Telling Stories

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Multimodal Storytelling and Identity Construction in Graphic Narratives

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When they founded the field of narratology in the middle to late 1960s, structuralist theorists of narrative failed to come to terms with two dimensions of narrative that constitute focal concerns of this chapter: on the one hand, the referential or world-creating potential of stories; on the other hand, the issue of medium-specificity, or the way storytelling practices, including those bearing on world creation, might be shaped by the expressive capacities of a given semiotic environment. Exploration of both of these dimensions of narrative has played a major role in the advent of “postclassical” approaches to the study of stories (Herman 1999), that is, frameworks for narrative inquiry that build on classical, structuralist models but supplement those models with concepts and methods that were unavailable to earlier theorists such as Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, A. J. Greimas, and Tzvetan Todorov. As part of this larger program for research, my analysis here focuses on word-image combinations in graphic narratives to explore a particular aspect of the worldmaking process: how texts that exploit more than one semiotic channel trigger inferences about agents within narrated worlds, or storyworlds.

In general, narrative worldmaking constitutes a topic of broad relevance for cognitive narratology, or the study of mind-relevant aspects of storytelling practices, wherever—and by whatever means—these practices occur (Herman, forthcoming a). Cognitive narratologists work to enrich the original base of structuralist concepts with ideas about human intelligence, examining various dimensions of narrative structure vis-à-vis modes of sense making; to this end, stories can be studied both as a target for interpretation and as a means for organizing and comprehending experience, a tool for thinking.

In the approach to narrative worldmaking sketched here, the focus is on cognitive processes cued by discourse patterns—infrences, prompted by visual as well as verbal information in graphic narratives, about the ontological status, inhabitants, and spatiotemporal profile of a given storyworld. Storyworlds can thus be viewed as mental models enabling interpreters to frame inferences about the situations, characters, and occurrences either explicitly mentioned in or implied by a narrative text or discourse.
Reciprocally, narratives provide blueprints for the creation and modification of such mentally configured storyworlds. A key question for cognitive narratology is what constitutes distinctively narrative practices of world construction, as opposed to those enabled by readouts from scientific instruments, syllogistic arguments, and other modes of representation.

Meanwhile, questions about medium-specificity fall under the scope of transmedial narratology (Herman 2004), or the study of narrative across media. Unlike classical, structuralist narratology, transmedial narratology disputes the notion that the fabula or story level of a narrative (= what is told) remains wholly invariant across shifts of medium (= an aspect of how that “what” is presented). Yet it also assumes that stories do have gists that can be remediated more or less fully and recognizably, depending in part on the semiotic properties of the source and target media. Transmedial narratology is thus premised on the assumption that, although stories conveyed via different media share common features insofar as they are all instances of the narrative text type, storytelling practices are nonetheless inflected by the constraints and affordances associated with a given semiotic environment. Sets of constraints and affordances interact in multimodal storytelling, or forms of narration that recruit from more than one semiotic channel to evoke storyworlds.

In what follows, after laying some additional groundwork for my analysis and providing further details about the three case studies on which I am focusing, I consider how the coordinated use of words and images in graphic narratives bears on three aspects of the profiling of characters in storyworlds: the assessment of the modal status (real or imagined? remembered or anticipated?) of the situations and events that the characters experience; the positioning of characters vis-à-vis one another, interpreters of the story, and broader master narratives circulating in the social domain; and the shaping of identity by a double temporal logic—according to which narrated occurrences are not only localized episodes within a chronology but also complex event-structures whose effects are distributed across time(s). Overall, my account has implications for two interrelated projects, though the aims of the analysis are especially closely aligned with the first of these: on the one hand, the integration of ideas developed by theorists of narrative into emergent frameworks for studying the richness and complexity of graphic narratives (cf. Bridgeman 2005); on the other hand, the expansion of the corpus of stories on which accounts of narrative have themselves been based, so that those accounts can be adjusted as necessary to accommodate the full range of phenomena encountered in the domain of narrative.

Worldmaking in Multimodal Narratives
This section establishes foundations for the study of narrative worldmaking, discussing how the semiotic cues available in a given storytelling environment afford blueprints for world construction. I also provide some further details about my three case studies: *The Incredible Hulk* comics, Daniel Clowes’s *Ghost World*, and Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir, *Fun Home*.
Reclaiming the Referent

The structuralists’ failure to investigate issues of narrative worldmaking can be traced back to aspects of the Saussurean language theory that the early narratologists treated as a “pilot-science.” Pertinent aspects include Saussure’s bipartite analysis of the linguistic sign into signifier and signified (to the exclusion of the referent), and, relatively, his focus on code instead of message, or the foregrounding of the structural constituents and combinatory principles of the semiotic system of language over situated uses of that system. By contrast, convergent research developments across multiple fields in the years since structuralism—including discourse analysis, cognitive linguistics, philosophy, and social and cognitive psychology—have revealed the importance of studying how people deploy various kinds of symbol systems to refer to, and constitute, aspects of their experience.

Thus, in concert with other recent studies by narrative analysts (e.g., Doležel 1998; Duchan, Bruder, and Hewitt 1995; Gerrig 1993; Pavel 1986; Ryan 1991; Werth 1999), I assume in my work (Herman 2002, 2009, forthcoming b) that a root function of narrative is world creation, that is, the (re)construction of worlds evoked through the telling and interpretation of stories. Further, as is underscored in Tomasello’s (1999, 2003) research on the sociointeractional dimensions of language acquisition and use, reference to discourse entities in general is an intersubjective achievement, a collaborative process of identifying discourse referents via a mutual cross-referencing of communicative intentions in specific contexts of talk (see Brown 1995). By extension, story analysts need to study how practices of narrative worldmaking both shape and are shaped by the communicative environments in which they unfold—in other words, how the process of building narrative worlds is at once made possible by and reciprocally impinges upon the contexts in which such worlds are made.

Mode versus Medium

By the same token, other research developments that postdate structuralist narratology can throw light on how multimodal storytelling affects the process of worldmaking. For example, Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, 22) draw a distinction between modes and media. In their account, modes are semiotic channels (or better, environments) that can be viewed as a resource for the design of a representation formulated within a particular type of discourse, which is in turn embedded in a specific kind of communicative interaction. By contrast, media can be viewed as means for the dissemination or production of what is being represented in a given mode; thus media “are the material resources used in the production of semiotic products and events, including both the tools and the materials used.”

Conversational storytellers, for instance, typically use two semiotic modes to design verbal as well as visual (gestural) representations in narratively organized discourse. In turn, spoken language and gesture constitute expressive media, by virtue of which the representations at issue can be produced and distributed in a more or less localized way—more localized if there is no secondary recording apparatus to
disseminate the story in, for example, the medium of video accompanied by sound; less localized if the storytelling process is video-recorded. Further when communicative interactions are remediated in this way, the medium chosen can affect whether the original multimodality of the interactions is preserved or lost. Thus an audio recording of a face-to-face storytelling situation not only remediates the interaction but also transforms it into a monomodal representation. The reverse is true when a novel or short story is remediated as a movie.

**The Case Studies**

My case studies consist of pages (= sequences of individual panels) taken from three graphic narratives, the first two involving fictional scenarios and the third a nonfictional, autobiographical account. I begin with a panel sequence from *The Incredible Hulk* comics (Lee 1972), exploring how narration via multiple semiotic channels affects the process of assigning a modal status (actual, imagined, projected, hoped-for, etc.) to characters’ experiences. I then turn to Daniel Clowes’s 1997 graphic novel *Ghost World*, considering how the text uses a verbal-visual logic to position characters in (social) space. Finally, I draw on Alison Bechdel’s 2006 memoir *Fun Home* to explore how, in retrospective graphic accounts like Bechdel’s, word-image combinations can be used not just to situate stages of the self along a timeline but also to suggest a more complex model of identity—a model according to which the self is a temporally distributed structure, involving a network of relationships among multiple time frames. (In my analysis of *Fun Home*, I use “Alison” to refer to the protagonist and “Bechdel” to refer to the narrator whom that protagonist eventually became.)

Centering on a character originally created in 1962, *The Incredible Hulk* portrays the experiences of Robert Bruce Banner, a nuclear physicist from Dayton, Ohio, who grew up in an abusive home. Banner’s exposure to gamma radiation has led to his bifurcation into the normal human Banner and his alter ego, the creature known as the Hulk. Sudden surges of adrenaline transform Banner into this creature, a green behemoth who can lift 100 tons and withstand up to 3,000 degrees of heat (Fahrenheit).

My discussion of the Hulk focuses on the final page of issue 155 of volume 2 of *The Incredible Hulk* comic book series, published in September 1972. In this issue, Banner/Hulk—having been shrunken to subatomic proportions by a serum that sends him careening through a microverse consisting of ever tinier worlds within worlds—comes to rest in a world controlled by a Shaper who transforms dreams—in this case, the dreams of an ex-Nazi scientist—into a pseudo-reality. Here U.S. and Nazi troops battle for the streets of New York City.

*Ghost World*, meanwhile, centers on two teenage girls trying to navigate the transition from high school to post-high-school life; the text thus stands out contrastively against the backdrop afforded by the tradition of superhero comics like the Hulk. Far from possessing superhuman powers, Enid Coleslaw and Rebecca Doppelmeyer struggle with familial and romantic relationships; resist (with different degrees of asiduousness) the stereotypes their peers try to impose on them; and are brought face to face, on more than one occasion, with the fragility and tenuousness of their own friendship. In this way, *Ghost World*, closer in spirit to the female Bildungsroman than
action-adventure narratives, overlays a graphic format on content matter that helped extend the scope and range of comics storytelling generally. Finally, Bechdel’s graphic memoir *Fun Home* draws on the autobiographical energies of texts such as Spiegelman’s *Maus* I and II and Satrapi’s *Persepolis* but harnesses those energies (and the resources of graphic narration more broadly) to the genre of the coming-out story. As Gutenberg (2005, 73) notes, coming-out stories typically involve a kind of reverse-Bildungsroman pattern, in which “the coming-out protagonist has to make an effort to ‘unlearn’ gender-specific norms of behaviour in order to survive in a homophobic culture.” Likewise, the story of Alison’s formation is in large measure the story of her learning to resist dominant norms and expectations about (e.g., sexual) identity. These norms and expectations lead, early in her life, to modes of self-representation that—as *Fun Home* reflexively explores—fail to capture the felt, subjective truth of her experiences. At the same time, in telling her own story, the narrator-protagonist comes to recognize how those same homophobic norms and expectations had damaging effects on her father’s life (and thus, in yet another way, on her own).

**Identity Construction in Graphic Narratives**

This section discusses how my three case studies use word-image combinations to cue several kinds of inferences about agents in narrative worlds. In *Hulk*, I focus on inferences about whether the characters’ experiences are real or imagined; in *Ghost World*, on inferences concerning how characters are positioned with respect to one another, interpreters of the story, and broader master narratives; and in *Fun Home*, on inferences about where to locate events on the time line stretching between Alison’s past experiences and the present moment of narration.

**Assigning a Modal Status to Characters’ Experiences:**

**The Incredible Hulk**

Story analysts such as Doležel (1998), Pavel (1986), Ryan (1991), and Werth (1999) have drawn on ideas from analytic philosophy and modal logic to show how assessments of the actuality status of situations and events bear crucially on narrative understanding. Thus Ryan (1991) argues that narrative universes (= constellations of public as well as character-relative worlds) are recognizable because of a shared modal structure; this structure consists of a central world that counts as actual and various satellite worlds that can be accessed through counterfactual constructions voiced by a narrator or by the characters, and also through what the characters think, dream, read, and otherwise do.

At issue here are the possible worlds that orbit around what is presented as what Ryan calls the “text actual world” (= TAW), or world assumed as actual within the narrative. Narratives typically feature a range of private worlds or subworlds inhabited or at least imagined by characters; these satellite worlds include knowledge-worlds, obligation-worlds, intention-worlds, wish-worlds, pretend-worlds, and so on (cf. Werth 1999, 210–58). Further, the plot of any narrative can be redefined as “the trace left by the movement of these worlds within the textual universe. [For] participants, the goal of the narrative game . . . is to make TAW coincide with as many as
possible of their [private worlds]. . . . The moves of the game are the actions through which characters attempt to alter relations between worlds” (Ryan 1991, 119–20). Of course, not every narrative faithfully exemplifies this structure; indeed, as McHale (1987) has shown, a hallmark of postmodern literary narratives is their refusal to adhere to ontological boundaries and hierarchies of precisely this sort. Yet even in the case of texts like Borges’s “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” where a world initially construed as a far-flung satellite ultimately merges with the baseline reality of the story, this ontological subversiveness can be registered because of how such texts deviate from the default template for worldmaking.

In parallel with broader, contemporaneous developments in art and culture, the Hulk comic uses word-image combinations to foreground issues of modality. For one thing, the premise of an infinite layering of ever-smaller worlds embedded one within another (visually evoked by Banner’s free fall through the microverse in the opening pages of the issue) poses the problem of what ontological level constitutes the baseline reality relative to which the other world levels might be viewed as satellites. Further, in connection with the focal world in which most of the action takes place, the text exhibits a garden-path structure that requires the discourse-level equivalent of the repair mechanisms set into play by garden pathing at the sentence level (cf. Jahn 1999). When Banner arrives on the world controlled by the Shaper, before being strafed by Nazi planes and then transforming into the Hulk, what he takes to be the actual world is in fact situated on an embedded ontological level; it is a state of affairs imagined by the ex-Nazi Otto Kronsteig that has been converted to quasi-reality by the dream-stealing Shaper.

An initial clue that all is not what it seems occurs early on, when a dead Nazi soldier himself transforms into a lizard-like creature before Hulk’s eyes (p. 7). A few pages later, an American soldier provides the Hulk with a verbal explanation, presented in speech balloons: “This is the world of the Shaper, greenskin. . . . He sorta rules us, . . . takes our dreams an’ shapes ’em . . . gives ’em life” (p. 14). Subsequently, when the Shaper uses a beam of light to transport Kronsteig into his moonlike spaceship, that environment is confirmed as the TAW of which the world represented in the previous pages constitutes a (manufactured) satellite. The text thereby suggests how the domain of the real, and not just fictional plots, emerges from the conflict of worlds—from the more or less extensive domination of one possible world over others.

In the sequence reproduced as figure 16.1, words and images conspire to signal the modal status of situations and events experienced by the Hulk during this phase of the unfolding action.

As the Hulk struggles with and gets the better of “Captain Axis,” a being who occupied one of Kronsteig’s intention-worlds in the form of a scientific experiment during the war, and whom the Shaper has now extracted from Kronsteig’s mind, the nonactuality of Captain Axis begins to obtrude into the pseudo-reality created by the Shaper, exposing that world as constructed and contingent versus natural and inevitable. Both the visual track and the Hulk’s comments accentuate the contrast between this powerful figment of Kronsteig’s imagination and the “shriveled old man” himself. Likewise, as the streets and buildings in the subworld passing itself off as reality begin to shimmer, like illusions in a desert, the subsequent panel portrays the
Shaper “shrieking from his satellite stronghold,” with the narration presented in unframed text above the panel, further underscoring the difference between the TAW and the Nazi-inhabited subworld lifted from Kronsteig’s warped imagination. The Hulk’s violent opposition to the Shaper’s attempt to create a new pseudo-reality from the “muddled brute’s” own brain suggests an anti-postmodern resistance to ontological play, a refusal of subversive strategies for worldmaking—in contrast with the Byzantine narrative universe modeled in the comic itself. The text thus reflexively critiques the very structures it exemplifies; the Hulk’s preference for “something real” is at odds with the bottomless stratification of the microuniverse in which he is trapped.

Situating Identities in (Social) Space: Ghost World

In Harré and van Langenhove’s account (1999, 1–31), one can position oneself or be positioned in discourse as powerful or powerless, admirable or blameworthy, and the like. In turn, a position can be specified by characterizing how a speaker’s contributions are taken as bearing on these and other “polarities of character” in the context of an overarching storyline—a narrative of self and other(s) being jointly elaborated (or disputed) by participants, via self-positioning and other-positioning speech acts. Hence positions are selections made by participants in discourse, who use position-assigning speech acts to build “story lines” in terms of which the assignments make
sense. Reciprocally, the story lines provide context in terms of which speech acts can be construed as having a position-assigning force.

Bamberg (2004, 2005) extends this work on positioning to distinguish among three aspects or dimensions of narrative positioning, which can be visualized as concentric circles spreading outward from the storyworld evoked by the act of telling a story (cf. Moisinnac 2008): first, how the characters are positioned with respect to one another in the represented situations and events; second, how storytellers position themselves vis-à-vis their interlocutors in the context of the speech event through which the narrative is presented; and third, how the storyteller’s discourse relates to more or less dominant story lines about the way the world is. However, positioning theory was originally developed to account for discourse in contexts of face-to-face interaction. To what extent can the theory be mapped onto graphic narratives like Ghost World, and conversely how might expanding the corpus of narrative data necessitate modifications to the theory itself?

Graphic narratives like Clowes’s afford a range of expressive resources by means of which interpreters of the text can be positioned—and through which, in the storyworld evoked by the narrative, characters’ own attempts at self- and other-positioning can be represented. Likewise, both visual and verbal elements of the text serve to position Clowes’s account vis-à-vis dominant story lines or master narratives circulating in the culture at large. Consider, for example, the positioning logic at work in figure 16.2.

The verbal-visual organization of the page shown as figure 16.2 aligns readers with Rebecca and Enid, while distancing them from the backgrounded male characters about whom the two friends converse (or argue). Here Clowes deploys the multimodal equivalent of a print text’s use of third-person or heterodiegetic narration that moves along a spectrum from relatively more external to relatively more internal views—that is, from external focalization, where the vantage point on events is not associated with a character in the storyworld, to internal focalization, where the vantage point is in fact a character’s. For instance, readers can use the context established by the design of first two panels to draw an inference concerning the status of the image represented in the third panel. Specifically, it can be inferred that this image of the former bass player is mediated through the perceptions of one of the two main characters—most probably Rebecca, given her physical location and the orientation of her torso and gaze in the preceding panel. That inference is reinforced by the absence of a speech balloon in the third panel, even though the bass player is shown talking on the phone. Readers can assume that, because of the male character’s location at the far side of the restaurant, Rebecca cannot hear what he is saying on the phone. By contrast, in the case of the (self-incriminating) utterance that is represented by means of a speech balloon in the second panel, readers can assume that this remark (“You guys up for some reggae tonight”) was made within Rebecca’s and Enid’s perceptual range and is therefore included in the report of their perceptions at this point in the unfolding action. Both the organization of individual panels and sequential links across panels thus align readers with particular vantage points on the storyworld, and prevent or at least inhibit other identifications and alignments.

At the same time, the page uses the modulation between relatively more external and relatively more internal perspectives to present alternating views of Enid’s
and Rebecca’s table as the primary vantage point on the storyworld. Panels 4 and following prompt readers to pull back from the internalized view of the ex-bass player in panel 3 and adopt shifting perspectives during Rebecca’s and Enid’s debate concerning what Rebecca characterizes as Enid’s impossibly high standards for men. In a manner reminiscent of the shot/reverse-shot technique in cinematic narratives, the text first provides, in panel 4, an over-the-shoulder view of Rebecca from Enid’s perspective, followed in panel 5 by an over-the-shoulder view of Enid from Rebecca’s perspective. Then in panel 6 the perspective shifts again, to a more externalized view that captures Enid’s angry expression as she defends her preference for the cartoonist over the “guitar plunkin’ moron” (= ex-bass player), to whom Rebecca had alluded favorably. By showing both Enid’s angry reaction and the now-discredited male characters in the restaurant, and by attributing to Rebecca the utterance “Still, I just hate anybody who likes cartoons,” panel 6 aligns readers with Enid’s position, fracturing the global story line concerning the lack of viable male partners into competing story lines about life choices for young women in Enid’s and Rebecca’s position.

At issue here, in other words, are story lines to which Enid, Rebecca, and the other characters in the storyworld orient as a basis for action and interaction—story
lines bearing on gender roles and romantic relationships, among other domains. The verbal and visual details found in individual panels and panel sequences cue readers to attach local textual details to this (emergent) story line, while that story line in turn provides context for interpreting the actions, postures, and speech productions of characters represented within a given panel or across panels. In this way, the scene portrayed in figure 16.2 can be connected to an overarching narrative about the divergent life courses of the two main characters, caused in part by Rebecca’s growing willingness to accommodate to dominant story lines versus Enid’s continued resistance to those same story lines. More generally, making sense of individual panels and panel sequences requires situating them in a broader logic, whereby selves are positioned and counterpositioned in social space—with Clowes’s text exploiting both visual and verbal designs to provide interpreters with orienting clues about the positioning process as it unfolds.

Situating Identities in Time: Fun Home

In previous studies (e.g., Herman 2007) I have examined how retrospective first-person accounts can set into play a kind of distributed temporality, with an older, narrating-I seeking to come terms with events involving a younger version of himself or herself, the experiencing-I—and thereby constructing, from the vantage point of the present moment of narration, the earlier self as one that in fact had the experiences in question. Similarly, at some points in Fun Home, attempts to parse the temporal logic of the text generate an unresolvable question: Exactly where along the time line of the story can the narrator-protagonist’s perception of—or affective response to—the represented events be situated? In other words, whereas some verbal-visual cues allow events to be situated at definite increments along the time line stretching between past and present, others index a fusion or blending of time frames, and a distribution of the self across those frames (cf. Fauconnier and Turner 2002; Herman 2007, 320–21).

Fun Home does represent Alison’s family experiences as playing a formative role, suggesting that they help explain how she became who she is. Engaging in retrospective first-person narration, the text establishes a time line whose distal end is the period in which the younger-experiencing-I lived in the house that her father built, worked at the funeral home, came out during college, and the like, and whose proximal end is the time frame of the present narration, through which Bechdel, in her role as the older, narrating-I, assesses the impact of those earlier experiences on her current sense of self (cf. Lejeune 1989).

Yet by exploiting the semiotic potentials of graphic narrative, Fun Home deploys another, different temporal logic as well. In this double logic, time is not only a forward-directed arrow, with earlier moments incrementally giving way to (and impinging on) later ones, but also a loop linking events assumed to have been separated by time’s passing. In consequence, experiential knowledge of life-transforming events is less a thing of the past, bracketed off from the here and now, than a process that flows across time frames and is in fact defined by how those time frames are juxtaposed in discourse. Likewise the emotional effects of prior events are temporally distributed; their impact derives both from the profile of the storyworld and from the process of narration by which it is made to live again.
The specific semiotic resource that Bechdel uses to “delocalize” events—that is, to prompt interpreters to construe them as being anchored in more than one time frame—consists of descriptive tags inserted into individual panels; these tags provide information that might not otherwise be inferred about the objects, situations, or events being portrayed visually. The tails of the tags are shaped like arrowheads (see figure 16.3), to differentiate them from the speech balloons used to represent utterances produced in the storyworld; but their format also distinguishes them from the unframed blocks of text that are placed above individual panels and that correspond to the speech productions of the narrating-I, which postdate the verbal and nonverbal acts represented in the panels themselves. The tags thus have a dual or hybrid status; they parallel the narrator’s ex-post-facto speech productions, insofar as they

Figure 16.3 Descriptive Tags and Temporal Ambiguity in Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home
From Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic by Alison Bechdel. Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.
comment on elements of the scenes being portrayed, but their placement inside panels aligns them with the utterances and thoughts of the characters within the scenes.

Furthermore, whereas some of the tags can be straightforwardly interpreted as emanating from the vantage point of the older, narrating-I, in other cases it is not clear what “timestamp” should be placed on the information given in the tags. In a panel that shows Alison polishing a mirror with a can of furniture polish to which the tag “incipient yellow lung disease” is affixed (p. 16), the present moment of narration constitutes the temporal frame of reference; that is, it can be assumed that the experiencing-I did not know about the health risks of the polish at the time that she was using it. The same goes for another panel that portrays Bruce Bechdel angrily hurling a plate against a linoleum surface and that contains a tag that reads “permanent linoleum scar”; only with the advantage of hindsight could the narrating-I attest to the permanence of this scar. In the case of figure 16.3, however, it is unclear when the attribution of elation to the father in the fourth panel on the page occurs. Did Alison recognize Bruce’s elation on the occasion of her visit, or is the ascription made possible by the act of narration itself—an act that brings the past and present into dialogue and generates this attribution as a result of the interplay between time frames? The same questions could be asked about another, earlier moment in the narrative, when Alison (or is it the narrating-I?) attributes to herself “marker envy” when she sees row upon row of magic markers owned by one of her father’s artist friends in New York (p. 191).

In short, because of the way it laminates words and images, (re)constructing the storyworld of Fun Home requires not just establishing a chronology of events that separates earlier from later phases of the narrator-protagonist’s life but also recognizing how her sense of self is shaped precisely by its fuzzy or indeterminate situation in time (Herman 2002, 211–61). Revealing the limits of linear models of the life story as a chain of causes and effects stretched end to end from past to present, Bechdel exploits the resources of graphic narrative to suggest that it is not always possible to know exactly where in time one’s own experiences, inferences, or affective responses should be located.

Conclusion
This chapter has tried to bring together two approaches to postclassical scholarship on stories: cognitive narratology and transmedial narratology. As I hope I have demonstrated, coordinating these two approaches can generate productive new research questions—questions that could not even have been formulated, let alone addressed, within classical, structuralist frameworks for narrative inquiry. What sense-making possibilities do multimodal storytelling practices afford that are not afforded by monomodal or single-channel narrative practices, and vice versa? Further, in narratives exploiting more than one semiotic channel, how is information about the storyworld distributed between the various channels or tracks—and with what effect? Why, in graphic narratives, are some elements of the storyworld represented visually and others verbally, and to what extent would the texts cue different worldmaking strategies if the information were parceled out differently? For that matter, are there differences among the worldmaking strategies required for multimodal
narratives that exploit different semiotic channels, for example, words and images in graphic narratives versus utterances and gestures in face-to-face interaction? To explore these and related issues—issues situated at the interface of research on narrative and inquiry into the scope and nature of human intelligence—story analysts would do well to build on the collaborative, cross-disciplinary impulses very much in evidence both at the Georgetown University Round Table 2008 and in the present volume.

NOTES
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Figure 16.3, “Descriptive Tags and Temporal Ambiguity in Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home,” is from Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic by Alison Bechdel, © 2006. Reprinted with permission of Houghton Mifflin Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

1. In parallel with Herman (2009, forthcoming b), in focusing on narrative ways of worldmaking I build on Goodman’s (1978) pioneering account but adapt it for the purpose of analyzing distinctively narrative methods of world creation.

2. Hence, as discussed in Herman (2002, 9–22), the notion storyworld is consonant with a range of other concepts—including deictic center, mental model, situation model, discourse model, contextual frame, and possible world—designed to explain how interpreters rely on inferences triggered by textual cues to build up representations of the overall situation or world evoked but not necessarily explicitly characterized in narrative discourse.

3. I am grateful to my Ohio State colleague Jared Gardner for his generous assistance with my research on The Incredible Hulk.

4. Clowes’s text was originally published in serial installments in the tradition of underground comics and subsequently assembled into a novel. My discussion of the text below builds on analyses sketched in Herman (2009).

5. For further discussion of Fun Home’s self-reflexivity about processes of self-narration, see Watson’s (2008, 27) account of the text as “a memoir about memoir, memory, and acts of storytelling” and “at all times an ironic and self-conscious life narrative.”

REFERENCES


