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Assemblage as the basic principle for the structuring of space and time in comics

In the theory of comics studies there are various ways of perceiving the structure and form of the medium. This paper examines whether or not it might be productive to use Deleuze's term "agencement" when analyzing the dynamics of the way various formal elements work with and against each other in the medium of comics.

When studying comics there has been a tendency to emphasize the processes by which the reader conceives the comic as a whole and fluid narrative and in this Scott McCloud's concept of 'closure' has been quite influential. How the reader 'fills in the blanks' of the comic in order to make the story's many pieces fit together. Both in terms of panel transition and text/image relation, McCloud foregrounds the cohesion of comics:

> Words alone have been telling stories clearly for millennia. They've done just fine without picture… But in **comics**, the two have to work together **seamlessly** enough that readers barely notice when switching from one to another. (McCloud, 31)

But as comics critic Ole Frahm has argued (Frahm, 177) Scott McCloud's emphasis on the unity and seamlessness of comics is not necessarily a useful way to conceptualize how comics work and what they are made of. This is why, I suggest it might be fruitful to insist on the basic fragmented nature of comics. That the medium is *always already* in pieces and that the object of comics studies is not to try to establish a homogenous, unified whole but rather to investigate the various ways in which comics are kept together and fall apart as narratives and heterogeneous structures.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have in their books developed different theoretical approaches that accentuate multiplicity and heterogeneity as a productive scope through which the world and its objects and processes can be viewed. Their concept of

agencement might prove useful here when trying to establish and understand the dynamics involved in the ways the formal elements of comics can work counter-intuitively, against the linearly direction of reading and actively work against a feeling of unity in the story told. Assemblage is the English translation of agencement and I will use the French word in this paper because there exist in French a word assemblage that has a slightly different meaning. In order to clearly distinguish the Deleuzian use of the word, agencement will be used by me, but when quoting from English texts, assemblage equals agencement.

A theorist who has worked specifically on the concept of agencement is Manuel DeLanda who in his book *A New Philosophy of Society* lists and discusses the concept as thought by Deleuze. Using his points is a way to collect Delueze's defining comments across all the many books published in collaboration with Guattari. In his introduction DeLanda notes how these thoughts can be conceptualized and it is here that an outset for a new comics theory could be in the making. "This theory [of assemblage] was meant to apply to a wide variety of wholes constructed from heterogeneous parts" (DeLanda, 3) and "the parts of an assemblage do not form a seamless whole" (4). Here is a way of thinking the whole as at the same time being a unity *as well as* consisting of smaller units, a fragmented structure where the seams are showing. But in this alternative to an organic, seamless whole, it has to be specified how this entity works and what its properties are. DeLanda says: "a whole may be both analysable into separate parts and at the same time have irreducible properties, properties that emerge from the *interactions* between parts" (10) and following this: "Assemblages are wholes characterized by *relations of exteriority*" (10)
This relation of exteriority can be used as a way of describing the way several parts of the comic relate to each other in connection with the way the elements have been categorized beforehand: panel to panel, panel to page, text to text, image to image, etc.
DeLanda introduces two dimensions that connect to this exteriority relation: The one dimension that:

> (...) defines the variable roles an assemblage's components may play (...) The other dimension defines variable processes in which these components become involved and that either stabilize the identity of an assemblage, by increasing its

degree of internal homogeneity or the degree of sharpness of its boundaries, or destabilize it. The former are referred to as processes of *territorialization* and the latter *deterritorialization.* (DeLanda, 12)

DeLanda underlines that an agencement as a whole can have elements that works either way and that an element can be both territorializing and deterritorializing.

Trying to use these Deleuzian concepts as a productive way of analyzing the dynamics of formal interaction in comics, I will first establish the basic problems by using a small comic strip and then fold out the perspectives using a more complicated comics narrative.

This little comic strip by Bill Watterson shows Calvin and Hobbes preparing for a sleigh ride, the joke being that they perform a safety check well knowing that they have no safety precautions:

Watterson, p. 52

From a McCloudian point of view, interest is in the way the panels are linked together by the reader filling out the space in between them in an attempt to create a fluid narrative that works in one direction – forward in a straight line from panel to panel like pearls on a string. But if we try to look at the strip through the scope of agencement, it can be noted that the gutter (the space between panels) works as destabilizing at first, because the reader can stop after one image, halted by the gutter and the short narrative breaks down. On the other hand, when reaching the second panel the reader can backtrack across the gutter and the gutter's function of parcelling out time becomes obvious. Then the gutter becomes stabilizing. The gutter as a divider between panels and or pages can then be seen as both territorializing and deterritorializing. In this strip, destabilizing is a theme

(since they finish the story by going down the hill at full speed) and this can be observed in the way the point of view changes throughout the strip. The reader is thrown off his or her feet as the story is told, but the effect is not deterritorializing in terms of the assemblage that formally makes up comic strip. In keeping with the story, the point of view tilts as we near the edge.

The relation between image and text here is really close and the images functions as a visualisation of the text. The two middle panels are in fact obsolete, the safety check is void, and the last panel shows this clearly. As is often the case, the last panel of a comic strip (where the reader is made to laugh) sums up the narrative but also actively contradicts it. Again, a panel can work as both keeping the narrative together and working against it.

When using the concept of agencement it is possible to look at a wide variety of elements, and it is my hope that this will prove useful in my disseration where narrative, text/image relations, fictional worlds and the chronotope will be viewed through this lens. Here I will focus on the way the text/image relation can be activated in keeping a fragmented narrative together. In the 8 page comic by Alan Moore and Rick Veitch "How Things Work Out" (see appendix) the narrative moves through a house where the stories (as in levels of a house) are divided into different temporal areas. The ground floor is 1939, the 1st floor is 1959, 2nd floor is 1979 and the top floor takes place in 1999, as we follow the same man from boyhood to old age. Temporally, the effect of the gutter is here even more deterritotializing because the reader has to cross time in the opposite direction (against causality, backwards in time) every time he or she moves from a floor down to the next. The construction of the floors being spatially in the same house is one of pure imagination and in order to keep the comic together, Alan Moore uses a technique of text/text and text/image relation that works like a verbal/visual rhyme which is in effect territorializing I have numbered the pages accordingly and the panels from bottom down within each page (ex. 3.4 = page 3, bottom panel).

Throughout the story, the panels are connected vertically as a house moving backwards in time and horizontally as both a story (floor) in a house and a narrative in time and the difference compared with the Calvin and Hobbes strip is that there are multiple narratives taking place within the page and across the pages. The panel to panel analysis is complicated because the linearity of the stories told are muddled and disturbs causality.

Taking a closer look at how the text and image can relate to each other in a territorializing way one can point to the bottom panel of page 6 where the owner of the building Mr. Katz is trying to calm down Sonny's father. His speech balloon names the items going out the windows on the following page: "Sometimes, I'm a regular **guy**, sometimes, I'm sweet like **music.** Sometimes I'm comfortable as an old **fedora**, and, yeah, sometimes, I'm an **animal**." Hereby the panels are knitted together in relations of text/image that are not only in accordance with the direction of reading or causality but poly-vectorial and multiple. Simultaneously, the relation between (6.4) and (7.4) is emphasized because of Sonny's speech balloon that bridges the gap between the pages and refers to a visual image of an actual dog. However, this balloon also point towards (7.1) by referring to something being thrown out the top window which turns out at some level to be Mr. Katz in his old age, but also the other items and in fact the dog. The panels in this story is to be looked at in their own right as small units that are linked together in ways that cannot be explained only by a focus on the line of panels because the panels make up an assemblage that is held together by territorializing formal moves but is also kept separate by the deterritorializing effect of others. I hope I have showed partly the difference between the way strips and comic books work and partly how the Deleuzian terms can open up for a way of analyzing comics that is not entirely focused on the unity of a narrative but acknowledges the seams the holds the story together and apart.

Works cited

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