulanaas is not alone in reading that lack-of-representation as representation-of-nothing; indeed, many also do who side with McCloud and find his explanation of the gutter congruent with their own readings. For example, in his introduction to *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, Douglas Rushkoff defines the gutter, echoing McCloud, as “Those white, empty lines separating one panel from another, one moment in comic narrative from the next” (ix). His use of the word “empty” there is not casual; for him, the gutter *must* be a void in order to do its miraculous work in the story: “In one panel, Clark Kent heads into

the phone booth; in the next he's Superman [...] Between these two incarnations, a simple gutter in which nothing is drawn, yet the entire transmogrification of man to superhero has taken place. It's the closest thing in comics to transubstantiation, and it happens in the unseen crack between two discrete moments. It is everything, yet nothing." The gutter's emptiness also puts the reader in a Kierkegaardian relationship with the art: "As such," writes Rushkoff, "a comic requires a *leap of faith* from its readers every time they move from one panel to the next" (ix-x; italics mine).

In a later essay in the same book, Darcy Orcutt writes that "the readers *must* 'fill in' the gutters, the 'spaces' between the panels, a process that turns these otherwise static images into narrative" (97). I could multiply examples in the literature. And it is easy to read McCloud's argument this way in light of the recurring message of the regular and white-space gutter: It is the energy of the leaper that animates the comic—the reader is the one with the great power and the great responsibility to make the story come to life. The reader exercises that power by jumping from something over nothing to something again, thus, the argument goes, giving motion to the something. And the very nothingness the reader has leapt is the precondition of the miracle that connects the somethings on either side of it into a story.

But that is not *exactly* what McCloud says, nor is it precisely what he tries to show us in *Understanding Comics*. There McCloud defines the gutter as a puzzle: it is not a statement that nothing is there; it is the space that is occupied by everything the artist has *not* drawn, but which the reader's imagination fills in according to the content it has been given and the content that it moves to. The gutter is not a picture of *nothing*; it is just *not* a picture of something, and that *something* is "there," but only "there" conceived of as the beholder's mind's eye. But what is there is not necessarily an image or series of images (though it might be); it is an inference based on what was seen "before" and "after" that moment. Of course, that "before" and "after" are not the before and after of film: the comic is not a series of pictures flashed before our eyes with the gutter being the missing shot we have to fill in; the comic page is viewed both as whole (i.e. all its parts simultaneously) and as parts set in sequence according to the cultural conventions of reading a page of text.

I think this is a key distinction, and to a point, McCloud agrees. In *Understanding Comics*, he takes up the term "closure" for the act of making a story out of a sequence of pictures divided by gutters. His use of the term is very broad, and he uses it, albeit with the adjective "automatic" or "electronic" when he likens it to the "closure" that the mind performs when confronted by the rapidly moving sequence of pictures that make up a movie which, we know, is the illusion of motion based on a rapid presentation of a succession of still pictures. To be true to McCloud's position here, he is clear that the closure in comics is on a different (and he argues unique) level from that performed involuntarily by the viewer of film, but I am not at all convinced, on phenomenological grounds, that the difference between the automatic closure of film and the still-page closure involved in reading comics is not a difference between two kinds of the same experience as it is two different kinds of experience altogether. If

what I am doing when I put two still pictures that I see *as* still pictures together to be a picture *of* motion is closure, then closure is not what I do when I see a film as the record of motion without in any way seeing the bars between the pictures even though they are what make motion in film possible.

My argument hinges on the difference between what I experience and what I know about it. I *know* that a movie reel is made up of a sequence of stills which, run by me at a certain speed, makes me *see* the changes between the positions on display in the series as movement even though the representations are not in fact, moving. The process of film breaks down the continuous movement of the filmed object into a series of discrete and still images which in turn recreate the image of that movement when played back at speed to me. But even though, for example, I know that the hummingbird's beating wing that I see in a movie is only a series of pictures in each of which the wing is perfectly still—I could stop the film and examine it—if I drew a picture of what I saw when I saw a hummingbird hovering in front of a flower and drew that bird's wing in all its feathered detail, I would be substituting what I knew for what I had experienced. However, that stilled-wing picture would be acceptable as a painting, say, called "Hummingbird in Flight," for we are now so used to the high-speed photo and the still shot extracted from film that we find it acceptable, even natural, to represent our experience to ourselves as if we actually see what the high-speed film tells us is there.

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That's fair. What we perceive is conditioned by the conceptions we bring to it, and every technological change does not just work our powers on the world, it changes the way we think of both the world and ourselves within it: think of the way in which Muybridge's photographs finally settled the debate about whether a trotting or galloping horse ever had all four feet off the ground—an answer that naked-eye observation could not provide—and, if so, how they were placed. In both cases, they do, and we now draw horses in motion differently because we know so. But the naked eye still cannot see all four hooves off the ground at once. Nor do I *see* the divisions between the pictures in a movie, or the regenerated screens on my TV. Not only do I not see them; I am not supposed to. One of the problems of film, for example, used to be the perception that wheels spun backwards on moving cars. That has been eliminated from modern film, in part because we know it is impossible for a car's wheels to spin in the opposite direction to that which would be required to make the car move in the direction we see it going. Yet one can see it as plausible that a child in 1965, before the problem of 'backwards wheels' was solved for film, could be persuaded that the film of a moving car showed something about the movement of wheels that the ordinary eye did not detect. In short, it is knowledge of physics independent of what we see in film that lets us decide which of the things that film shows us are in fact things in reality that we cannot see on our own, and which of the things that film shows us are illusions created by film itself.

The point is this: the act of closure in reading comics—making a series of pictures into a story—is an act performed on elements, all of which are visible at once. For

McCloud, that makes comics' form of closure unique. He even goes so far as to say that, "in a very real sense, comics *is* closure" (*Understanding* 67). But for my argument, and, I believe Yahgulanaas's point as well, comics is not just the paradigm of closure, it is also the paradigm of closure's limit, because closure is how we make sense of what we are aware of both seeing *and not seeing* together. For Yahgulanaas's point, the difference between "automatic closure" in film, and what McCloud might be persuaded to call "pure closure" in comics, is found in the difference between not being able to see and not being willing to.

62 McCloud pauses on the topic before moving on. He understands that what he says about the gutter being the representation of possible representation—i.e. the representation of what the reader knows is there but that the artist has chosen not to draw (and so the reader puts it in)—is not complete. To explain more fully, he offers two three-panel sequences we might call "Peek-a-Boo": the first, a regularly-guttered triptych (62) showing a mother playing peek-a-boo with her infant, who is seated in a high chair; the second (67) that same game from the infant's point of view, though this time with the three panels arranged so that the first and last panels of the mother's revealed face bookend the frameless middle panel of the mother concealing her face with a cloth. What I believe McCloud intends to show is how two panels (each with a face saying "Peek-A-Boo") separated by a gutter (the unframed middle) actually contains the imagined picture of the raised cloth, thus confirming his point (Figure 4). But effectively, this second rendition is also a picture of comic *without* gutters, thus, I would argue, undermining it.

The point of the first sequence is to illustrate McCloud's argument that interpreting the move from panel to panel in comics is, in his words, "an act of faith." Infants cannot perform this act: we can see that the infant is distressed when the mother "disappears" behind the cloth, and is relieved when she "returns": "Peek-a-Boo!" In the same way that we, literate in the ways of the senses, understand that she has not gone anywhere, we do not need to see every intervening event between successive "appearances" of an object or a person in comic panels to know they are the same—and that we have been shown the beginning and end of a sequence that those within the panels have "moved through." That is what the gutter does: it tells us to have faith and use it.

Or, as McCloud says, "Nothing is *seen* between the two panels [in this case, the mother's face revealed by the lowered cloth], but *experience* tells you something [the raised cloth] *must be* there" (67; italics in original). That works with the concealed face as the content in the gutter. So the point seems proved. But in order to understand this example, we have to further imagine the mother raising and lowering the cloth in between its fully concealing or revealing her face. We are literate as readers of comics, so we do this without a second thought. But in effect, McCloud has put us in the position of imagining gutters to show us what we imagine when the gutters are really there. It is a clever move: we are shown the absence of a gutter. Into that absence we imagine a gutter to demonstrate the gutter's work, and that work is to



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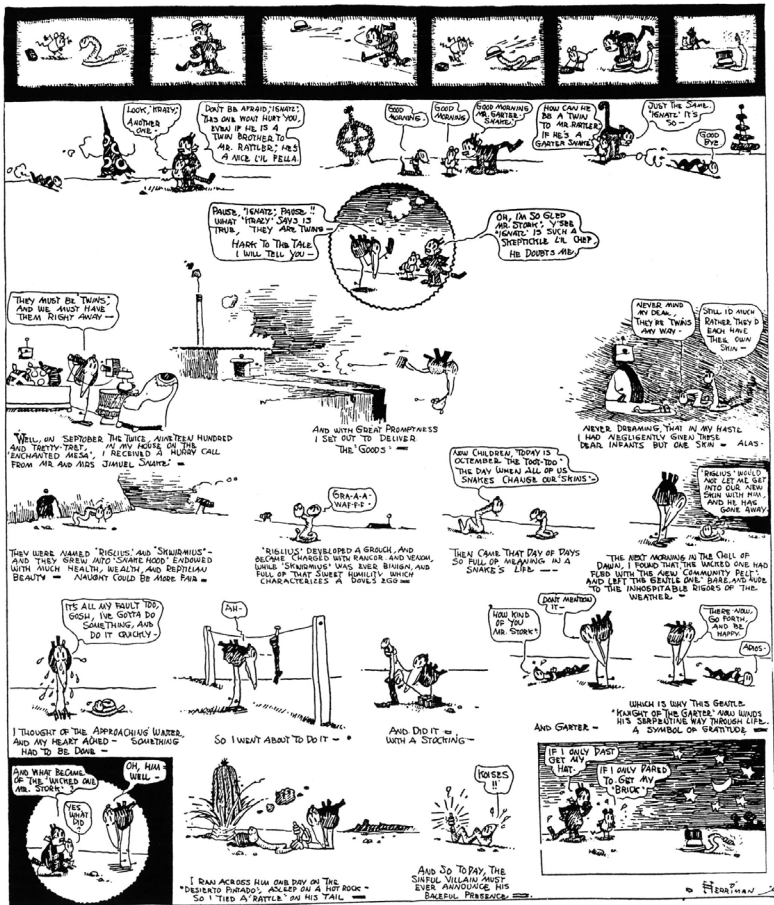
Figure 4. McCloud plays "Peek-a-Boo" with the Gutter itself, from *Understanding Comics* 62 (top) and 67 (bottom).



show us nothing so we can imagine something between the panels we *are* shown. That second sequence is an interactive drawing of the mind doing without the gutters what McCloud says the mind does with them. But in order for the illustration to work for us, we must be doing exactly what the gutters are supposed to be telling us to do except do it in their absence. But since we do the same imaginative work whether the gutter is there or not, that means the gutter is irrelevant to the imaginative work of making a sequence out of a series. If that is the case, and the gutter is not doing what McCloud says it is doing, then it is either doing nothing, or it is doing something else.

Whatever purpose the gutter serves, it is clearly a convention of the form. But it was not a standard at the outset. As we can see from Figure 5, George Herriman varied the presentation of his highly influential work in *Krazy Kat*, sometimes using gutters to organize sequences, sometimes not. Further examination of the early history of the form reveals a kind of Burgess Shale fossil record with every manner of life form—the fantastic and the ordinary—found side by side.

- 64 What we can see here is that, taken as a form, through the varying stylistic approaches of various individual artists, comics was experimenting with many ways of conveying the idea of motion through the arrangement of still frames all visible at once. Indeed, as seen in Figures 6 through 8, Töpffer himself seems determined to run through the entire phylogeny of this new art form of life, employing borderless panels, contiguous panels—like folds in a page—and something blurring the lines between the gutters that will appear in American reprints of his work and panels themselves to tell his “Picture Tales.” Historically, the question for comics as originated, then, in Europe, and shaped by the American popular culture to the point that Yahgulanaas offers his critique of them, is, if the imagination involved in reading comics works the same way with gutters and without them, why *choose* the guttered page—clearly the choice that won out? For us, then, that question becomes, is the spatio-temporal meaning that we ascribe to the gutter something that the gutter is intended to mean, or are both McCloud and Yahgulanaas reading the gutter the way any art form can be read—not only for its past intentions but for its present significance?



JANUARY 14, 1917

Figure 5. George Herriman varying the presentation of Krazy Kat—sometimes in guttered sequences, sometimes not, January 14, 1917; from *Krazy and Ignatz: The Other-Side to the Shore of Here, Volume II: 1917* (7).

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Figure 6. A Töpffer Sequence without a Gutter (Google Images).

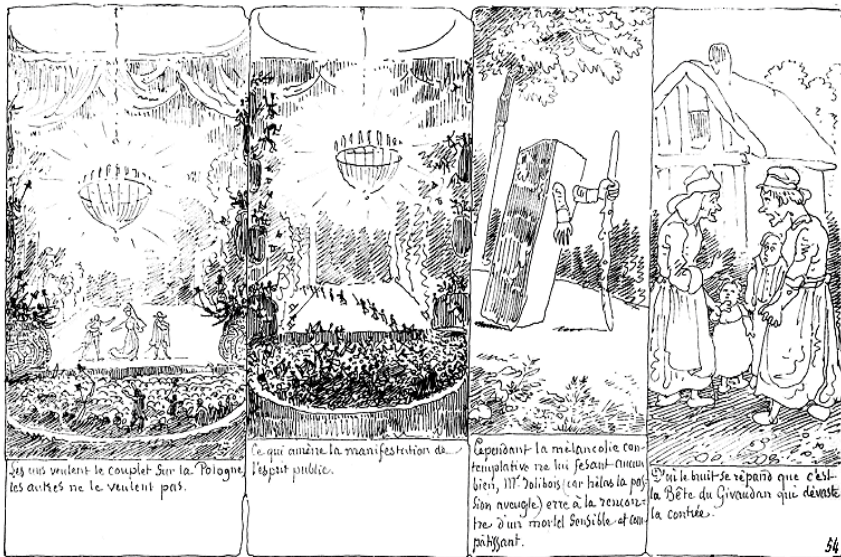


Figure 7. Töpffer using single-line borders—almost as fold-lines—as gutters, much the way manga uses these lines decades later (Google Images).

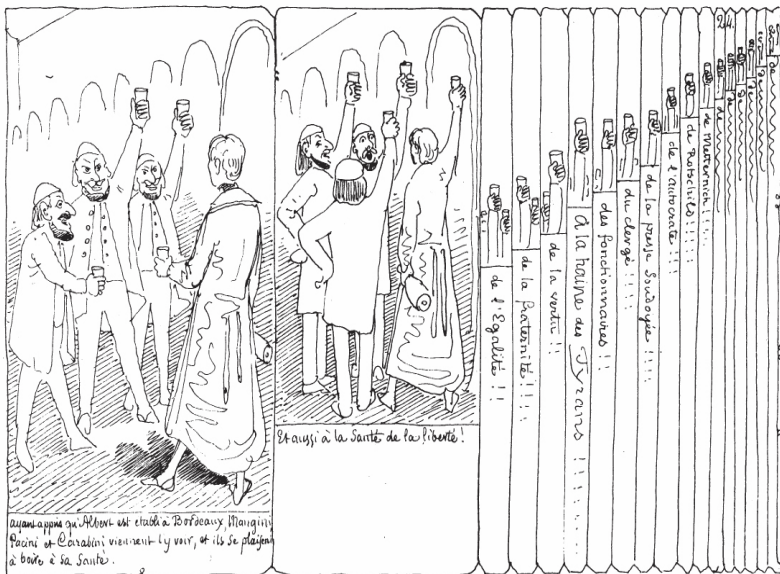


Figure 8. The Post-Modern Töpffer blurring the distinction between fold and panel (Google Images).

Yahgulanaas's critique of the gutter as a European, culturally-based delineation of empty space is multi-layered. It is not just that the white strip between the things we see on the comic page is so easily interpreted, the way Turtle Island was interpreted, as a great and Open Range, a nothingness to be used as the observer sees fit; it is that the panels defined by the gutters are so rectilinear, so *sharp*: *Ouch!* Empty of pictures, the standard comic page looks like nothing so much as a landscape first mapped, then shaped as a flat expanse divided by fences and roads. Think of what I consider one of the key experiences one should have in order to understand Canada: the prairies seen from the air, the land and any but its most obdurate features subordinated to the grid. Such geographical latticeworks abound, even where the landscape itself is not re-shaped (though it often is as well): highways, power lines, housing blocks, street systems ordered by number and the right angle, like a graph, particularly those of New York and my home town, Calgary—a division and sub-division system based not on the nature of the land put to use, but on the efficiency principles of the mind

68 that does the using.

Does it make a difference if the lines we use to define the end of one thing and the beginning of another are straight or curved? In the spiritual sense that Yahgulanaas sees every representation in art, yes. The curve is the land, the body, the river; it is the shape of the continuity between things; in a religious sense, the shape of the continuum out of which individual things emerge and to which they remain connected. The straight line is the map of a world of discrete objects whose continuity is not considered to be in them, but left to us to make or ignore. The line is the sharp distinction, the precondition of the technology that changes the world and re-shapes it to its own categories and needs. Stories shown in curves are different from stories shown in rectangles, triangles and squares; their storytellers are different, and their worlds.

It has always felt extreme to me to say that the colonizing mind did not actually see the native populations of the colonized land. I have often found that claim difficult to comprehend, not so much intellectually, at the distance of story, but emotionally, experientially, as something that I could do or have done to me (even though every time I read of things like the hunger experiments recently revealed on children in residential schools in this country, I believe it all over again). How does something that resists you also be something whose existence you do not acknowledge? Clearly this is the paradox of Canadian history (like many histories) that Yahgulanaas's argument (and his art) asks us to address. If the blank gutter represents a place where nothing but the space exists to which the *observer* gives life and meaning (or where the *observer* makes life and meaning) then it is itself a picture of the mind that arrived at the landscape of his ancestor's world and saw it as nothing more than a receiving space for its own "gift" of life and order—a view of things perhaps diminished now, but certainly not yet gone.

Most of this discussion has focused on the gutter as representing space; only secondarily has it represented time. But both McCloud and Yahgulanaas acknowledge the gutter as representing each—and both—equally, time as essential an element in



an event as space. For McCloud, the lack of pictures in the gutter means that whatever the events are between the events depicted in the panels is left up to the reader to imagine according to the clues to be found in the panels themselves, and, sometimes, imagined wrongly according to how the story turns out. I would add, too, that the inter-panel emptiness is what also makes room for revision in later stories; every panel has an “off-stage” attached to it, and in that “off stage” whole stories can be created: at least in part, the gutter makes the retcon possible. The lack of pictures, too, means that the amount of time represented by the gutter is infinitely flexible, from a mere moment—a bat is swung in one panel and a ball connected with in the next—to millions of years, to none at all (as in McCloud’s “scene to scene” transitions or shifts in space defined by the famous “meanwhile” voice-over). Nor does time need to move one way: one panel can be followed by another in the order of reading but preceded in the order of the story.

I can read as much in “in *The Gutter*” about time as I can about space: the colonizing erasure of Indigenous history and its replacement by a European timeline, and the notion of what counts as an event associated with it are perfectly compatible with both history and Yahgulanaas’s critique. I use the term “timeline” cautiously here: the term prioritizes the worldview of “before” and “after” in the arrangement of events. As noted earlier, *Red* is a mural-comic: as well as read in sequence, everything in it is also meant to be viewed at once; this reflects what Yahgulanaas phrased this way in our correspondence: “time is attached to the panel, but it is fully connected to *all* panels at the same time.” Thus *Red* is a visual representation of both what Plato called “the moving image of eternity”—the time factor that changes from future to present to past regarding any event, and the unchanging time element that remains a constant dimension of all events together. But that historical interpretation leaves untouched the question of the cultural interpretation of time that expresses itself in the panel-gutter-panel sequence of American comics and the curved panels surrounded and connected by a continuum structure of Yahgulanaas’s own work.

Here is my take. It is a given that the comic page is read in the same manner as the text page of the culture that produced it: English speakers read comics left to right, top to bottom, for example. But most of the analysis of sequential art treats understanding the comic page as interpreting a series of pictures: the obvious and productive analogies between comics and film, paintings, or photographs dominate that analysis. But let me try this thought experiment based on the idea that a page of sequential art is a page of text: if the comic page is a page of meaning we read from panel to panel (even as we order our reading within the panel according to the images and words within it), then we can consider each relationship between whole and part in the meaning of a piece of sequential art the way we consider the relationship between whole and part in the meaning of a selection of text.

If the page in a comic is a page in a novel, the panel is a paragraph; if the page is a paragraph, the panel is a sentence; if the page is a sentence, the panel is a word, and so on up or down in scope, and we can all think of the single-page comic sequence

that would take (and thus be the equivalent) of a novel as well as the panel that acts as a single letter. This flexibility of scope is one of the features of comics that makes it possible for them to contain so much more (and for many, so much more accessible) information than pure texts, a feature Will Eisner used in World War II to make comics the language for field instruction for illiterate conscripts who needed the information but did not have the ability to read text, and that Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón used to condense the Senate report on 9/11 to a graphic novel for those who have the desire to know what the report said but do not have the time or dedication to read a 5000-page document.

Comics, then, expand the power of text; they do so by substituting pictures and words for words alone, but the structure of text remains: if we think of the page as a sentence, then the panel is a word. And if the panels are words, then the metaphor for the relationship between the panels and the space between them is not the invisible-in-motion bar between frames of film; it is the space between words themselves.

- 70** When we think of the panels as pictures representing X at different points in time, it makes sense to ask what X was doing in between those points: what *not drawn* pictures exist in the gutter between the ones that are there for us to see. But if we think of the panels as words, then the question does not seem as obvious: If I write “My father was once a soldier,” does anyone ask “What words must I imagine between ‘My’ and ‘father’ in order for the sentence to make sense?” I would venture that the answer is “no.” That is not to say that there could not be words in there: I could retcon the sentence, and add information that changes or contradicts the image you had of my father in the sentence in which you met him: “My loving father was once a soldier” or “My angry father was once a soldier,” “My fictitious father,” and so on. But the possibility of more words than are shown in the first sentence is not the necessity of your imagining more than you see in order to make sense of what the sentence tells you.

In fact, I would argue two things: one is that if there is a necessity to imagine words in the gutter between words in the sentence, you could fall into an infinite regress in much the same way any two panels in a comic could have an infinite number of pictures between them. The other is that if the space between words in a sentence represents a word or two not written but understood, that says that the relation between any two words is mediated by other words, but what, then, mediates the relationship between the mediating words and the words they are supposed to connect? It is another relationship that needs words to mediate it. In the end, you have another infinite regress. These philosophical conundrums are not really arguments for an infinite sequence of pictures or words so tightly connected that, so to speak, “there is no space between them”: what they do is make us see that at some point, usually at the level of the ordinary sentence or the reading of a page of comics, we *make* sense out of what we are given. We do not have a picture of the half-lowered cloth in the “peek-a-boo” comic; we do not need a word in between “my” and “father” to *understand* what we are being told. Making sense means going beyond the level of that evidence itself. The gutter in the comic, like the space between words, does not represent anything; it

is a conventional sign to say: make sense of what you have been given.

That argument would seem to have me fall on the “nothing” side of the “what’s in the traditional comic gutter?” question, though it is not the “nothing” that Yahgulanaas says is there in a dangerous way. But if what I have pointed to here is the neutral “nothing” of our own activity in making sense of what is there (in the panels), then it is not the “nothing” that Yahgulanaas wants to say is the creation of our actively ignoring what *is* in the world in order to act upon it—or, more accurately, the reality of the Indigenous world that the colonizing world ignored in order to take it for itself. For that to be true, then my “comic panels as text” argument would have to allow that the language code of spaces and letters embeds some mechanism of denial as well.

And I think it does. If the comic panel-gutter-comic panel sense-making machinery is like that of word-space-word, and, as Yahgulanaas says, there *is* something in the gutter that leaving it blank denies, then there is something in the space between words that the system of separate words with spaces between them also ignores. There is. The short answer, now basic to the understanding of linguistics (Sedivy 107-15), is that many—and all European—written systems are divided contrary to the actual experience of the language as spoken. The division of the undulating stream of sound that language is into discrete words with rules of grammar and notation represents the systematic exclusion of a significant part of the experience of language in favour of the standardized system that makes communication through writing possible. Effectively, writing not only eliminates accent; it often divides (or combines) words contrary to their experience of being spoken or heard.

Over time the effect of writing on speech in writing-producing societies is to shape speech in the image of text, but gaps remain where the auditory original patterns show through. To take a small yet persistent example in English: the words “although” and “a lot” both sound like the individual words “although” (which it is) and “alot” (which they are not)—so much so that “alot” is one of the most misspelled (two) word(s) in the language. Spelling “alot” as one word is such a common error that searching “alot spelling mistake” on Google yields 15 million websites complaining about it as everything from a pet peeve to a résumé-destroying blunder. I have had to write each one-word “a lot” three times in the same space to dodge the SpellCheck function of this computer. Eventually, I am sure that “alot” will become one word from the pressure of its written use this way alone, but it will do so against resistance within a system in which a lot rides on the distinction between words as they sound and words as they should look. Framed in comics terms, the question “What’s in the gutter between “a” and “lot”? is answered by, “Nothing—but it’s the nothing of a word forced out of its position in speech.”

As much as comics, then, can be said to speak in the universal vocabulary of pictures, they are still written in the culturally generated structures of text. To those within them, those structures are so common that they seem as natural as speech. What I see Yahgulanaas’s work doing from outside the European traditions of text—and sequence—that dominate North American comics, is offer a critique of those

conventions not just in comics but in meaning-making technology itself from a culture that makes meaning in a completely different way—a way based much more firmly on the oral experience of language, and a worldview based upon it.

If that is the case, or even likely to be, one of the consequences of the discussion about whether the gutter is empty or full is that, in terms of what we do as readers in moving from panel to panel, it does not matter. No matter what is between them, including the true “nothing” of two panels sharing a single line border, successive panels present us with discontinuous images that we in turn make sense of as parts of a continuous story. If standard comics choose to separate panels with a space, the way words are separated here, that is because we are used to words with spaces between them as the sign of meaning-being-made. If we leave those spaces white in comics, it is because white is the unquestioned default sign of the distinction between units of text. When that sign is questioned as if it were a picture, what it is a picture of reveals its cultural origins and meaning. In one sense, McCloud is right: the gutter is part of

72 the way in which the reader gives the comic life, but in no greater or lesser sense than the space between words lets the reader “give life” to the sentence.

But if whether the gutter is full or empty does not matter in terms of the interpretation of panels, it does matter in terms of the relationship between what exists and how it is represented. The full gutter of a Yahgulanaas piece challenges, informs, reminds us that every representational system carries the assumptions of its practitioners with it. For the systems embedded in spoken language, language is a whole from which any given meaning is taken; written-language systems break that whole into things the relationship between which then becomes a problem.

Ever since I became aware of Yahgulanaas’s critique of the gutter—or at least of what that gutter represents—I have been trying to look at the standard gutter, really look at it until I could see it for what it is. The best I have been able to do is either see it the way McCloud wants me to, as the kind of something I cannot see that represents something I could but do not—which, as oddly as that is phrased, is the way I am used to it seeing it, the way we all are, even though, like the details on the hummingbird’s wing in motion, we cannot. Or, to see it as nothing, the way Yahgulanaas says I really do, coming as I do, from the colonizing mind and everything level and perpendicular that it has built. Something? Nothing? Or something and nothing at once? Every time I think I can do this, it slips from me. Then when I think, *this is a picture that is nothing to some and everything to others*, what I glimpse is the irreconcilable.

But I am not at all sure, as I once was, that “irreconcilable” is not actually a form of praise. Reconciliation does not necessarily mean an end to what motivates discussion. Sometimes it is an agreement to stop talking. And while that has its place, in politics at least, that end of discussion too often comes with what satisfies the majority or the powerful. What is admirable in art—and the critique that art makes possible—is that the discussion need never rest. And perhaps it never should in political or other aspects of life, either. Whatever it is or represents, whatever can be seen in or through it, the gutter in comic art (of all places) might well be a model for the

reality of life in a place created out of incompatible cultures that cannot settle their differences but must learn to share what they do not have in common.

And to set this stage of my reading in the context of sequential art, that difference may also mean that there is not a single set of terms by which to define Canadian graphic novel any more than there is a single set of terms by which to define Canada. At least some art, if not some part of all art, is a critique of conventions, including the conventions of art itself. When he launched *Red* at WordFest in 2009, Yahgulanaas said that it was a book designed to invite discussion. He offered it as both an opportunity and a test—to see if anyone was listening, not just to a story worth thinking about, but, to a way of story-telling and sense-making presented in a language that could be called universal if only because it might make what we do not understand about each other clear.

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