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Openness of Comics: Generating Meaning within Flexible Structures

Maaheen Ahmed

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Never before have comics seemed so popular or diversified, proliferating across a broad spectrum of genres, experimenting with a variety of techniques, and gaining recognition as a legitimate, rich form of art. Maaheen Ahmed examines this trend by taking up philosopher Umberto Eco's notion of the open work of art, whereby the reader?or listener or viewer, as the case may be?is offered several possibilities of interpretation in a cohesive narrative and aesthetic structure. Ahmed delineates the visual, literary, and other medium-specific features used by comics to form open rather than closed works, methods by which comics generate or limit meaning as well as increase and structure the scope of reading into a work.

Ahmed analyzes a diverse group of British, American, and European (Franco-Belgian, German, Finnish) comics. She treats examples from the key genre categories of fictionalized memoirs and biographies, adventure and superhero, noir, black comedy and crime, science fiction and fantasy. Her analyses demonstrate the ways in which comics generate openness by concentrating on the gaps essential to the very medium of comics, the range of meaning ensconced within words and images as well as their interaction with each other.

The analyzed comics, extending from famous to lesser known works, include Will Eisner's *The Contract with God Trilogy*, Jacques Tardi's *It Was the War of the Trenches*, Hugo Pratt's *The Ballad of the Salty Sea*, Edmond Baudoin's *The Voyage*, Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's *Arkham Asylum*, Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series, Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell*, Moebius's *Arzach*, Yslaire's *Cloud 99* series, and Jarmo Mäkilä's *Taxi Ride to Van Gogh's Ear*.

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