signs
STUDIES IN GRAPHIC NARRATIVES

Intl. Journal for the History of Early Comics and Sequential Art



"Drawing without a master, on Madame Cave's method."

N.B.—The style was applied on the walls of Paris long before the lady inventor was born.

suppl. #2

A Chapter on Methodology

signs
STUDIES IN GRAPHIC NARRATIVES

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The Arrow of Time

The cultural landscape I describe in *Naissances de la bande dessinée, de William Hogarth à Winsor McCay* [Smolderen 2009] suggests a narrative that differs in many ways from the one presented by other historians of the comic strip. The differences are all related to the methodological decision I made early on *not* to start with a definition of the form.

My goal is to understand the processes that led to the 20th century *comic strip*, a highly recognizable species of picture stories that crystallized around 1900 in the US and has stayed relatively stable to the present day in spite of the tremendous competition from other medias. Only a pencil and some paper are necessary to produce a readable and enjoyable comic strip, but in the age of the movie, the radio, the television, the computer and the Internet, the form is literally thriving—the robustness of this deceivingly simple medium in the 20th century is its most striking historical feature. However convincing and natural some of the available definitions of comics may appear to us today, they fail to explain this success. The goal of my research was to provide a *definition with a historical domain* that could address the enigma of the medium's robustness, and quite a few other questions. Obviously, I could not begin my research by deciding in advance what would be its end product.

In *Naissances de la bande dessinée*, I choose to present only the results of my work without dwelling much on the methodological issues. I return to these issues in the present essay. Here is my stance, summed up in a simple motto: *the historian should not explain the history of the form on the basis of its present state, but explain the present state of the form on the basis of its history.*

Laid in these terms, the proposition is self-evident: it allows for the arrow of time and the order of causality. In practice, it is all but intuitive. To explain something we know pretty well (the present form of the comic strip) on the basis of something of which we have a much poorer knowledge (the history of the comic strip) seems strangely self-defeating. The reverse operation is much more natural and comfortable, which explains why most of the specialists, when they construct a narrative of the form's history, instinctively (and implicitly) invert the arrow of time and causality.

This inversion has caused a lot of confusion and a few quarrels in the recent past. Some European and American specialists, for instance, took issue with the celebration of the 100th anniversary of Outcault's *Yellow Kid* [Wheeler & Beerbohm & De Sá 2003]. They accused an older generation of researchers of muddling the true history of the form by taking 1896 as its point of origin and linking it to the use of speech balloon. I believe there is no point in such a dispute for an historian who respects the arrow of time and causality: if our task is to explain the present form of the comic strip on the basis of its history, these more or less obsolete definitions are interesting and valuable EXACTLY in the measure in which they differ from the ones we feel are the most congenial today. It is only by figuring out which implic-

it and explicit definitions were relevant to the actors of the past, and by carefully retracing the trajectory of their changes over time that we can hope to create the new theoretical construct we are looking for: the comic strip form of today as a product of its history.

How does this construct differ from the one we know, or believe we know (without the benefit of a truly historical perspective)? For the historian, this is a crucial question, whose answer will determine the worth of his, or her, work.

Multiple Point of Views, Multiple Definitions

Note that the historians and theoreticians of the comic strip hold no exclusive rights to the business of producing definitions. In fact, it is useful to assume that all parties contributing in one way or another to the existence of the comic strip will produce, or project, such constructs in a way that is directly related to the role they play in the form's existence.[1] It is important, here, to insist on the multiplicity of these relevant social groups and sub-groups (authors, readers, publishers, printers, retailers, collectors, critics, scholars, historians, theoreticians, censors etc). The cultural artefacts we study depend on the complex (and always dynamic) compromises that are constantly woven between these "heterogeneous" actors. In the course of such negotiations, all participants tend to rationalize their particular relationship with the form by laying out their points of view (and practices) in terms of "principles", thus producing their own definition.

(Some of my ex-students, for instance, recently presented an innovative project to a mainstream publisher of comic strip albums. Much to their astonishment and indignation, he refused to consider it on the ground that it was not "de la bande dessinée". The discussion that followed was a clear example of the ongoing process of rationalization that always takes place during such negotiations.)

The school of theoreticians who started showing some interest in the comic strip form in France during the Sixties was no exception to this trend. Structuralism, semiotics and the theory of media played a major role in the sudden interest they took in the subject; thus began an intellectual process (most importantly mediated, in the US, by Will Eisner [Eisner 1985] and Scott McCloud [McCloud 1994]) that ultimately led to the definition of the comic strip as *the sequential art*.

The "Sequential Art" Definition

A central characteristic of this model is that it tries to describe the comic strip at a purely axiomatic level. The definitions might vary slightly from author to author, but the gist of the model is that any sequence of drawings which spatially maps the successive moments in time relevant to a narrative, belongs rightfully to the category. There is, of course, a huge difference between the "*Yellow Kid* definition"[2] and the "*sequential art* definition" of the comic strip: the former is anchored in a historical form (the Sunday Comic Supplement), while the latter has no such historical strings attached. In the tradition of Lessing's *Laocoön* (we will come back later to that most significant essay, published in 1764), McCloud and others want to describe the comic strip form in the most general terms, as a *medium*, only using the basic categories of space and time. In other words, their core definition does not have a historical domain.

This is the theoretical framework on which most of the scholars ground their historical researches today—they

[1] This sociological approach to the problem of multiple definitions (or "multiple framings") is broadly inspired by [Bijker 1995], a book I highly recommend to anyone interested in the epistemic issues raised in this article.

[2] Which can probably be traced back to [McCardell 1905].

start with the *sequential art* definition. It is a clear case of trying to understand the past through a concept whose relevance to the field was only made explicit quite recently (hence, the "battle of the Yellow Kid"), but the approach now seems so "natural" to us that we glide over the resulting paradoxes without giving them much thought. To the contemporary reader, the *sequential art* definition seems to capture the essence of the 20th century form—it is perfectly satisfying, it *feels* right. To the historian, however, it presents a recurring problem in that it fails to discriminate the modern comic strip from the variegated species of picture stories from the distant past—hence the paradoxes.

For instance, I did not read any complaint about the contradictory nature of David Kunzle's titling of his works. One of his major opuses, entitled *The Early Comic Strip* [Kunzle 1973] covers the 1450-1825 period. This choice of words did not stop him from publishing a book called *Father of the Comic Strip: Rodolphe Töpffer* [Kunzle 2007] more recently. Such contradictions go deeper than terminology. They reveal the profound problems of conceptualization that pervade the field.

This is not, however, to deny that we may have perfectly good, contemporary reasons to be interested in the abstract, sequential nature of the "comic strip medium" that so fascinates the contemporary researcher. The question I ask is: what can we really hope to find in pursuing this theme along the historical dimension?

Typically, a researcher working under the *sequential art* paradigm will identify the material that already conforms to the *sequential art* definition, and exclude, or marginalize the material that does not. In a nutshell, this is Kunzle's methodology: the task amounts to delineating the contours of an abstract domain that was defined before any historical work had been done. The peculiar circularity of the method seems to have escaped most of the observers: if the history of the *comic strip form* only concerns what *already* corresponds to the present definition (described by a set of axioms with no historical domain), how can we ever hope to retrace the historical steps that led to it? In other words, given such a collection of objects, what can we learn of any theoretical relevance that we did not already know?

Remember that this question is of the utmost importance to whoever is really interested in the history of the modern form:[3] our business is to explain the present with the past, not the reverse. If our historical research about the form cannot change our perception and understanding of the present state of affairs (illuminating hidden assumptions, answering vexing questions etc), it does not amount to much.

Which does not mean that the *sequential art* definition cannot present very interesting challenges to the historian who respects the arrow of time and recognizes the ever-changing nature of socially embedded conceptualizations. In truth, the axiomatic definition of the comic strip *does* have a historical domain—if one takes into account the cultural history of the *sequential art* concept *itself*.

In the 18th century, Gothold Ephraim Lessing proposed that poetry should be considered as an art of succession *par excellence* and that the poets should focus

[3] It goes without saying that Kunzle's two monumental volumes are historically illuminating (and extremely valuable) in respect to the *contents* and the context attached to the picture story form since the invention of printing. However, Kunzle basically presents the form in question—the "Comic Strip" in the title of his books—as a *constant*. To empirically retrace the genealogy of the modern comic strip (which stabilized around 1900) is a very different project. Such research will not necessarily map the same path as was covered by Kunzle's *a priori* definition, nor explore the same material. To understand the historical changes that lead to the modern comic strip, we must be prepared to encounter some (genealogically) related forms that may be radically different in conceptualization and categorization.

Polygraphic Humour: The Missing Part of the Equation (A Visual Companion to the Section on page 15)

In their book illustrations, cartoons, thematic collections of comic drawings, the humoristic illustrators of the 19th century typically adopted a polygraphic approach to style that paralleled the hybrid linguistic style of the comic novels they illustrated [Bakhtin 1982].
Perceived as relatively archaic, the picture story genre offered the comic artist a natural ground for such stylistic evocations and a good vehicle for making fun of the modern world or for getting romantically nostalgic about pre-industrial times. Thus, the artist and engraver often treated their picture stories in a manner that evoked the wiry contour line of old woodcuts. Sometimes, as in George Cruikshank's *Ballad of Lord Bateman*, they alluded to the neo-classical "calligraphic line" of John Flaxman (1755-1826).



Faust. Vingt-six gravures, d'après les dessins de Retzsch. Seconde édition, augmentée d'une analyse du drame de Goethe, par Madame Elise Voïart. Paris: Audot, 1828.

An alternative to the naïve woodcut line, the neo-classical "calligraphic line" introduced by the English sculptor John Flaxman was adapted to serious book illustrations by Morris Retzsch in the 1820s.

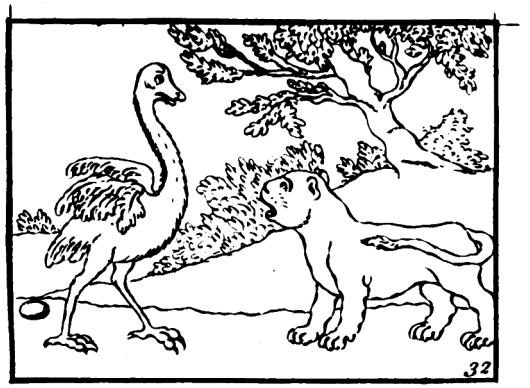
exclusively on the description of *progressive action*. McCloud and many others have demonstrated, in effect, that many aspects of Lessing's analysis of the treatment of *progressive action* by poetry can easily be applied to the 20th century comic strip form—if one allows for the use of schematized pictures in place of words. Here is one perfectly valid question we could ask on such grounds: can we possibly get a deeper historical understanding of this theoretical fit? As a line of historical inquiry, the question is not without value, if only because the *Laocoön* was very much part of the cultural landscape when Töpffer conceived his "romans en estampes", six decades after Lessing published his essay.

In fact, in the second part of this essay (to be published in SIGNs), we will see that there are compelling reasons to believe that Lessing's distinction between poetry (as an art of succession) and painting (as an art of simultaneity) played a primary role in Töpffer's peculiar invention. If this is, indeed, the case, the fit between the modern form of the comic strip and the original *sequential art* concept *can* be explained satisfactorily in historical terms: it would then be directly related to Töpffer's views on the *Laocoön*.

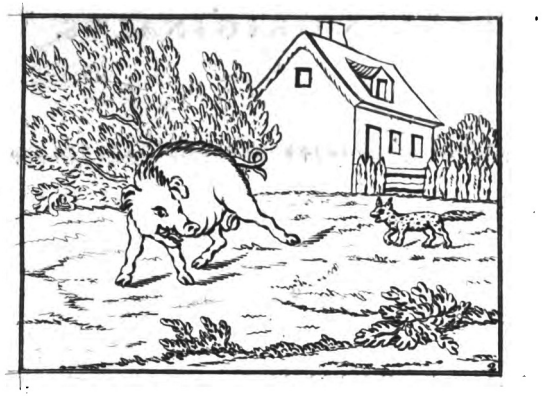
If Töpffer and Lessing actually agreed about the worth of the *sequential art* concept (as most researchers would believe instinctively), such an historical link would be interesting enough; the truth, however, happens to be much more counter-intuitive, ironical and illuminating.

A Different Take on the 19th Century Material

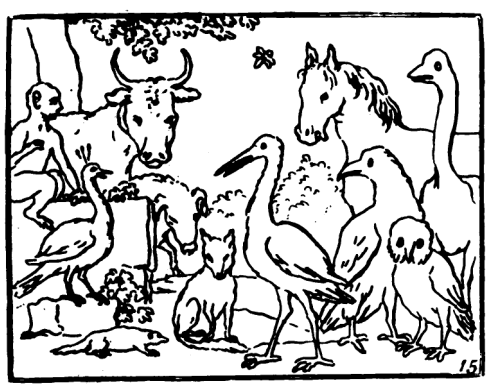
To be honest, the connection between Töpffer's work and Lessing's *Laocoön* was not the first question I had in mind when I started working on *Naissances de la bande dessinée, de William Hogarth à Winsor McCay*. It



The Lioness and the Oſtrich.



The Ermin and the Hog.



The Aſſembly of Animals.

Jean Kidgell.
Original Fables.
London: Jacques Robson, 1763.

The neo-classical "preference for the primitive" (and for simple outline drawings) was already apparent in the second half of the 18th century, as in John Kidgell's **Original Fables**, a bilingual book adorned by copper plates clearly designed to imitate the old woodcut style. At the end of the 19th century, Benjamin Rabier's picture stories and his illustrations for **Les Fables de La Fontaine**, were still referring back to the naive woodcut style of yesteryear.
Note, also, that the "clear line" of the 20th century, often associated with Hergé's **Tintin**, is "genealogically" related to these archaizing styles, typical of the versatile, polygraphic humor of 19th century illustrators.



Manners and Customs of ye Englyshe: Drawn from ye Quick by Rychard Doyle, to Which be Added Some Extracts from Mr. Pips Hys Diary. Contrybuted by Percival Leigh.
London: Bradbury & Evans, 1849.

Published as a serial in **Punch** then in a book, in 1849, this series is typical of the polygraphic reframing of contemporary life, as seen through the lens of the distant, naive past. Gustave Doré, in **Le Journal pour Rire**, adapted Doyle's device to French subjects in the early 1850s.

was my work on the Coconino World website with a gang of talented ex-students that played the biggest part in convincing me that there was something very partial and reductive in the way scholars looked at the history of the comic strip as if the distinction between isolated cartoons and sequential picture stories was absolutely fundamental. As a social group, the young authors from Angoulême had a very different take on the historical material we surveyed and selected for the site; the sequential nature of the material—paramount to "comic strip scholars"—was of very minor consequence to them. The quality, liveliness, humour and originality of the drawings were their main criterions. Because my friends did not mind looking through the "non-sequential stuff", we started searching for public domain graphic art that appealed to them, regardless of its nature. It soon became clear that their broad approach in selecting and categorizing the material was indeed quite relevant to my research. In fact, my friends mapped the old landscape of the 19th century graphic production in a way that highlighted the actual profile (and practice) of the international network of comic illustrators who worked between 1800 and 1900. Most of the picture stories produced during the period came from this group of commercial artists; however, the "sequential" material amounted to a very small subset of the artists' actual output. I began to realize how an anthology exclusively devoted to the "comic strips" of the period—like Kunzle's second volume on the 19th century [Kunzle 1988]—would cut a very arbitrary slice of the landscape, missing the bigger picture of the cultural (and historical) relevance of this group as a whole. The network of mutual influences, the shared heritage, and, above all, the *stylistic attitude* of the humoristic illustrators of the time are much more striking when you consider *all the material*—not just their sequential output—with equal attention. Seen through the *sequential art*'s selective lens, however, the picture stories of the 19th century tend to float above their own historical domain and to present a very artificial disconnected landscape.

This is not to say that the scholars who focus exclusively on sequential forms are not aware of the prominent role the great humoristic illustrators played in book and press illustrations from the early Romantic to the late Victorian periods—of the books they illustrated, the comic drawings they collected in numerous albums, the broadsheets and caricatures they vigorously published. Most of the scholars of the "sequential persuasion" mention this material in passing—and then deliberately restrict their discussion to what correspond to their a priori definition. At least, one would hope that rejecting "non-sequential" works, as irrelevant to their definition, should present an important theoretical issue for them. Unfortunately, this is not the case. When confronted with the interesting, ambiguous specimens that could put the sequential art concept to a historical test, they generally give weak and ad hoc justifications (if any) for excluding them from their survey.

Hogarth's Importance

Quite recently, my friend Thierry Groensteen offered me a perfect example of this practise. In an otherwise sympathetic review of *Naissances*—posted on his excellent blog [Groensteen 2010]—Thierry took issue only with the fact that I had chosen William Hogarth as a point of departure for my study of the comic strip form. *Because* [he wrote], *even if the "dumb show" of Hogarth engravings unwind an "imaginary novel", the narrative develops according to a mode, a rhythm, a* découpage[4]

[4] *Découpage* (breakdown), is also the French term for a *shooting script*. When used as a technical term by comic strip authors, the word has a definite cinematographic connotation for the French user.

Old Prints.





George Cruikshank
The Loving Ballad of Lord Bateman.
London: Charles Tilt, 1839.



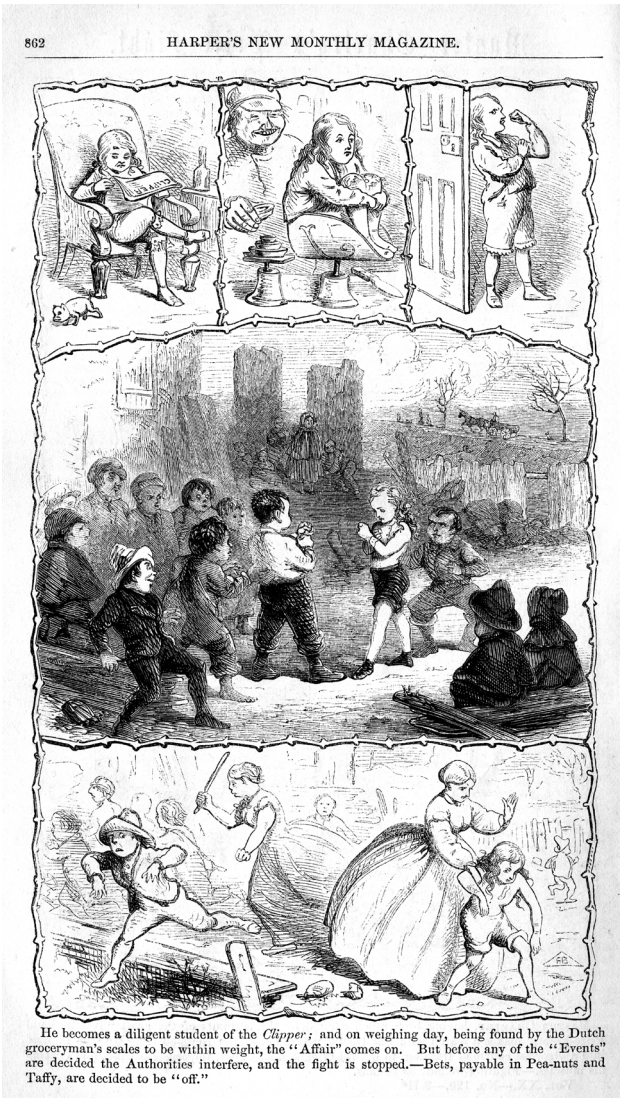
Adolph Oberländer.
Lebensbilder aus Alt-Athen und Isar-Athen.
Fliegende Blätter 2126 (1886).

Flaxman's highly recognizable "antique" style was often evoked by Cruikshank, Grandville, Cham, Oberländer, Caran d'Ache and many others illustrators working in the comic vein. (The illustrators were of course conscious of their sources: in a letter to Cham, Töpffer writes of some of Cham's drawings that they are "properly flaxmanized".)

Sometimes, Flaxman's typical contour drawings (with their somewhat mechanical alternation of thick and thin lines) were simply meant to evoke a distant, comically naïve past, as in Cruikshank's **Loving Ballad of Lord Bateman**. In other cases, the style was used to generate a humoristic contrast with the modern world, as in the "neo-classical" chapter of Grandville's **Un autre monde**, or in a series of cartoons comparing modern and antique life, drawn for **Fliegende Blätter** by Adolph Oberländer.



J.J. Grandville.
Un autre monde.
Paris: H. Fournier, 1844.





Frank Bellew.
Master Charley's Prize Fight.
Harper's New Monthly, May 1860.

The pseudo medieval style adopted by German artists for illustrating traditional popular ballads had a huge impact on the culture of humorous illustration when some of their books were translated into English in the early 1840s. Richard Doyle, for example, drew the iconic fourth cover of **Punch** in this style as well as many exuberant initial letters and vignettes for the magazine.

After the 1840s, the pseudo medieval style of illumination became a default solution for the illustrator of children books, ballads, folk-tales, etc. It was ubiquitous in magazines for children like **St Nicholas,** till the end of the 19th century.

The influence of the sentimental, ornate style of Ludwig Richter was particularly strong on Wilhelm Busch whose graphic and verbal tone is typical of a period impregnated by pseudo medievalism. It is also evident in these pages drawn for the **Harper's New Monthly** by Frank Bellew (a British expatriate). The jagged stick borders used to frame and compartmentalize the page are typical of the Germanic style. Bellew's **Master Charley** is a good example of the hybrid formats adopted by picture stories during this period, with their mix of narrative, decorative and thematic inspiration. Stories like this are often hard to gauge according to modern criteria.

that have nothing in common with la bande dessinée. From the point of view of the sequential logic of action, which for me, is still the ontological basis of the Ninth Art, the Bayeux tapestry, older by seven centuries, could teach a thing or two to Hogarth.

Starting with Hogarth, however, seemed to me perfectly justified, if only by the fact that, for the humoristic illustrators of the 19th century, Hogarth was *the* towering figure in the cultural landscape. And because the modern comic strip was a direct product of their comic tradition (and definitively *not* of the Bayeux's tapestry "tradition"!), I believe Hogarth would have been a meaningful starting point even if he did not produce the series for which comic strip scholars generally know him. Understanding Hogarh's importance to his 19th century heirs was a key objective of my research.

At this point, let me say only that I believe that Hogarth is the source of an overarching stylistic characteristic that contributed much to the historical development and variations of the forms (picture stories included) with which the comic illustrators played around during the 19th century. If I'm right, this unrecognized aspect of their craft is the part of the equation that determined the humorous tradition's relationship to the picture story genre as a whole—and it is still very much the hidden "engine" of the comic strip form today.

I will come back to this in a moment, but first let me return to Groensteen's argument against Hogarth. It completely misses an important methodological point: the fact that you can only map historical changes if there are some changes to map. I did not choose Hogarth as a starting point because I believed his *Progresses* were similar to the comic strip form—quite the opposite: I was interested in the strikingly significant, multi-layered *differences* between the two forms. Only a careful analysis of such differences can give a historical domain to the problem of "understanding comics". The same can be said of the many ambiguous, hybrid forms produced in the 19th century that cut uneasily across our categories. Such forms should *not* be discarded backhandedly, but studied carefully—*because* of what they can reveal about our implicit (and possibly unfounded) theoretical/historical assumptions.

This is definitively not the stance adopted by Thierry Groensteen and Benoît Peeters, in their *Rodolphe Töpffer : l'invention de la bande dessinée* [Groensteen & Peeters 1994]. One could argue that this influential book *did* try to anchor the *sequential art* conceptual framework in the historical domain, but if it did, it was only in a very peculiar and limiting way. In presenting Rodolphe Töpffer as the original inventor of the *sequential art* form, the authors really put a *terminus post quem* to the field of relevant historical research—in effect, severing the new form from its past (Kunzle's *early comic strip*). By describing the *sequential art* concept as complete and self-sufficient from the start, they also ensured that no change of theoretical significance would happen between Töpffer and the modern view on the comic strip.—*Et voilà !…*

It was, of course, a subtle way to have one's cake and eat it. In Groensteen's view, the *sequential art* concept could only find its proper historical domain if it also firmly preserved its "ontological" purity. In fact, Töpffer's theoretical writings about the *romans en estampes* form considerably muddle the question. They indicate that Töpffer connected his own works with Hogarth's *satires*, but tantalizingly refrained from theorizing about the similarities and the differences between the two forms. Groensteen (who wrote the relevant section of *L'invention de la bande desssinée*) approaches these possibly challenging connexions in a dry, purely external manner. He is content to note that Hogarth satires cover the life of their protagonists



Author unknown.
Le peintre To-Kai.
Imagerie Artistique,
series 9—nº 4.
Paris:
Librairies-Imprimeries Réunies,
Ancienne Maison Quantin, 1891.

In the 1850s, comic illustrators like Bertall, the young Gustave Doré and others made fun of the new artistic tendencies heralded by the prestigious Salons in **Le Journal pour Rire**. These humorous stylizations often appear more modernistic (to our own eyes) than the paintings they refer to—a fact that underlines the dynamism of polygraphic humor in the 19th century, its quick reactivity to cultural change and the role it played in laying the ground for the modernist revolution of the 1900s–1910s, when young artists, like Felix Vallotton, Lyonel Feininger, George Grosz, Jules Pascin etc, began their career as comic illustrators, before crossing over to serious art. Humorous illustrators are instinctively attracted to (if not always convinced by) any new ways of depicting the world. This includes the exotic forms of art that were presented in the various Great Exhibitions (always a powerful source of inspiration for the comic artists working for the illustrated press), or imported through other channels. This page from the celebrated Maison Quantin documents the growing influence "Japonisme" had on French comic and serious artists in the late 19th century. Note how the (unidentified) illustrator puts the exotic style to work in terms of a familiar mischief gag, worthy of the Katzenjammer Kids.

in a few pictures, generally separated by intervals of months, if not years, and that the reader has to interpret a number of clues to deduce the events that happened in between. The 20th century reader, of course, knows that the comic strip does not work like that, so the problem seems settled—but only because of our intimate knowledge of the thriving, modern form.

As I already pointed out, paradoxes are bound to sprout from the reversing of the time arrow in historical conceptualizations, and they can only be tweaked by the kind of *legerdemain* that comic strip scholars do all the time. To demonstrate that Töpffer was really the first and sole inventor of the medium, scholars like Thierry Groensteen have to switch abruptly from an axiomatic conception of the picture story medium—which should include the Bayeux tapestry *as well as* Hogarth's *Progresses*, if one was consistent with the generic sequential art definition—to the kind of intuitive observation that resort to *familiarity* (i.e. "the Bayeux tapestry develops according to a mode, a rythm, a *découpage* that is closer the modern comic strip than Hogarth's *Progresses*").

So, let me confirm here, just for the record, that on one point, at least, I agree with Groensteen: one cannot read Hogarth's *Progresses* as one reads a 20th century comic strip like *Tintin*. But the differences go much deeper than what a superficial comparison with the familiar form of the modern comic strip can capture. Hogarth was immersed in a very old culture in which images—satirical images in particular—were deciphered in a way that was often described as hieroglyphical. In his massive work on Hogarth, Ronald Paulson [Paulson 1991-1993] has shown the tangle of sophisticated intellectual games that each of Hogarth's satires presented to their readers. Behind every "realistic" detail, they found visual *ciphers* in which Hogarth activated classical and biblical literary allusions as well as more prosaic topical concerns.

As much as one would like to cut to the sequential chase, so to speak—and skip the complexities of a visual culture that died silently at the turn of the 19th century, one cannot dismiss Töpffer's constant references to Hogarth in his writings about the *romans en estampes* form, or the fact that Outcault's *Yellow Kid* was still saturated with emblematical/allegorical influences in the last years of the 19h century. More generally speaking, one cannot ignore the centrality of Hogarth's cultural legacy, which permeated the tradition of comic illustrations, satires and humorous images in the age of the illustrated press. In fact, there is every reason to believe that the history of the comic strip is a subplot of the momentous transition between the culture of the hieroglyphic (emblematic, allegorical) *decipherable* image and the culture of the audiovisual (post-photographic), sequentially *readable* image—a subplot that reflects, indeed uniquely illuminates, the larger cultural canvas.

Given that the tradition of the 19th century humoristic illustrators links Hogarth's satires to the modern comic strip in a continuous fashion, what we need to define is the "overarching" aspect of Hogarth's legacy that was most significant in supporting this continuity. As we shall see, the stylistic attitude Hogarth transmitted to his heirs offers a robust way of specifying the relationship between his satirical works, the 19th century humoristic illustrators, the 20th century comic strip, and the earlier forms of picture stories that Kunzle reviewed in his *Early Comic Strip* volume.

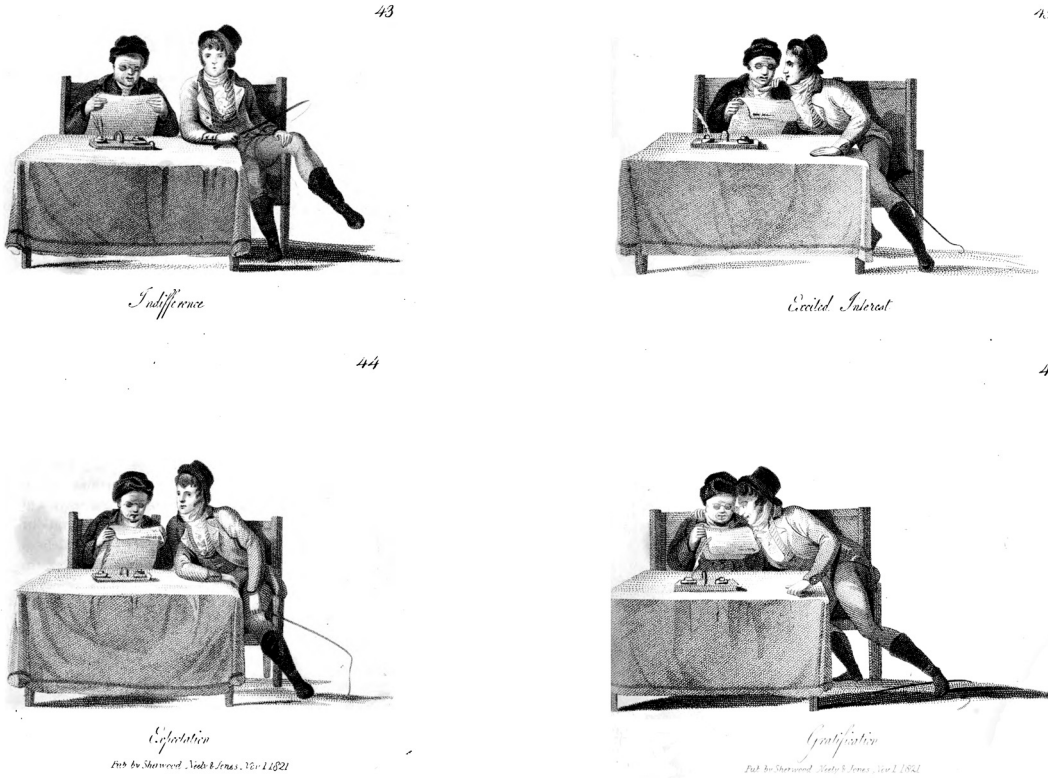
Polygraphic Humour

Under the well-varnished appearance of his graphic satires, Hogarth deliberately evoked (and stylized) the whole spectrum of the visual idioms operating in his time. He introduced an ironical way of addressing a

Diagrammatic Schematization

When an illustrator evokes an artistic style by carefully selecting a number of relevant traits, he *schematizes* the style in question, opening it to all kinds of contrasts and creative combinations. This process of schematization, however, can be extended to—and superimposed onto—many other domains (technical, scientific, societal…).

In the age of the illustrated press, the comic illustrators were generally the first to address the new *ways of seeing*—the new systems of representation—that were constantly appearing in the wider visual culture. When they related to images produced by technical novelties like aerial and instantaneous photography, chronophotography, cinematography etc, they tried to capture diagrammatically what was new about the new experience—but this was only part of their work: in general, they also approached these novelties with a healthy skepticism, searching their deep cultural memory for graphic similarities and parallels. (The reframing of the old satirical *label* in terms of the "phonographic" speech balloon, for example [Smolderen 2006], is typical of this process of interpretation.)



Henry Siddons.
Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action; Adapted to the English Drama: From a Work on the Subject by M. Engel. Second Edition, Improved.
London: Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1822.

In **Naissances de la bande dessinée**, I document the influences Engel's book on gesture and theatrical action had on Töpffer's earliest venture in the picture story genre. Töpffer's first comic story (**Histoire de Mr Vieux Bois**, originally drawn in 1827) borrowed some of the postures depicted in the illustrations of the English adaptation of Engel's book by Siddons. The book also contained this sequence of progressive action, depicting the visibly growing interest of a man who hears the terms of a testament.

In the age of the melodrama, Engel put **desire** (of the attractive and repulsive kind) at the core of the theatrical language of action. The same elemental force drives the stories of **Mr Vieux Bois** and **Mr Cryptogamme**.

Töpffer's diagrammatic evocation of a "specialized" sequential idiom - in this case, the rhetoric of theatrical gesture - prefigured the process of **comic schematization** by which polygraphic humour would digest the revolution of the moving image at the end of the 19th century, paving the way to the modern comic strip as **an audiovisual scene on paper**.

graphic culture already saturated with a seemingly infinite variety of diagrammatic *systems of representation*. Compounding a vast array of conflicting registers, his satires opened, to the humoristic tradition, the domain that I propose to call *polygraphic humour*.

"Cherchez le diagramme" is the name of the game when one wants to decipher Hogarth's images. Ronald Paulson extensive analysis of his graphic satires [Paulson 1991-1993] is invaluable in this respect. It shows that to penetrate Hogarth's meanings the reader has to navigate a multi-layered visual text saturated with conflicting systems of representation (ranging from the highly rhetorical language of history painting to the rebellious insolence of graffiti drawings). By ironically hybridizing such contrasting material, Hogarth was looking for an *interface* through which he could demystify—by reframing them in realistic, contemporary terms—the established "eternal truths" on which the powers of his time founded their political, religious and artistic ideologies.

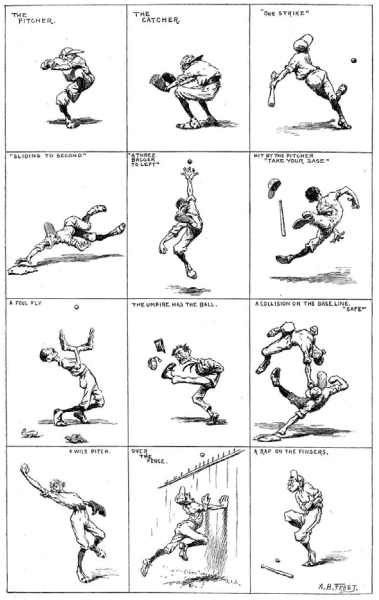
Conversely, by combining the traditional structures of readability (allegorical, pictorial, emblematic) to represent modern subjects, Hogarth was able to treat the contemporary world itself as a readable structure. The polygraphic approach gave him a powerful visual tool for making sense of the modern metropolitan world.

Hogarth's "battle of the images" was a game of stylistic collisions, ironical contrasts and hybridization. Scintillating with humorous sparks of meaning, his satires made sense, ironically, of the accelerating world of the "New" (a realm that was also typically addressed by the "news" and the "novels" of his time [Paulson 1996]). It was only natural that the usefulness of Hogarth's polygraphic approach would grow in the later age of the illustrated press.

This is, of course, the "missing part of the equation" that I was referring to—more a stylistic *attitude*, actually, than any particular stylistic characteristic. Indeed, it is their way of embracing the unlimited *variety* of the modern graphic landscape that best defines the humoristic illustrators that came after Hogarth - Cruikshank, Grandville, Doré, Töpffer, Busch, Öberlander, Outcault, McCay, etc. The main weapon of the comical illustrator is his facility with the graphic languages. Except for his facetiousness, the artist who belongs to this family acts like the inveterate polyglot, who never stops comparing words, concepts and etymologies between different systems of representation.

I will leave to the reader's imagination the task of applying the polygraphic concept to the 20th and 21st century comic strip. It pervades the whole field and is absolutely central to the works of the most influential and respected artists, from Outcault, McCay, George Herriman and Hergé, to Crumb, Spiegelman, Watterson, Chris Ware, Satrapi, David B., Mazzucchelli, etc. Indeed, the polygraphic approach, as an expressive tool, appears to play an even more prominent role in the contemporary form of the graphic novel than it did in the popular comic strip. This is because the concept connects powerfully with the *linguistically hybrid* form of the *novel*—a parallel that illuminates the deep relationship between the humoristic illustrators and the literary tradition that began in Hogarth's time—with the novels of Fielding, Smollett and Sterne—and developed, in the 19th century, with those of Dickens and Thackeray.

According to Bakhtin's analysis of the 18th century humoristic novel [Bakhtin 1982], the style of these comical novelists was fundamentally hybrid—it was a combination of styles; their language was never pure—it was a combination of languages. (In English, Bakthin's Russian term for this characteristic is translated as *heteroglossia*, the French translation prefers *polylinguisme*.)



OUR NATIONAL GAME.

Arthur B. Frost.
Our National Game.
Harper's New Monthly,
December 1889.

In the US, illustrators like A.B. Frost (who attended Thomas Eakins' drawing class in Philadelphia), T.S. Sullivant, E.W. Kemble lead the way in exaggerating the photorealistic "feel" of arrested action. Later, Winsor McCay and the Disney school were prominent in exporting this naturalistic approach to the field of animation.

Thanks to Hogarth's deep interest in diagrammatizing arrested movement (see his commentary of the second plate of **The Analysis of Beauty**), the comic illustrators had quite a head start in dealing humorously with awkward accidental postures (an interest that was principally mediated by Rowlandson and Töpffer, in the first part of the 19th century). Consequently, the humoristic illustrators were quick to exploit the reservoir of curious new attitudes opened by "snapshot photography" in the 1880s–1900s.



SNAPSHOT SHOWING CURIOUS POSITIONS OF PEOPLE TAKEN UNAWARES IN A THOROUGHFARE.

Fortune L. Meaulle.
Snapshot Showing
Curious Positions of People Taken
Unawares in a Thoroughfare.
Picture Magazine, January 1895.

Bakhtin also points out the important role that *stylization* plays in the writing of such books: the novelists stylize the languages they evoke by selecting and highlighting certain of their traits. When applied to *diagrammatic* systems of representation, the same process (polygraphic stylization) perfectly describes the humoristic illustrators' dealing with the visual Babel of the modern world.

At this point, it is worth noting that *polygraphic humour* gives a very robust (and specific) historical domain to Hogarth's powerful legacy. Not only does it define Hogarth and his 19th century successors' stylistic relationship to the literary culture of their time—thus connecting today's graphic novelists to the same deep stylistic trend in literary history—the polygraphic concept also specifies how the comic illustrators—including the comic strip artists of the 20th and 21st century—connect to the old, variegated culture of linear schematization, as practiced since the 15th century in all forms of technical or artistic illustrated books, popular prints, graphic satires, etc.

The polygraphic approach to style potentially embraces the whole spectrum of diagrammatic representations; it can draw on all sources, old and new. Frequently it does both. When working for the illustrated press, in the 19th century, Hogarth's heirs literally camped on the semiotic borders of the rapidly expanding industrial and colonial world. They were on every battle-front, addressing every significant *new way of seeing*, taking note of the emerging technologies produced by the industrial revolution, the various artistic trends and revivals, the new social habits, the colonial explorations and exhibitions, etc. Their work was crucial, because in their stylized shorthand, the comic illustrators always found some way to make humorous sense of the *new*, by hybridizing it with some relevant idiom selected from their vast repertoire of established, and sometimes quite ancient, graphic solutions. Like Hogarth, they *interpreted* the new ways of seeing in terms of the old systems of representation.

In the 19th century, George Cruikshank probably helped define this stance (and mediate Hogarth's legacy) more than anyone else. His work was a prominent model for his continental colleagues during a large part of the period. Cruikshank's typically Romantic fascination for the most primitive forms of representations (graffiti, stick figures, naive or childish drawings) set the "core graphic tone" for the genre till our days. (Of course, if we strictly follow Bakhtin's analysis of literary heteroglossia, there should not be a "core style", only an Harlequin's mantle of borrowed styles; the potential contradiction here disappears when one sees that the childish, graffiti-like style so often found in the works of Cruikshank, Grandville, Töpffer, Doyle, Doré, Busch, Oberländer etc, roots the anti-academic stance of the humoristic illustrators in a symbolical "maternal language" that defines their artistic genealogy in social (graffiti) and psychological (child drawing) terms; but it is stylized ironically, just like every other graphic system of representation they evoke.)

Polygraphic Humour and the Picture Story Genre

To return to the central question of this essay, we need to see how defining Hogarth's stylistic stance as polygraphic allows us to articulate the humorous tradition to the whole picture story genre.

Hogarth's first *Progresses* were based on two Venetian morality tales from the 17th century. It was a perfect template on which to build his denunciation of the religious discourse of his own time. By evoking the old continental form of the catholic moralistic picture



John McLenan.
Mr Slim's Final
Piscatorial Experience.
Harper's New Monthly,
November 1855.

Comic illustrators generally approached the picture story genre as a vehicle for their romantic nostalgia, but Töpffer's language of closely knitted actions was originally meant to satirize the stereotyped processes and behaviours generated by the industrial revolution. It was only natural that the comic artists working for the illustrated press would adapt this language to reflect the contemporary habits and activities of their readership, by depicting stereotyped "social scripts" like a day at the beach or at the horse-track, a week-end in province, a fishing expedition etc. In the 1850s, Gustave Doré picture stories for **Le Journal pour rire**, Richard Doyle's Brown, Jones and Robinson stories for **Punch**, John McLenan's stories in **Harper's Magazine** were typical of this trend which probably represents Töpffer's most characteristic contribution to the picture story genre in the second part of the 19th century.

Note how McLenan, in typical polygraphic humour mode, combines the "social script" of a fishing expedition with spectacular views of the microscopic world inspired by illustrated scientific books and articles on the subject.

story, he pointed out the hypocrisy of the moral authorities, whose rigid discourse was blind to the real social mechanisms responsible for the fall of many young girls and young men in contemporary London. In this context, it is clear that the "sequential vehicle" on which he built his first *Progresses* was deeply ironical, and not to be taken at face value. Hogarth referred to the Venetian picture stories only to highlight the inadequacy of a corrupt system of representation. In other words, he borrowed the old narrative template, typically, as a *polygraphic device*.

This is how the paradox of "the earlier comic strip" dissipates. *The polygraphic artist treats the existing sequential templates like any other visual idioms in his repertoire* (the various graphic styles, the emblems, the allegories, the graffiti, the academic art, the rhetorical vs. accidental postures etc). For Hogarth (and his 19th century successors) the "picture story" form was just another diagrammatic system of representation to be contrasted against concurrent systems, in order to make sense of the modern world.

Decipherment vs. Narrative

As satires, Hogarth's *Progresses* were exceptional in that they embedded a highly elaborate narrative component into the decipherment process. In that, they clearly represent an exception. The sophisticated forms of playful decipherment cultivated by the satiric/emblematic tradition did not mix easily with the more straightforward task of reading a simple picture story. As a general rule, the comic illustrators of the 19th century continued to show a marked preference for the traditional (non-narrative) resources of their wistful polygraphic craft. Cruikshank's collections of humorous drawings, which did a lot to refresh the landscape of the "decipherable image" in the 1820s–1830s, were seasoned with all kind of puns and rebus, free associations of ideas, playful contrasts and comparisons, etc. These humorous devices called for the same kind of decipherment that applied to the richly textured world of allegoric, hieroglyphic and emblematic images since the Renaissance.

At the end of the 19th century, the satirical works of Opper, Outcault and many others representatives of the comic tradition were still rooted in the culture of the decipherable humoristic/satirical image. The pervasive nature of this model goes a long way in explaining the marginal status of the (much simpler) picture story form in comic art during the 19th century. However, it is important to understand, as my Coconino friends did instinctively, that when these artists touched the genre of the picture story, they did not suddenly drop their usual craft for another. There is a deep stylistic continuity in the way Hogarth's heir designed their decipherable images and their picture stories: *both categories were rooted in the humorous polygraphic stance*. To read a humoristic picture story or decipher a humoristic image, one had to navigate a "polygraphic space" where the artist ironically stylised and compounded different systems of representation. In the 19th century, visual humour was, above all, an exercise in semiotic flexibility for the modern visual polyglot.

When the humoristic illustrators resorted to the picture story genre, they generally used all kind of *old* templates from the popular culture—including the illustrated ballads, the crude chapbook woodcuts, the atrocity prints etc—as vehicles to their anti-academic (and romantic) preference for the archaic and the naive [Gombrich 2002]. This "preference for the primitive" accounts for most of the perplexing variety of 19th century picture stories and for many of the ambiguous forms that are difficult to classify as "proper" comic strips. By vocation, polygraphic humour is a prolific generator of hybrid forms, and that generator was kept



James J. Calahan.
The Telephone.
In Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes, a Volume of Choice Telegraphic Literature, Humor, Fun, Wit & Wisdom.
New York: W.J. Johnston, 1877.

It was inevitable that the telegraph, like the Phonograph, the Kinetoscope, the telephone would fall under the scrutiny of comic illustrators and participate in the creation of new diagrammatic idioms. Here, the artist imagines the havoc created in a telegraph office by a shouting telephone operator (note that the Bell Telephone Company, like this strip, was only created in 1877). Jagged lines and electrical expletives represent the tumultuous atmosphere that results in the operating room.
The «telegraphic experience» which transforms the written word into short repetitive bursts of electrical energy certainly informed this visualization of an office touched by a collective bout of Tourette's syndrome. One has to wonder if the energetic exclamation marks and stars buzzing through the wires of the telegraphic «nervous system» did not give birth to the standard vocabulary for representing shock, surprise and other violent emotions affecting the characters' own nervous systems in the modern comic strip.

very busy by the success of the Romantic illustrated novel, the late gothic/early Renaissance revivalism that inspired many illustrators after the 1840s [Buchanan-Brown 2005] and, in general, by the frenetic ecology of the illustrated press. George Cruikshank's *The Ballad of Lord Bateman* (1839) and his sequential illustrations for *Jack Sheppard* (1840) are typical of the polygraphic reframing and compounding of older sequential formulas. Doré's *Histoire de la Sainte Russie* (1854), Frank Bellew's *Master Charley* (1859) are other examples, as are most of Wilhelm Busch works (which would certainly be hotly debated as "comic strips, proper" if not for the *Max und Moritz* influence on the American *Katzenjammer Kids*). In fact, except for the direct influence of Töpffer, most of the sequential material produced by the comic tradition, in the 19th century, was playfully referring to the popular picture stories of yesteryear and was *deliberately* archaic in tone and design.

Conclusion

The real laboratory from which the modern form of the comic strip emerged at the end of the 19th century was *polygraphic humour*. The artists working in this vein did not limit themselves to "sequential art". They dealt with a vast range of formats that included isolated cartoons, book illustrations and thematic series of comic drawings *as well* as picture stories. In a rapidly evolving visual world, these artists exploited the whole spectrum of the graphic culture to make humorous sense of every new *way of seeing* brought in by art, science and technology. More often than not, their picture stories evoked older forms of pictorial narratives as stylized archaizing idioms to be contrasted with modern life. This began to change toward the end of the 19th century, when the public of the illustrated press developed a growing fascination for the automatic recording of progressive action by instantaneous photography, chronophotography, the Kinetoscope and the Phonograph. This trend led to the modern form of the comic strip that emerged and stabilized, just after 1900, as a diagrammatic "audiovisual scene on paper".

In further articles, I will try to define Töpffer's place in this scheme of things and ask some hard questions about his current status as the *benevolent* father of the comic strip. The highly original picture stories Töpffer drew in the 1830s and 40s were unique in that, far from being nostalgic, they were meant to parody the blind, hectic development of industrial progress. This central preoccupation undoubtedly gave Töpffer a head start in describing action in a pseudo-objective, mechanistic fashion that prefigured the modern comic strip.

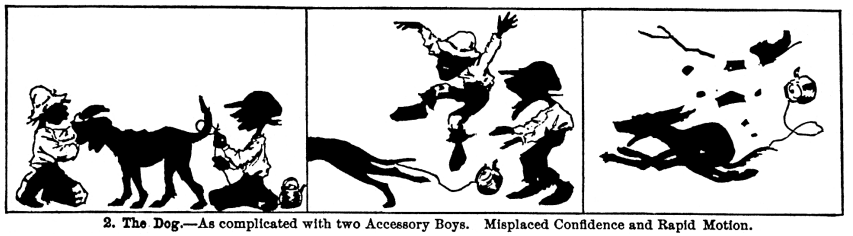
While Töpffer was clearly the inventor of a new kind of diagrammatic sequential syntax, there are good reasons to believe that his status as a *benevolent* inventor is somewhat misleading. His albums only make full sense when they are read as a comic "thought experiment" whose primary target was Lessing's theory of poetry as a one-dimensional medium of progressive action. In his serious writing about art, Töpffer refuted Lessing's model, which he understood as partaking of a soul-less rhetoric of progress. In other words, Töpffer "comics" did not promote, but *attack* Lessing's conception of a purely sequential art.

To make his point, however, Töpffer relied on the very tools of the comic illustrator: his *ad absurdum* demonstration was built on the humorous stylization and hybridization of the various sequential "idioms" he related to the triumphant materialistic discourse of scientific and technological progress. Töpffer's "thought experiment" was quite abstract, but it was also clever and funny (in a perplexing kind of way); his picture stories were well received (if not fully understood) by professional comic artists in the 1840s. Some aspects of his visual syntax then became an integral (and prob-

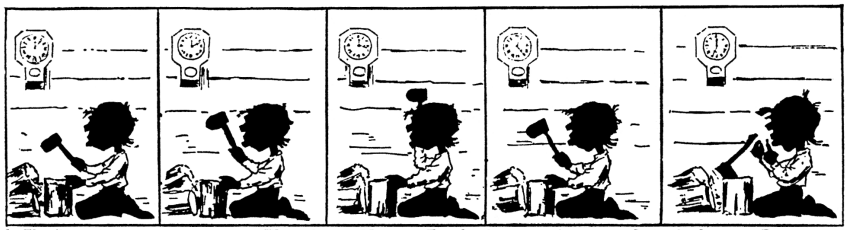
PHOTOGRAPHS OF ANIMALS IN MOTION, TAKEN BY PROFESSOR ABRIDGE'S INSTANTANEOUS PROCESS.



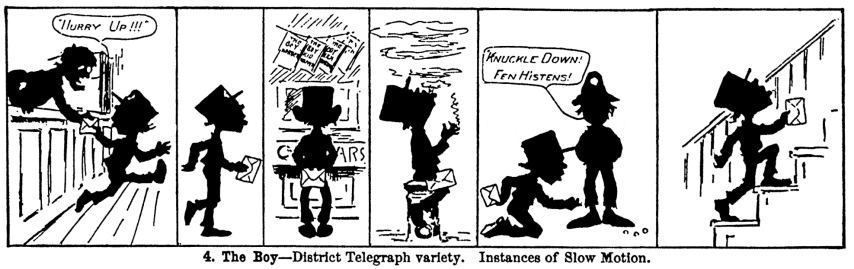
1. **The Mule.**—The Animal which posed for this Series is of the breed known as "The Paragrapher's Extra," and is capable of anything possible to an individual of his Species.



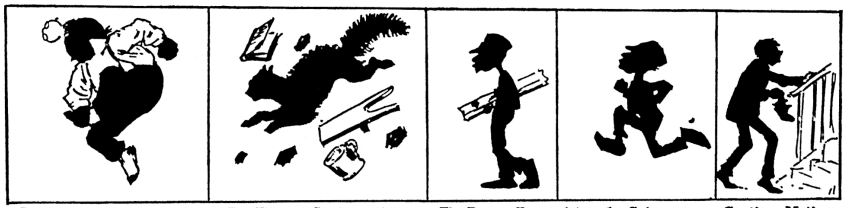
2. **The Dog.**—As complicated with two Accessory Boys. Misplaced Confidence and Rapid Motion.



3. **The Boy**—As he appears chopping Wood for his Mother. The Clock is included in this Series for Scientific Reasons, and not merely for the Picturesque Effect.



4. **The Boy**—District Telegraph variety. Instances of Slow Motion.



Involuntary movement of a heavy body. | The Thomas Cat in motion, with accessory causes. | The Boy—office variety. 1—Going on an errand. 2—Going to a distant fire. | Cautious Motion. Time, 2 A. M.

Henry Stull.
Photographs of Animals in Motion, Taken by Professor Abrdge's Instantaneous Process.
Our Continent, April 8 1883.

Humour is a powerful semiotic and cognitive tool: the diagrammatic Histoires sans paroles published by European and American cartoonists near the end of the 19th century helped translate (ironically) the new phenomenological experience of the moving image (in this case, Muybridge's Zoopraxiscope projections) in terms of existing systems of representation. Here, we see how familiar "social scripts" are comically reinterpreted in the light of the new technology.

ably crucial) part of the thriving culture of the *polygraphic comical image* from which the modern form of the comic strip emerged and stabilized around 1900, after an ironic but vibrant dialogue with the nascent technology of the moving image.

Despite the (relative) stabilization of the modern comic strip as an *audiovisual scene on paper*, polygraphic inventiveness is still very much the engine of the form's dynamism today. A historical definition of the comic strip should definitively allow for the processes of stylization and diagrammatization that command the form's relationship with the graphic, artistic and technical culture at large, as well as with the variegated picture story genres of the past. Polygraphic humour infused life into the dry, axiomatic sequential art concept—and gave it a rich historical domain.

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