The Interdependent Relationship of Artists and Writers in Comic Books

Tim Bavlnka

Faculty Sponsor: Sharon Jesse, Department of English

ABSTRACT

Comics have grown and developed into an artistic medium. Serious work creating a legitimate form of literature behind the covers has been going on for decades. The productions in the comic medium reveal the complexity of characters, themes, tones, and plots created between the meshing of the images and the words and invoke a world to the reader comparable to any work of art. Writers and artists have dedicated their lives to telling their stories, regardless of the fashion in which they do it. The script of the comic, planned out by the writer, can be radically re-contextualized when interpreted by the artist. The writer constructs a near cinematic world with words on paper, which gets fleshed into life by the artist with images and colors. The script and art combine to form meaning to what is on page, and the face of literature are transformed by the narrative shape of a medium devoted equally to word and image.

ART

Art may be one of the last parts of the creative process, but its role in the visual narrative is obvious – the story lives through the art. It is what we see. We get to know the characters through their visual appearance, action, and lives and are able to identify with them as characters (McCloud 30). It shows us the world we are immersed in, the events going on in it, and the environment where our characters live. It is the key part that separates comics into a visual narrative and where most of the writing is invisibly transferred.

While the writer becomes invisible, the artist is therefore forced into a state of hypervisibility. Their art is what inevitably becomes what the characters are visualized and identified as, instead of textual descriptions on page. Actions are changed from words to images, and we can see the character actually doing, instead of imagining the act. But, unlike the visual form of film, these actions are not fluid into actual movement. There is still a level of imagination involved with the reader's participation.

STYLE

The art style can vary greatly depending on the artist. It can change the entire tone, weight, motive and even the purpose of a story. A horror series can feature macabre art, while an action series might focus on square jaws and muscles; a series focused for children might have softer, rounded lines, while an older adult series will have more dynamic lines. The styles can vary to an incredible degree, but an artist is generally chosen deliberately for their uniqueness, and how it can shape the tone of the over-all narrative.

Here, for example, are two extremes of comic book art. On the left is a selection of Alex Ross's photorealistic paining style, versus the deformed line drawings of Marjane Satrape. Ross brings his characters to life in a very literal sense, making them appear to be as realistic as an actual person. While he is incredibly talented, it also forces onto the reader a more absolute image of the character, a golden-aged era of heroes, where everyone seems to wear spandex. Satrape's style creates a sense of childhood innocence, which purposely contrasts her story about growing up in the oppressions of Iran.

(http://www.alexrossart.com/)

(Satrapi 1)

In regards to the independent comic book scene, we can compare the work of Daniel Clowes and Craig Thompson. Both primarily work in black in white, line drawings. Clowes's characters have an almost too real appearance to them, allowing the reader to take in a shared tragedy of their humanity, to see the pain and emotions in their faces Thompson, while similar to Clowes, uses a more fluid approach, adding a tone of whimsy and innocence, and perhaps naivety.

(Clowes 73)

(Thompson 183)

Two of this year's biggest comic book events also vary drastically in artistic approach. DC's 52 keeps a traditional comic book superhero look to it, partially due to time deadlines of putting out an issue every week, but also to help the reader stay in touch with the characters, as it mixes several different story lines. The style and

weekly repetition helps to create an unforgettable iconography shared by the characters of the series, which in turn helps keep the multilayered and heavily entangled plots more tangible for the reader. The more detailed work of Marvel's Civil War is used to add to the gritty world where the characters are now living, and helps emphasize their struggle over basic human (or meta-human) rights. This, however, has been heavily delayed throughout the year, due to the more time consuming process.

(Jones, Geoff, Grant Morrison, Greg Rucka, and Mark Waid 16)

(Millar 24)

Style can effect how we see a specific character character. Marvel's character Wolverine is seen here in two very different forms. On the left is a comical, goofy characterization of this notoriously gritty individual. On the right, even though we can't see his face, the coloring and texture of the picture create a self-sacrificing man, wrenched in pain and pushed to his limits. While is iconography is consistent, his character is now able to behave differently depending on the context in which he is placed.
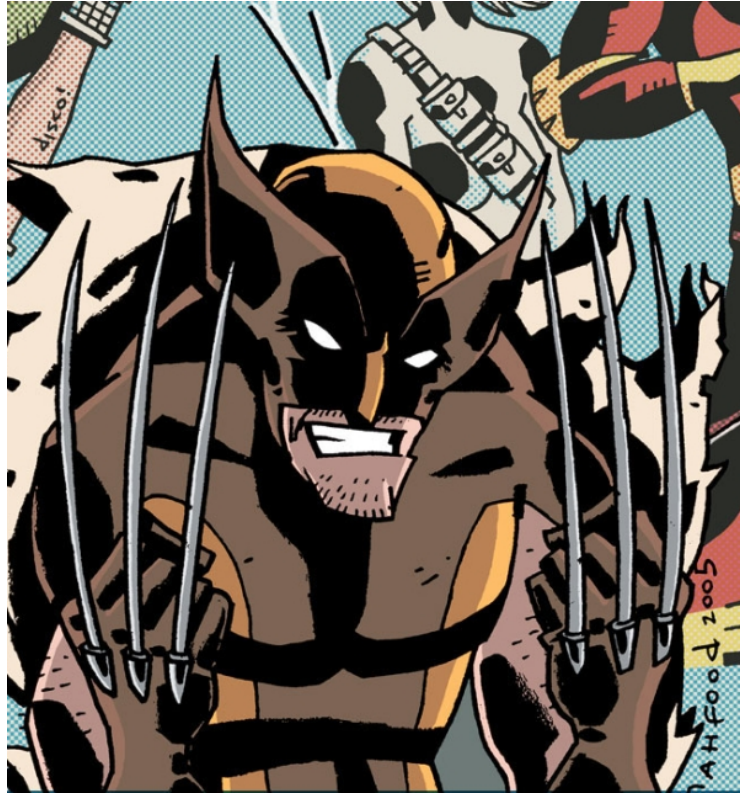
(Wha...Huh?)

(Moore, Stuart 12)

Not only can it function from story to story, the art and writing can forever change the way readers see a character. Batman through the years functioned as a detective thwarting goof-ball villains like "The Bizarre Polka-

Dot Man" – man who flung dots at people. The 1960's television show with Adam West is a good example of this. Jump ahead to 1986, and we get Frank Miller's canon shaking reinterpretation of the Dark Knight. Scared, bruised, bleeding, and ready to ruin a criminal's face with his bare hands, Miller's story and art forever changed the way Batman is presented and read.
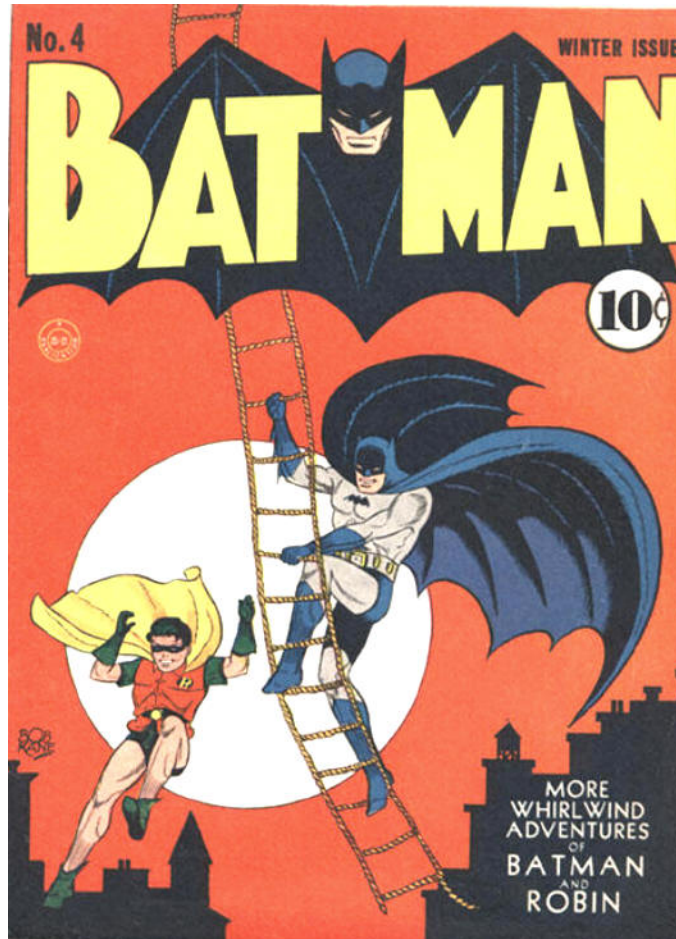
(Kane, cover)

(Detective Comics #300 cover)
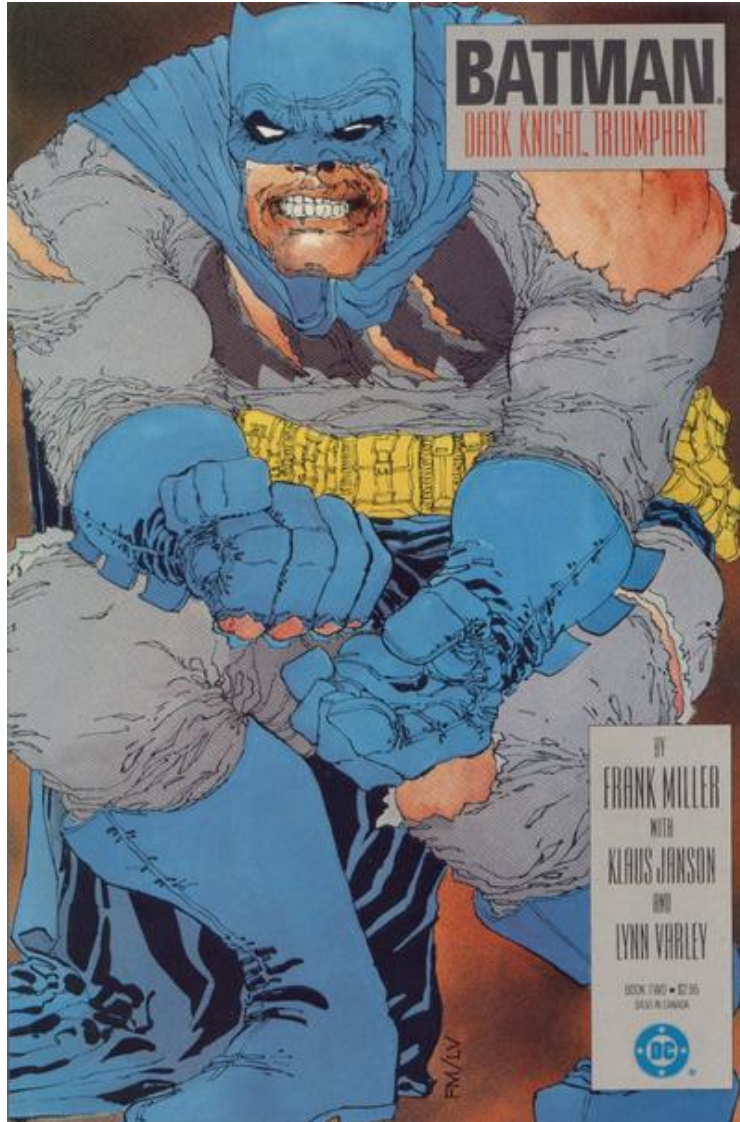
(Miller supplemental)

DIFFERING ARTISTS

Neil Gaiman's incredibly popular comic series Sandman has been known for its regular change of artists in its story telling. These next few examples are each different issues, but collected together in the same book. This first page is standard comic book art, the coloring helps to add to the mysteriousness and darkness of the comics tone. This second page uses water colors to add to the fantasy and make believe that is always apparent throughout the canon of Sandman. Drastically different, we see how the artist can turn the story into a surrealistic experience, creating a bizarre experience for the reader to follow. And finally, the art twists itself into a psychotic breakdown. These all differ greatly from the art we saw back in the 80's which was limited to pulpy paper, and non-digital inking technologies.


(Gaiman 26)

(Gaiman 47)

(Gaiman 107)

One day her hook will catch your heart.

Describing her, we articulate what she is and why she is:

when hope is past, she is there.

She is in a thousand thousand waiting rooms and empty streets, in grey concrete buildings and anonymous hotels.

She is on the other side of every mirror.

When the eyes that look back at you know you too well,

and no longer care for what they see, they are her eyes.

She stands and waits, and in her posture the pain no longer tells you to live, and in her presence joy is unimaginable.

(Gaiman 81)

To emphasize this more, here we get a side by side comparison of an original print of a Sandman page from 1986, and a re-mastered and re-inked version released earlier this year. No longer are we staring at murky, swampy greens, but magical and mysterious oranges and blues. The color black, which plays an important visual role throughout the series, is actually black. And the shadows on the men on the bottom aren't limiting. Through current technology, the feel of the story can change dramatically.

(http://www.neilgaiman.com/journal/2006/06/sunday-morning-again.html)
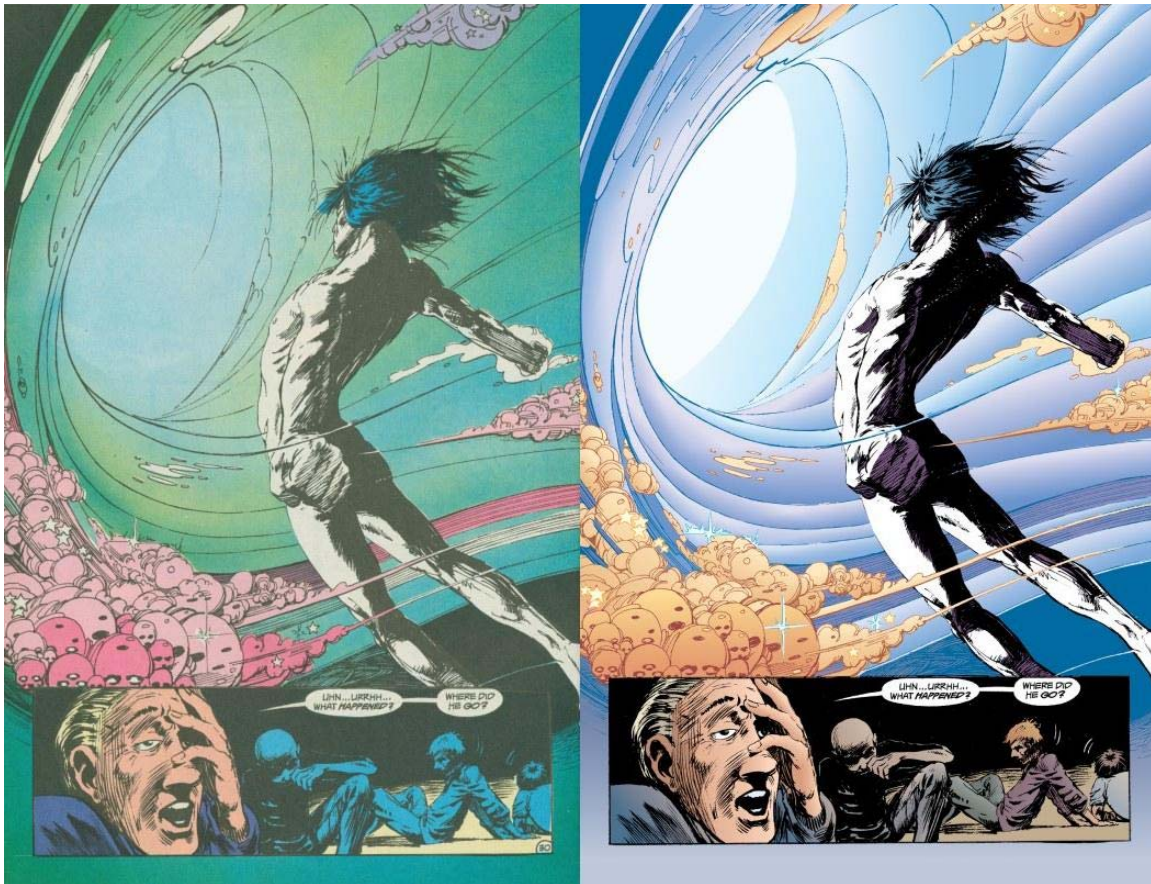
WRITING

The writing process differs from person to person. While some enjoy the collaboration with artists and other writers to create their work, others lock themselves away until their project is complete (Salisbury 68). The writer's job, unlike the artist, is to remain invisible to the reader as much as possible. They need to create something where the audience can get lost, as if no one is writing at all, as if the events in the pages are actually happening to some degree.

Spider-Man can be taken away from his superhero element with constructing a scene of tragedy. Spider-Man is hardly in the panel, the caption adds an emotional significance that the page itself cannot.
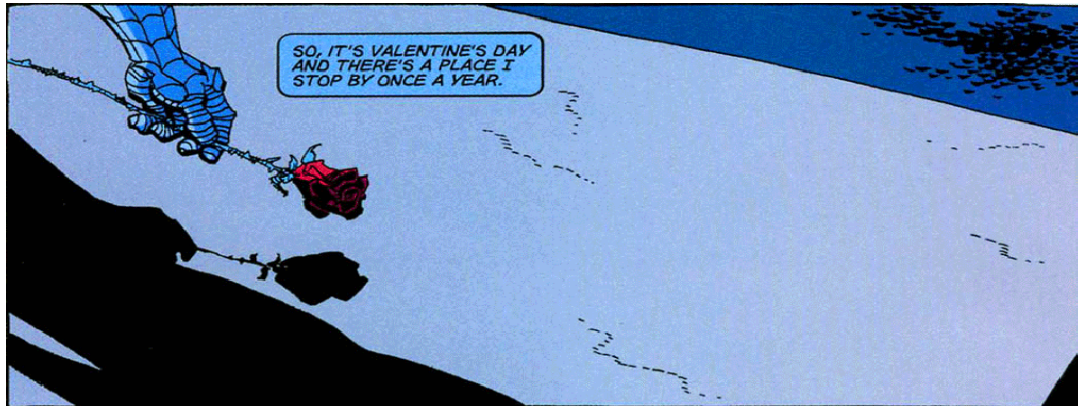
(Loeb 12)

We have examples of when the words help emphasize the meaning where the art cannot. Here is a page from *Punisher*, describing a toy gun – a favorite toy of his murdered son. Contrasting the arsenal that Punisher traditionally goes through, the gun to him represents a lost innocence, and a reminder of his purpose.

(The Punisher Armory 36)

This page is unique because it focuses on one panel, blacking out the rest of the page for emotional emphasis. Neither the art nor the emotions on the faces give away anything in particular, but when we read it we learn about Reed Richards losing his child in birth. The words hold much more power to what is happening on the page.

(Byrne 22)

These are panels are powerful not only because of the dialogue represented on page, but because of the ways the writers invisibly set up the narrative. Their directions to the artists and their collaborations help guide the visual art, while also setting up the traditional textual narrative.

SCRIPT TO PAGE

The relationship of the artist and writer is something of mutual trust. The writer writes, and the illustrator draws what they are supposed to. Famed writer Warren Ellis has fired artists flat-out for going against the script, bastardizing his initial creative process (Salisbury 65). While the process requires some mutual trust, often time scripts are sent across countries or oceans from person to person, with little contact between those involved.

But, the script writing process can differ from person to person. The majority of the time scripts are written in a literal script form – with description of what is being seen and what exactly is being said. Some prefer to simply plot

out scenes for the artist to complete, and add dialogue over them (Salisbury 10). On occasion, for more serialized comics, such as Batman or Superman, a writer will simply ask the artist what they want to draw for that issue, and write a story around it (Salisbury 46).

Many writers speak about the collaborative nature of the creation process when they work extendedly with talented artists whom share their same vision. The script writing process can become incredibly sparse when there is a stronger connection between the writer and artist, "Character enters room," may be all that need to be said for the artist to illustrate it. The sense of trust is incredibly important to this process, particularly when individuals plan to work with each other for an extended period of time, or if the series is created/owned by both the writer and artist.

Here are a few examples of some average scripts:
A screenplay format script from Warren Ellis, descriptions of each panel, and their respective dialogue.

PAGE TWENTY

Pic 1;
Watford dips to the bag again, pulling out another two photos, still reading from his sheet as he does so.

WATFORD;   FIRST, HE CUT OUT BRACKNELL'S IMPLANTS. HIP AND TRENDY THING TO DO THESE DAYS; STICK SHIT UNDER YOUR SKIN. FUCKING SCUM...

WATFORD;   HE LEFT THEM ALL AT THE FOOT OF THE BED. THE HIGHLIGHTS OF THE LIST; STAINLESS STEEL BALLS, RODS, ETC (APPROX. TWO POUNDS). PRE-WAR MASONRY NAILS (3).

Pic 2;
He shows the top photo to John, who leans in, not quite believing this one.

WATFORD;   ABORTED FOETUS (1), PRESERVED.

WATFORD;   REASONABLE SUPPOSITION WAITING FOR CONFIRMATION FROM THE HOSPITAL IS THAT SAID FOETUS IS THE ABORTED CHILD OF BRACKNELL, I.

Pic 3;
Watford strips away the top photo — and John stops moving entirely.

WATFORD;   THEN HE THOUGHT FUCK IT, AND WENT FOR HER FACE.

WATFORD;   'ERE.

Pic 4;
Rest of the page.

This is the black and white photo of Isabel Bracknell's head in death. Because it's about time we showed something nasty — we could afford to let the audience's overheated imagination do the work up until now, but it's time to swing for the bastards.

She was a beautiful brunette, not yet thirty. Dark eyes, pretty lips, snowy white skin. Now, her left temple is a jagged hole. Her mouth, ajar, has been widened by inches at either side. Her cheeks have been all but slashed off. One side of her face is so badly cut up that you can see her tongue through it. One of her eyes has been slit across, and the thick soft white has pushed out through the slit a little, all else in the eye is dark. Dead as hell. Dead ugly, dead with inhuman hate. Dead Isabel. Horrifying. If it doesn't make you feel sick while you're drawing it, then it ain't ugly enough. It's got to hit hard, got to make you want to puke and weep.

(no dialogue)

Above: *Ellis's graphic description of murder victim Isabel Bracknell, from Hellblazer #134. Courtesy of Warren Ellis.*

(Salisbury 70)

Below is Garth Ennis's hand written sparse page format. With artists he works with for awhile, he doesn't even bother typing them, and just writes what is supposed to be seen and said, trusting the artist to do anything else.
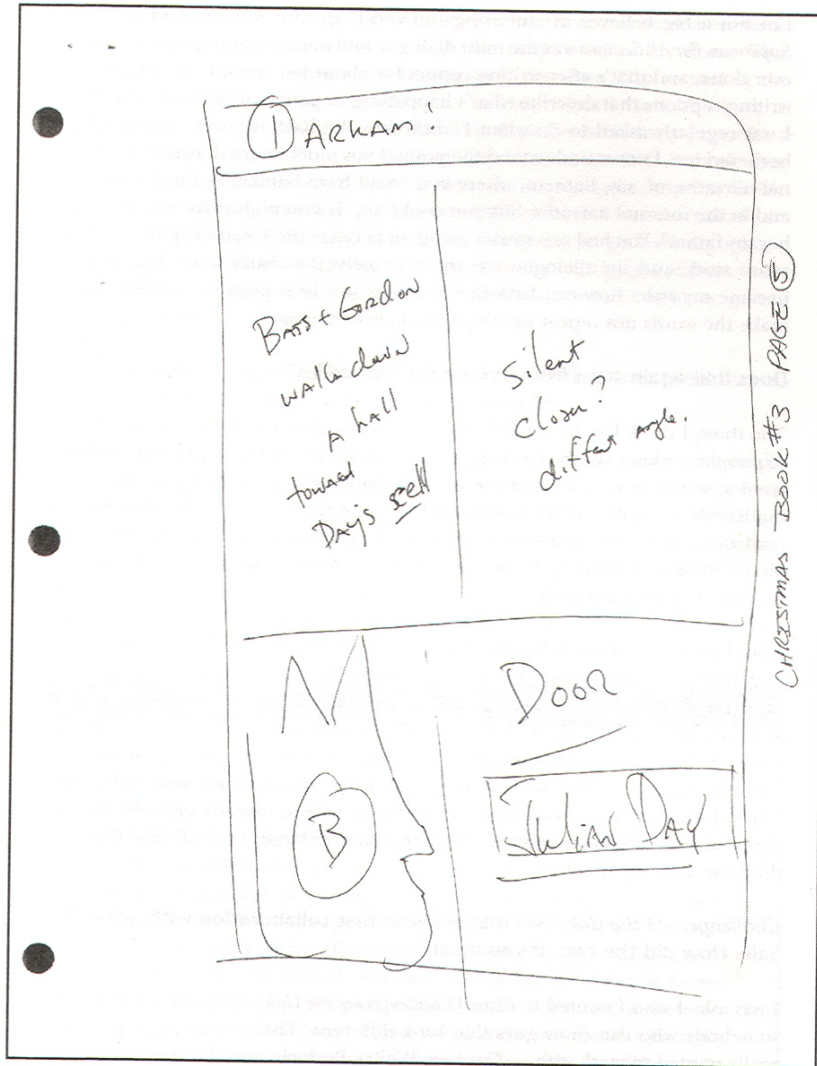
Above: *An extract from Garth Ennis's handwritten first draft script for* Preacher #50. *Courtesy of Garth Ennis.*

(Salisbury 82)

Here is a page complimenting a screenplay format page from Jeph Loeb, It just briefly constructing page format, and some rough angles.

Above: *Loeb's rough of the same page for artist Tim Sale. Courtesy of Jeph Loeb.*

(Salisbury 157)

Neil Gaiman's poorly drawn conceptual page approximates what is to be seen.

Above: *Detail from page eight of Neil Gaiman's mini-version of* Sandman *#17. Courtesy of Neil Gaiman.*

(Salisbury 106)

Grant Morrison's fully sketched out page. Grant actually started as an artist, so he is able to work a little better with visually constructing a page as well as with a script.

Above: More Morrison thumbnails, from the first part of 'Crisis Times Five'. Courtesy of Grant Morrison.

(Salisbury 215)

Comparing the writer's script to the completed page shows you just how complex the construction of a comic can be. For example, we have here the very first page of Alan Moore's masterpiece "The Watchmen." Moore is notorious in the business for being very concise with what he wants on page, and writing down every minute detail, because he claims they otherwise won't be there (Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked).

(Moore, Alan 1, supplemental)
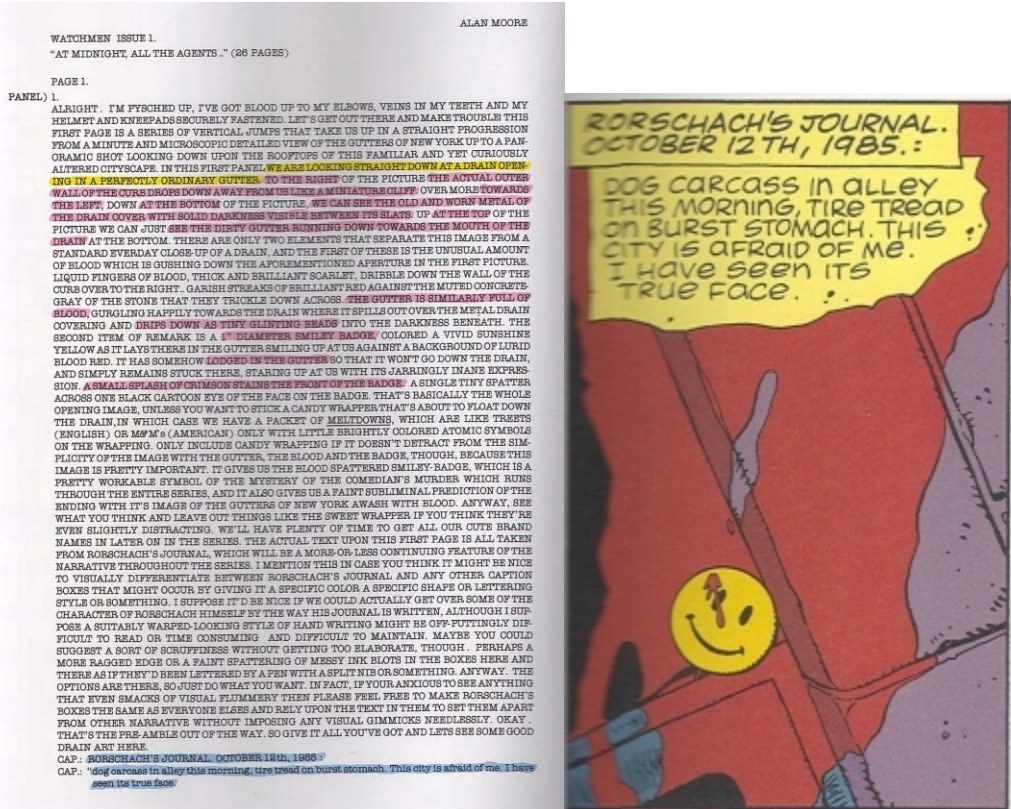
(Moore, Alan 1, supplemental)

This is the first page of the script for The Watchmen, and this page alone is directed entirely towards the construction of the first panel of the comic. The highlighted yellow are directional cues, red is what is visually apparent, and blue is dialog. Nearly most of Moore's description is unhighlighted, because he is not just setting up what is on that particular panel, but invisibly constructing an entire universe, right down to the candy that they might eat.

Page two of the script is directions for panels 2 and 3. While they are much shorter, much of what Moore's imagination is creating is becoming invisible to the reader. In this case, a picture is literally worth a thousand words. In general, Moore will write about 80 pages of script for a 24 page single issue, for The Watchmen that is about a 960 page script for a book roughly 300 pages long (Salisbury 103).

(Moore, Alan 1, supplemental)

We can see here a script of Warren Ellis's first issue of Hellblazer. This page is interesting for its use of words and images to create the story. The top half of the page is mostly just two individuals talking, taking the role of the word. The script descriptions just tell about what will be seen, people standing, folders of papers, and dialogue - mostly describing the murder. Ellis's description for the bottom half of the page invokes the artists talents to complete his image in a visual sense. He gives a description for the artist to illustrate the dead head of a murder victim, "If it don't make you sick while drawing it, then it ain't ugly enough" (Salisbury 68). When we see the combined finished page, we get a classic example of words and images complimenting each other. It is one thing to just read about a murder or just see photos, but their combined use creates a more sickening scene.

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Watford dips to the bag again, pulling out another two photos, still reading from his sheet as he does so.

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                                            IMPLANTS. HIP AND TRENDY THING TO DO
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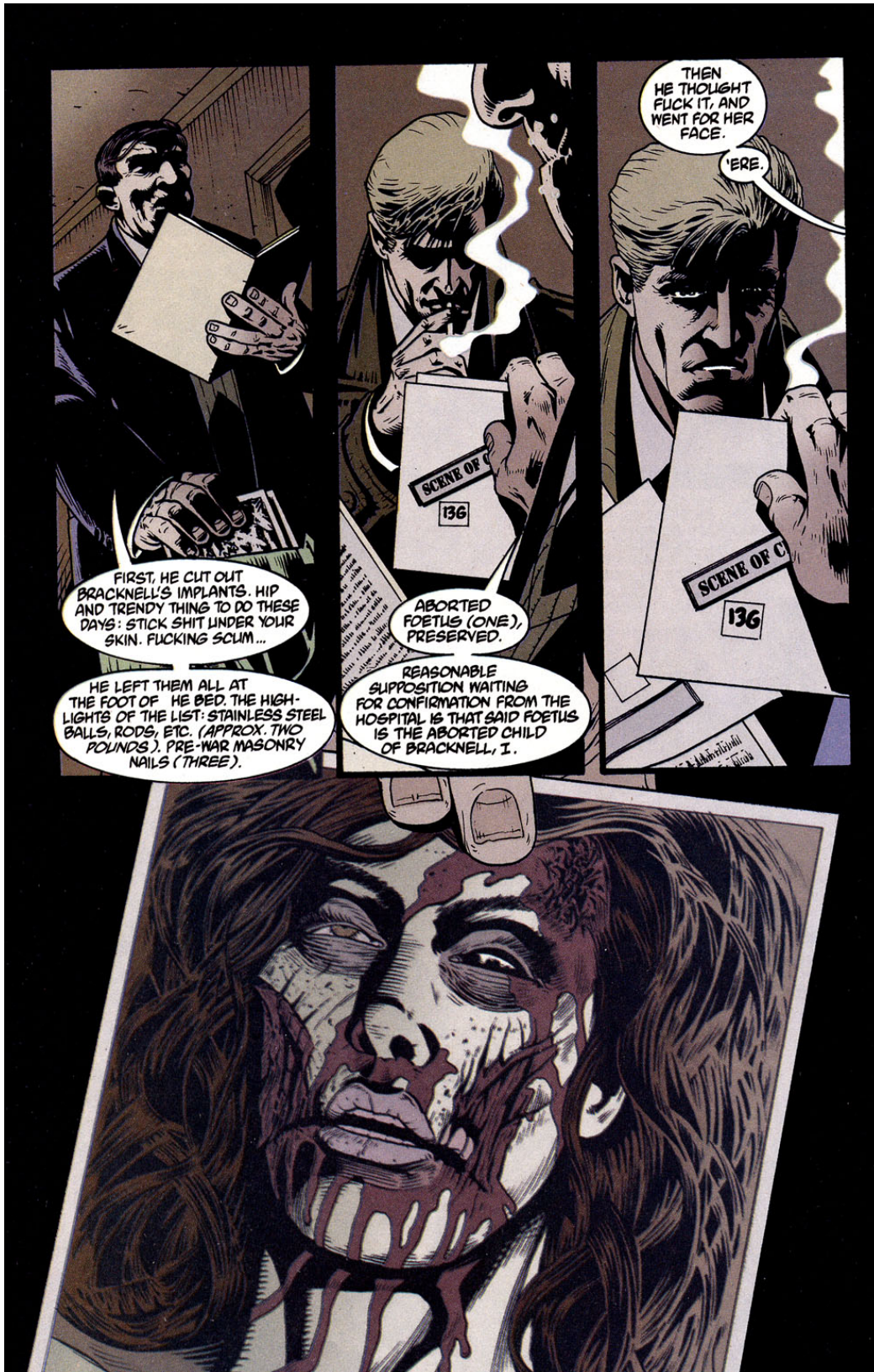
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(no dialogue)

Above: *Ellis's graphic description of murder victim Isabel Bracknell, from* Hellblazer *#134. Courtesy of Warren Ellis.*

(Salisbury 70)

(Ellis 20)

Using another piece of Ellis's work, Desolation Jones, we can see how an artist can develop a sparse comic script into something much more eloquent. Ellis wrote the first few issues of his story "blind" – not knowing who the artist would be. JH Williams took a simple description and brought it to a vibrant life.

> **Pic 1:** Surreal moment: Jones looks out the passenger-side window and there's a thick RED LINE taking the place of the road, running alongside them – a massively magnified version of the kind of line that describes roads on maps.
> **Pic 3:** AERIAL SHOT: The car is small in this shot, and it's driving down a red line that describes a road, and now the rest of the map, of greater LA, is visible all around it.
> (http://www.warrenellis.com/?p=974)

The final outcome is something completely unexpected, and visually just as interesting and important to the complete narrative as is what is being said on page.

(Ellis, Warren, and J. H. Williams 5)

CONCLUSION

The comic is a narrative form representing the fusion of the visual art of illustration and coloring and the invisible art of writing. Neither on their own gives the same effect on the reader, nor is one more important than the other. Not just a story, but an entire universe is presented within the pages of their graphic narrative, creating a full immersion for the audience through its complex construction. Their unique narrative structure can lead to the art, the words, or both driving a complex plot, evoking a specific emotion, or simply telling a story. Comics are not just an art form, but a complex art form, one that can be analyzed on multiple levels, or simply just enjoyed for what they are.

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