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Perception is everything

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Perception is everything

by

Daniel D. Shea

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ART

Major: Integrated Visual Arts

Program of Study Committee:
Brent Holland, Major Professor
  John Cunnally
  David Zimmerman

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2018

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................... iii

ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................................. iv

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................. 1
  Artist Statement ................................................................................................................. 1
  A Journey of Creative Pursuits ......................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER 2. DEVELOPING STORY ......................................................................................... 9

CHAPTER 3. ANALYSIS ........................................................................................................ 21
  Tools Used and Story Summary ....................................................................................... 21
  Sectioning the Story ......................................................................................................... 26
  Formal Analysis ............................................................................................................... 29
  Analyzing My Own Work ................................................................................................. 51

CHAPTER 4. FUTURE ............................................................................................................ 55

REFERENCES ......................................................................................................................... 57
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A good story has the ability to transport the reader/listener/viewer to another place. When done right, storytelling can be the greatest escape from the world. In this thesis, I detail my journey from listener, to lover, to learner and creator of stories.

The primary story I follow is a piece I created entitled, *Perception is Everything*. Inspired by the William Blake quote, “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern,” this story is the fantastical trip of a man named Gregory Jameson as he is jolted out of his mundane life and thrust into an unfamiliar version of the world. Here, Greg is forced to trust in a strange being only he seems able to see. This story embodies the fear and confusion inherent within every new endeavor in life.

I also show the path I have followed to create the story and help myself learn to become a better storyteller. One tool I use to achieve a better mastery of storytelling is a system of analytic analysis. I adapted this system as a way to dissect both my work and other works I admire in order to see what makes these stories tick.

The feeling of reading or creating a good story is one of my favorite feelings and one which was instilled in me from a young age. My desire is to pass along that joy and to inspire others to love and create good stories as well.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Artist Statement

From a very young age, I have had a great deal of interest in narrative and storytelling, in both visual and literary forms. For me, comics have always caught my attention as the perfect marriage of those two aspects of storytelling. As I have grown and refined my skills in both writing and drawing, I have gained a great deal of desire to tell my own stories. Now, I am striving to combine all my skills to do exactly that.

My interest does not only lay in telling stories but in analyzing them as well. I like to pull them apart and examine the inner workings, like a tinkerer at his workbench. I want to find out what exactly gives a good story that extra shine. Conversely, I want to seek out the pitfalls of storytelling so as to avoid sealing my own fate with a rotten story.

The bulk of my creative attention has been turned towards an ongoing story by the name of Perception is Everything. It is a piece which dives deep into the fantasy end of how our brains work to perceive the world around us while brainstorming the many possible realities which may lay beyond the veil of what we can see.

A Journey of Creative Pursuits

I have always loved stories. As the son of a librarian, that love was ingrained within me or, rather, lovingly pressed upon me early in life. I remember being read to most every evening as my mother would churn through a wide array of books. She read everything from Newberry and Caldecott award winners to the dingy, neglected titles I would mine from the deepest depths of the children’s section. For my mom, it didn’t matter what the book was because all books were great! Then, when my mom wasn’t reading to me, I was checking out and listening to “Read Along” books with records or cassettes that would read to me and emit
a whimsical “turn the page” tone to keep me on track in the book. As I grew, the stories also
grew until my mom decided it was time for me to forage ahead on my own. However, over
time I grew less and less interested in literature and I wasn’t quite sure why. Instead, my
focus began to shift to art.

I didn’t really realize I had a knack for drawing until about 4th grade, when other kids
started paying me a quarter apiece for my pencil renderings of their favorite baseball cards. I
didn’t think much of it at the time. I just knew Tom Glavin’s visage kept me in quarters for
my arcade habit, so I was happy. As people started to recognize my burgeoning talent, I
started to realize why I didn’t like to read anymore; a lack of imagery in chapter books. It
was around this time my cousin introduced me to the wonderful marriage of text and image
that is comics.

It’s not as if I didn’t know comics existed (I was devouring the likes of Calvin and
Hobbes and Outland very early on from the Sunday “funnies”), I just didn’t know the full
depth of that particular rabbit hole. At that moment I (my mom) bought my first comic book,
Spider-Man #26: With Great Responsibility 30th Anniversary Special (Fig. 1). To answer
your question, yes, I picked that comic solely because the holographic cover and gatefold
poster. From that point on, I was hooked.

Our nearest comic shop was about an hour long drive away, but I was more than
happy with grocery store wire rack comics. I didn’t follow any particular characters, writers,
artists, etc. I just enjoyed the escape of a gripping story filled with fun and action-packed art.
I enjoyed comics so much, when it came time to start doing book reports in school, I asked if
I could write one on a comic book. At first, I was shot down because the comics were too
short, but I had recently gotten some large trade paperbacks (collections of multiple comic
issues) as gifts so I proposed one of these collections for my book report and my teacher accepted. That is how the 320 page *Marvel/DC Crossover Classics v. 1* trade (Fig. 2) became the first book report I ever wrote.

When it came to independent reading, comics weren’t my only source of story. Once I identified imagery as the missing link in my enjoyability of books, I was able to find other fine marriages between words and images. Enter the *Great Illustrated Classics* series by the Waldman Publishing Corporation (Fig. 3). These abridged versions of classic tales exposed me to some of the most beloved stories in literary history. The reason I devoured them so easily is because every other page in these books has an illustration. This way, as a 10 year old, I was able to enjoy the great adventures of characters like Edmond Dantès in *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas and Captain Nemo in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* by Jules Verne without having to work through the unfamiliar writing styles of a couple of 19th century French authors. That kind of accessibility to the classics helped bridge the gap for me from comics to traditional literature.

Throughout my grade school years, my love for comics and fine art both grew rapidly, at first at an equal rate, but my love for literature soon lagged behind as I was pushed into testing in school to measure how quickly I was able to read. I’ve never been the swiftest of readers so being told what to read and how fast to read it turned me off books for a time. At this point, art took the reins for quite a stretch and I spent my high school through college years studying art and honing my physical abilities.

Still-life and self-portraits were the staple of my early education. My work has always had a playful quality to it and, while I haven’t always worked with comics or illustration, the spirit of storytelling has always abounded in my work. If I was working on a still-life, I
would find a composition within the disparate objects that would allow me to tell a story. A dramatically lit charcoal drawing of toilet paper and eggplants became a story of unrequited love between a thick, tubular shape and the bulbous, oblong shape it so desperately desired. A colorful composition featuring a purple bust of George Washington became a theoretical look into the kitschy home of George and Martha Washington (Fig. 4). At the same time, my primary concern was polish, not depth or meaning. During my Undergraduate studies, I never really cleared that hurdle to take my work to the next level and inject great meaning into it. Perhaps that’s why art became more of a hobby after graduating with my Bachelor’s degree. After college, my primary creative outlet became music.

I studied music in some capacity from a young age and have always had a pretty decent ear along with a good sense of rhythm. Music, like writing, is another facet of the arts and naturally drew me in. It’s this love of music that drew me to the basis of my current project, *Perception is Everything*, but I will detail that correlation later.

I can track my life with my musical obsessions as if it’s a detailed timeline. In grade school it was pop, because pop is catchy and accessible. The third grade Dan was an MC Hammer fanatic, complete with knock-off Hammer pants and a finely honed MC Hammer dance in my repertoire. I would record Top-40 hits from the radio and ask my parents to buy whatever Casey Kasem was selling. Once I got to middle school, I had started to discover the Oldies and Classic Rock end of the radio dial. This was also about the time my older brother got a CD player and a subscription to the Columbia House Record Club (8 CDs for a penny!...and a monthly obligation to purchase whatever they decide to send you). This is where I built a strong musical foundation upon the likes of Led Zeppelin, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones, but my primary obsession of this time in my life was The Doors. While The
Doors’ career was, short, turbulent and tragic their music has resonated a great deal with many over the years (myself included). In the later part of Middle School into High School, I hit a big Heavy Metal phase which flowed into a Punk Rock phase as I started to learn to play the bass guitar. The raw, visceral qualities of Punk appealed to the adolescent in me while the simplicity of most of the music appealed to the budding bassist. In College, I turned into a bit of a pretentious Indie enthusiast. If a band wasn’t nearly unknown or lauded by the music blogs Pitchfork or Stereo Gum they weren’t worth knowing. Soon the pure musician in me caused me to adopt more omnivorous musical tastes; good music is good and that’s all that matters.

Music was a fine place holder in my artistic journey for a time while I was in college and for a couple years post-graduation. I had the opportunity to play in several different bands playing music everywhere, from beer soaked basement shows to polished steel frame stages running professional sound equipment. I also got to record with a few bands in similarly odorous basements as well as professional studios. In the end, music felt more like a great hobby than a career and way of life.

Instead, my primary desire after college was to marry the love of my life, and work to become the best husband and father I could be. For several year after college, my focus was on family. My wife, Brooke, and I were married in the summer of 2007 and started having children in the summer of 2010, with our daughter Viviana being our first child. All that time I saw my wife enjoying a career she loves as a High School English teacher and with her support and encouragement I applied for Graduate School at Iowa State University. I was accepted and started in the Fall of 2013. One week after classes started our second child, Seeley, was born and almost two years later Finnegar came along. Many might think it
foolish to grow a family while working a full-time job and going to Graduate School, but raising a family with my wife has been the most enriching experience of my life. I’m certain school would have been much easier without kids, but easier by no means translates to better. With the love, support and understanding of my wife, we have made it all work.

My biggest struggle throughout Graduate School has been figuring out what I want to create. Despite a lifelong love affair with comics, my work has not always been focused on them until recently. Prior to Graduate School, I focused on learning the basic elements and principles of design. I honed my craft in various media and concerned myself with creating the most detailed and striking images I could conceive. However, I gave very little thought to the meaning behind those images. My primary concern was to catch the eye, but I rarely went deeper than that.

Now, the polish is secondary and my focus is creating something of more substance. One might think this is a simple task and on the surface it sounds easy. For me, the search for meaning has been a difficult one. I tried making work that potentially made a statement on an issue of general public concern by creating portraits of endangered species, but it didn’t feel genuine. After wracking my brain for a time, I turned to another art form which I have always adored, writing.

One of the primary axioms in creative writing is “write what you know.” So, I did. As I wrote, I rediscovered my love of story and wrote stories that reflected elements of my own experience. This led me to explore creating my own comics for the first time. Why it took me so long to try my hand at an art form I have admired since grade school, I will never know.

As a way to bridge the gap between the sequential panels and pages of comics with the stand alone imagery of what I was used to working with, I began creating singular large-
scale pieces with text which work together as a sequential narrative. (Fig. 5-6) In these pieces, my primary interest was in how the text interacts with the image. Ideally, the text and image should marry together perfectly, neither element overpowering the other visually. During this study of word and picture relationship, I was struck by a quote from Will Eisner in his book *Comics and Sequential Art*:

> “Comics deal with two fundamental communicating devices: words and images. Admittedly this is an arbitrary separation. But, since in the modern world of communication they are treated as independent disciplines, it seems valid. Actually, they are derivatives of a single origin and in the skillful employment of words and images lies the expressive potential of the medium.” (Eisner 7)

Eisner’s point in both words and images coming from a single origin seems particularly poignant. Words can enhance an image in many ways, be it simply through elegant prose, or by marrying with the image in a visual manner. Eisner liked to integrate words into his compositions in many ways, particularly with the title pages of his ongoing series *The Spirit*. (Fig. 7) This idea of shaping text to be a part of the image inspired me to explore word and image relationships further as can be seen in another set of images I created based on a passage of text I wrote. (Fig. 8)

My next step was to create comics in the more traditional sense. At first, I was lost when trying to create traditional comics. Despite a life-long love of comics and a decent ability to both write and draw, I felt like a fish out of water. No longer was I creating images observed in life or photography, but instead, I was trying to create something from nothing. At least, that’s how it felt at first. Drawing with photographic references, both found and self-
created, only got me so far and consistently took me a frustratingly long time to create. I then decided to brush up on the basics of general anatomy, figure drawing, and more advanced perspective drawing, focusing on creating a visual shorthand I could use to create generic scenes. From those generic scenes I could add details to the figures and the space they occupy using references and imagination.

Creating comics became a new craft to hone and one that marries two of my favorite creative expressions, writing and drawing. In hindsight, the choice to make comics seems like a no-brainer, but the long and winding road which has brought me to the present has been a revolutionary one, nonetheless.
CHAPTER 2. DEVELOPING STORY

Story ideas come to me in many ways, in many forms and at many varying times. I keep a running folder of documents, each containing a story idea in some form or another. Sometimes it’s a vague idea, a sentence or two or the basics for a whole universe of material. As I work on the stories, they sometimes graduate out of the idea folder and get a folder of their own where I write and rewrite stories, forging them into something more concrete and complete. The main story exhibited within my thesis, *Perception is Everything*, went through that same process.

At the start, the story was a vague idea, born out of the famous quote by William Blake from his epic poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.” This quote has stuck with me since the first time I heard it as an adolescent, obsessed with the band The Doors.

As a big fan of The Doors I devoured not only the music but writings and film. I first heard the William Blake quote by watching the 1991 Oliver Stone film, *The Doors*. While I did not desire the destructive lifestyle of Jim Morrison, who died at age 27 of drug induced heart failure, I admired his quest to see the world as more than what we perceive on the surface. From that point on I was drawn to the fantastical, strange, and supernatural aspects of all things.

It was around this time I started looking at Surrealism and created art in my high school courses that was strange for the sake of being strange. I didn’t have too much rhyme or reason behind what I created; a man whose mouth morphs into one end of a telephone receiver while the lens of his glasses morphs into the other end, a sculpture of a foam
mannequin face that was emerging from a sheet of linoleum. I sought out movies which were out of the ordinary as well. Films like Darren Aronofsky’s *Pi* from 1998 and David Lynch’s entire catalog were strange but accessible for my questing high school brain. I was attracted to oddities. I still am.

The comics I purchased changed as well. Instead of Spiderman and Superman, I was reading slightly more out of the ordinary books like Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* and Alan Moore’s run on *Swamp Thing*. But the creator who grabbed my attention most was Sam Kieth and his comic, *The Maxx*. (Fig. 9) Kieth was actually the artist for Gaiman’s first issues of *Sandman*, but it wasn’t until I saw his full, unbridled, creator owned work on *The Maxx* that I fell in love with his visual sensibilities.

Initially, I bought *The Maxx* simply because I loved the imagery. I didn’t even read the words of the story until I had scanned the whole issue in visuals alone. Sam Kieth’s work has always captivated me because it is so out of the norm yet extremely eye catching. He runs the gamut from super simplistic to rather realistic in the span of one page, one drawing. (Fig. 10) Katherine Keller of *Sequential Tart* states, “When trying to describe Sam Kieth, phrases such as “30-something 10 year old”, “Dr. Seuss on crack”, and “wonderfully insane” come to mind.” Kieth continues to be a source of inspiration as he continues to produce strange and thought-provoking work.

While this complete paradigm shift was probably not caused solely by a single quote from an 18th century poet and artist, William Blake’s words are what stand out to me most in retrospect. For that reason, I decided to build this story of *Perception is Everything* around Blake’s indelible quote. I began to hypothesize what it might mean for things to “appear to
man as they are, infinite,” and the first step in that journey was to begin building a universe
within which I could tell infinite stories about infinite subject matters.

Diving into the idea of an altered perception of reality, I first looked at another work
influenced by Blake’s quote, Aldous Huxley’s 1954 book *The Doors of Perception*. This
book details Huxley’s experience of taking mescaline in 1953. Huxley decided to take
mescaline after reading a paper by British psychiatrist Humphry Osmond who was using the
drug in his research on schizophrenia. Huxley wrote to Osmond who agreed to meet with
Huxley, administer the drug, and monitor Huxley. The appeal of mescaline to Huxley lay in
its capacity for self-transcendence. The idea of an expanded perception of the world
fascinated him. One example he wrote of his hallucinogenic experience is:

“The legs, for example, of that chair--how miraculous their tubularity, how
supernatural their polished smoothness! I spent several minutes--or was it
several centuries?--not merely gazing at those bamboo legs, but actually
being them---or rather being myself in them; or, to be still more accurate
(for "I" was not involved in the case, nor in a certain sense were "they")
being my Not-self in the Not-self which was the chair.” (Huxley 6)

Reading Aldous Huxley’s poignant observations of his experience with mescaline
helped fuel my vision for this idea of the infinite. Huxley’s statement that he felt almost as if
he was the chair leg, that there was a melding of space and a sense of shared existence among
all things in the world struck me as especially interesting. This idea also reminded me of
another writing, though it is far less iconic and academic, *The Bartimaeus Sequence*, a
fantasy book series written by British author Jonathan Stroud.
In the *Bartimaeus Sequence*, Stroud envisions a world run by magicians whose greatest power lay in their ability to summon various beings from another realm to do their bidding. Once in the world, the beings can take almost any form they like and can even look different on each of the seven planes of existence within the world. The reason these beings are so malleable is because their realm is one of a shared existence. They do not experience time or space in the same manner as those in our realm. Each being consists simply of an essence which flows and mingles with all other beings in that realm. To my mind, I envisioned a similar concept in our world as a visualization of how our consciousness or souls exist when our mortal bodies either pass away or fall unconscious. Pages 4-8 of my work, *Perception is Everything* (Fig. 13-16), illustrate my vision of this essence passing through its own plane as the main character, Greg, falls unconscious and slips into a coma. There’s no real indicator of how much time has passed based on these pages because our consciousness does not experience time on another plane in the same manner as we do on this mortal plane. Also, Greg does not wake up until his essence of consciousness has fully dissipated from the page, absorbing back into his mortal shell.

In the early stages of creating this story the main character, Greg, went through many different iterations; he went from young to old, he went from widower to married to remarried, he went from seeing to blind and back again. In the end, I settled on an older, remarried man because I thought he should be a man who believes he’s seen enough of the physical world and the relationships within it to know how it all works. The reason being, I wanted to chip away at that confidence little by little and make every inexplicable event in the story difficult for him to accept. At the opening of the story, Greg is speaking of the mundane nature of everyday life when he suffers a cerebral incident (Fig. 12); an event
which shakes him up and triggers a series of moments to begin chipping away at his basic perception of how the world works.

The first major obstacle Greg encounters is his perception of how time has passed since his incident. To him, it feels as though it was yesterday that he was leaving work and felt a pain in his head. In my story, the reasoning for this is because Greg’s consciousness left his body during the incident and retreated to its own plane of existence in order to protect itself from any harm. On that other plane, his consciousness experienced no linear passage of time. So, when it returned to Greg’s mortal shell, Greg felt as though no time passed at all. On page 9 (Fig. 17) he notices a difference in his wife, Christina, but he chalks it up to the relief that he’s still alive after a traumatic experience rather than the passage of time. It’s not until Doctor Powell tells him on page 10 (Fig. 18) how long he has been out that he becomes aware of the fact that he was in a coma for 4 years. Even after hearing the facts straight from the Doctor, Greg is not convinced. He tries to get out of bed, to spring into action and prove the statement false, but his legs collapse under his own weight due to muscle atrophy. Once Greg encounters this physical evidence of the passage of time in the form of muscle atrophy, he’s forced to believe Doctor Powell, thus negating what his consciousness has felt on the other plane while Greg’s body lay in a comatose state.

The next, and most jarring, incident Greg experiences takes place on page 11 (Fig. 19). Here, Greg is resigned to believe he has, indeed, been in a coma for 4 years. Throughout this page, Doctor Powell is trying to assure Greg that they will help him work through everything and get him back on track. However, while Doctor Powell is speaking, a strange humanoid being, a spirit, walks in through one wall, looks Greg straight in the eyes and walks out the other wall, without breaking stride. Greg sees this, but can’t quite compute
what just happened. He feels his sanity crumbling in upon him in the form of hands grabbing at him and pulling him out of the reality he has known his whole life. This moment is drawn out through page 12 (Fig. 20) as Christina, realizing Greg is trying to come to grips with this new reality, tries to get his attention. Little does she know, Greg’s reality has been assaulted far more than she can understand at that moment.

The next scene, played out on pages 13 (Fig. 21) and 14 (Fig. 22), introduces Greg’s estranged daughter, Mirabelle. Mirabelle’s perception of reality is introduced and changed in short order over two pages, but in a much more natural manner. We learn on page 13, Mirabelle was not on speaking terms with her father before his stroke so, prior to the phone call from Christina, Mirabelle’s step-mother, Mirabelle’s familial reality consisted of perhaps wanting to finally talk with her father or perhaps not, either way it was not possible. During the phone call, in which Christina informs Mirabelle her father is awake and she should visit, Mirabelle’s feelings get thrown into turmoil and confusion. Her world changes in an instant and she is forced to confront her feelings about her father. With Mirabelle, I wanted to add a bit of a human element to the story to remind the reader that one’s world can be turned upside down in very real ways, ways which have nothing to do with spirits or different planes of existence. Also, from a storytelling standpoint, this sets up a new conflict to happen sometime in the future and offers a great variety of possible storylines to play with. As an aside, the reader learns Mirabelle is a Doors fan as the song “Break on Through (To the Other Side)” plays as her ringtone.

Going back to Greg’s supernatural dilemma, pages 15 (Fig. 23) and 16 (Fig. 24) deepen his mental crisis of coming to grips with what is real and what is not, or, rather, what he perceives as reality versus what everyone else perceives. On page 15 Greg is in the midst
of a physical therapy session when he stumbles and is caught not only by his physical therapist, but also by the mysterious spirit. Again, no one seems to see this strange being. With this latest incident, Greg decides to confide in Christina who is sympathetic and doesn’t believe he is crazy. However, based on her perception of the situation, she simply believes Greg needs rest and healing. This illustrates how we, as physical beings, have a difficult time believing anything we cannot see. This, of course, is natural and reasonable, yet I wonder how much of this world we miss due to our limitations of only comprehending what our brains allow us to process.

Going back to Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception* for a moment, another quote from that book caught my attention. In the book, Huxley quotes the Cambridge philosopher, Dr. C. D. Broad stating:

“Each person is at each moment capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him and of perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe. The function of the brain and nervous system is to protect us from being overwhelmed and confused by this mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge, by shutting out most of what we should otherwise perceive or remember at any moment, and leaving only that very small and special selection which is likely to be practically useful.”

(Huxley 6)

I use this quote on page 7 to set up the story a bit and show what Christina is reading to Greg at the moment. From this quote, Huxley postulates we are all potentially Mind At Large, meaning we are capable of perceiving all things at all times, as Dr. Broad’s quote states. However, as animals who need to protect our physical bodies, our minds filter reality down
to the bare essentials to keep us on guard for any danger as we seek out nourishment. Huxley felt the use of psychoactive drugs removes portions of this filter to give access to the Mind at Large.

This concept of our brain’s limitless capabilities informs my story, *Perception is Everything*, a great deal. Thinking upon this idea makes me wonder what exactly our brain is filtering out, and causes me to ask what if education, evolution, a physical cerebral incident, or even meditation could cause our brains to alter that filter? With Greg, my character in *Perception is Everything*, it is the manner in which his brain has healed from a stroke which has rewired it, causing his mind to perceive more than the average person. As for what he sees in this unfiltered world, I turned to things mankind has reported to see for ages: ghosts, spirits, angels, whatever you would like to call them. I posed a reality in which these spiritual beings walk amongst us, working behind the veil of our brain’s own filter.

Going back to the story, pages 17 and 18 (Fig. 25), Greg takes Christina’s advice and tries to rest. Upon falling asleep, he starts dreaming and finds himself reliving the incident that landed him in this altered state of being, or as he sees it, this craziness. Greg falls from one iteration of himself into and through another, then into his own brain which is altered by this strange spirit being he keeps encountering. This alteration causes the brain to light up with color. Throughout the story, I decided to use color as a visual motif to signify the unfiltered portions of Greg’s perception as seen on the cover, the moment Greg dissolves into his conscious essence and whenever Greg encounters a spiritual being. I felt it would give greater weight to Greg’s unfiltered perceptions.

On page 19 (Fig. 26), Greg is waking from his traumatic dream only to see this spirit being is beckoning him to go with him, making him feel even more as though he’s nuts. The
brains in the background are a carryover visual motif meant to indicate Greg may still be in a bit of a dreamlike state. As the spirit being continues to speak with Greg and touches him in a reassuring manner, Greg calms down and realizes it is only himself and his sleeping wife in the room with this spirit being. He calms because it is always easier to accept the inexplicable when there is no one around to try and explain it to. With this moment of acceptance all that has happened to Greg since waking seems to become more real; a more acceptable reality. This is why, on page 20 (Fig. 27), Greg ultimately accepts the spirit being’s invitation to show him he is not, in fact, crazy. While he hesitates because he does not want to leave his wife, he still leaves because he needs answers. Plus, the spirit being assures Greg they will be back before she wakes. However, that may or may not be the case.

Turning to another real world example of people seeing things that others do not, there is a condition known as Charles Bonnet Syndrome (CBS). CBS is a condition reported in about 10 percent of all blind or visually impaired people where they experience visual hallucinations in varying forms. The hallucinations can be anything from simple colored shapes to people moving about the world. CBS gets its name from the 18th century naturalist and philosopher, Charles Bonnet, who discovered the condition in his 87-year-old, perfectly sane grandfather who was nearly blind but reported seeing visions of many different things. In a TED talk from 2009, neurologist Oliver Sacks explains the phenomenon as the visual parts of the brain becoming hyperactive and excitable due to lack of input, causing them to fire spontaneously.

This phenomenon got me thinking in a more fantastical direction, wondering, what if the hallucinations caused by the hyperactive portions of the brain aren’t actually hallucinations? What if the hyperactivity is causing the brain to look beyond its own filter,
allowing it to perceive more of the world as it truly is, infinite? One of the example Dr. Sacks shares in his TED talk involves a woman who sometimes sees multiplied visions, such as a man in a striped shirt who suddenly splits into six then collapses back in upon himself, a phenomenon called palinopsia. What if those six versions of one man were actually the brain perceiving six different realities converging upon one another? In another example Dr. Sacks describes a patient who sees two young men sitting next to his granddaughter on the couch, but the granddaughter says there are no young men with her and they disappear. What if those young men are visions of another time which the unfiltered brain has perceived because it has expanded its perception of time beyond the linear construct we know and experience? These are all very wild and fantastical postulations, but for the purposes of Science Fiction and Fantasy writing, neuroscience provides a very rich playground. Getting back to CBS and the story at hand, the idea of perfectly sane people being able to accept the hallucinations they see reinforces Greg’s acceptance of his vision of this spiritual being in my story.

Pages 21 and 22 (Fig. 28) showcase some of the spirit being’s abilities as he phases into Greg’s leg to mend his muscle enough for Greg to walk on his own again. These abilities are something I intend to expand upon in subsequent stories. In this unfiltered aspect of the world, there are many other beings who work behind the scenes helping those they are meant to help. Greg is a special case, though, as it is a rare thing that humans are able to see these beings. With Greg’s leg fixed, the spirit being helps Greg leave the hospital by scouting ahead, creating a diversion, getting him more acceptable clothing and leading him to the exit.

In the background of pages 21 and 22, I borrowed a visual motif from a comic which has stuck with me from a young age, *Family Circus*. While *Family Circus* is certainly not the most poignant comic on the funnies page, far from it, I was always drawn to it as a child due
to its simplicity in both style and substance. Nevertheless, some of my favorite Sunday strips growing up were those in which one of the children, Billy, is sent on an errand or some such thing and the strip details the circuitous route Billy takes all over the house, yard or neighborhood to complete the simplest of tasks only to fail due to his dawdling. For example, there is a strip where Billy is given a letter to run out to the mailbox before the mailman comes by. The strip shows Billy’s path through every room of the house, going under tables over chairs, around a light post outside only to end with Billy missing the mailman due to his dawdling. (Fig. 30) When drawing out this escape from the hospital I was reminded of those strips and thought it a fitting motif for the pages.

At the end of page 21, I introduce Jim Morrison as another guide through this new unfiltered plane. Admittedly it seems odd and hokey in some ways, but in future stories one finds out this plane is riddled with figures who have gained access to it and have become permanent fixtures. There are people who have opened their minds in one form or another, such as: Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Freud, even Aldous Huxley himself. There are many ways to remove the filter on one’s brain (drugs, meditation, education, etc.) and after the filter is removed one’s essence, one’s consciousness or soul, becomes aware of the mingling of these planes. For that reason, when one passes on, one’s essence holds the form of the mortal body. Under normal circumstances one’s essence is returned to this realm as a relatively blank soul and given the option to either join the spirits working behind the scenes or be returned to the pool of souls waiting to reenter the mortal world.

To cap off this arc in the story on page 23 (Fig. 29), I have Jim chat with Greg in a casual manner in order to disarm him and put him at further ease. The spirit, who is finally introduced as Barchiel (one of the lesser known archangels from Biblical fame), doesn’t have
much by way of social skills. In this chit chat, we get to see playful side of Greg that has not been able to surface since his awakening. Also, given Greg’s opinion of Jim, we can perhaps see why Mirabelle has taken a liking to *The Doors*, seeing it as a small rebellion of the father she spurns.

In the end, I chose to pull the viewer away from the main cadre of characters as they walk off into the proverbial sunset in order to give a sense of their story coming to an end. Then, in the final panel, as Greg and company become specks on the page, I introduce a true antagonist for the reader to anticipate in the next arc and beyond. Just as Greg is coming to terms with this new reality, the dark side of this unveiled world is revealed because not all souls are pure. In this world, some are born with a tainted soul, while others are corrupted over time as the dark element strives to spread its influence across the world.
CHAPTER 3. ANALYSIS

Tools Used and Story Summary

While on my journey to create good comics, I found myself longing for a systematic way to evaluate comics in terms of how they read and what they mean. I wished to gain a greater understanding of what makes the medium tick and use that knowledge to improve my own comics. To develop this system, I didn’t think it prudent to look only at my own work. Instead, I chose a more iconic and well known piece of comics history to test out these methods of analysis, *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, by Justin Green (1972).

*Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* is an autobiographical account of the author’s upbringing. Using the character of Binky Brown as an analog for himself, Green details how his Catholic upbringing coupled with a then undiagnosed form of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) known as Scrupulosity created a set of neurotic behaviors which followed him well into adulthood. This seminal work is widely considered the start of the autobiographical or confessional comics genre. Some even consider it the start of the graphic novel movement as its 44 pages of singular storytelling seemed like an epic compared to the common comic book story length of the day (Spiegelman 2009). Art Spiegelman, a Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novelist himself, credits Green as a major influence on his most successful work, stating in reference to Green, “...I readily confess that without his work there could have been no *Maus*. One point of my pentagon-shaped Pulitzer prize belongs to him.” (Spiegelman 2009)

While no standalone volume has been written solely on the subject of Justin Green or his Binky Brown works, there are many book chapters, articles, interviews, essays, etc. which acknowledge the importance of this gem of the Underground Comix era. Most of the
writings focus on Binky Brown’s importance as a pioneer of autobiographical/confessional comics, or speak to its impact as an early example of OCD literature before OCD was a known condition, but few take a deeper look at the meaning of the work itself. I ventured to look at Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary from an analytical perspective using the texts Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance by Erwin Panofsky and Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art by Scott McCloud as a basis for my analysis as well as my own critical perspective.

Both texts are important in their own right and were chosen for specific reasons. Erwin Panofsky was a German-American art historian who was held in highest esteem by the art world at large. Famed British art historian Kenneth Clark described him as “unquestionably the greatest art historian of his time.” (Chilvers) Panofsky’s greatest contributions to the art world are considered to be in the study of iconography with his book Studies in Iconology being considered the standard bearer of the field.

Panofsky’s contributions represent a more formal side of artistic analysis by looking at the underlying meaning of images found within a given work of art. McCloud, on the other hand, represents a newer yet equally rigorous form of analysis which focuses on the mechanics of the comics medium. McCloud’s most popular work, Understanding Comics, is considered the current gold standard in comics analysis. Of McCloud’s seminal work Publisher’s Weekly says, “He dissects the vocabulary of the medium, cheerfully analyzing the psychological power of comics and their central role in our ultra-visual culture. McCloud attempts to place comics within the tradition of serious western art.” While his work is not perfect, McCloud’s book is still considered both a forerunner and the primary resource of comics analysis.
Each text provided a different set of tools to facilitate a thorough analysis of Binky Brown. In *Studies in Iconology*, Panofsky decodes works of art from the Renaissance period by analyzing them at three different levels (Fig. 31):

- **First level (primary or natural)** - Interpreting meaning through basic factual descriptions of the objects which are seen and which basic expressional characteristics are observed. Meaning at this level comes from one’s own practical experience.

- **Second level (secondary or conventional)** - Looking with a deeper understanding of the images, actions and concepts presented. Using prior knowledge gained from books or education to formally analyze the images and their relationships to one another to discern what events, themes, etc. are being depicted. Meaning at this level comes from one’s reading and education.

- **Third Level (tertiary or intrinsic)** - Using information about the cultural climate at the time of the work’s creation or the creator’s class, racial or religious perceptions, to uncover hidden meanings of which the creator may not have been aware. This is the “ultimate goal of iconology.” Meaning at this level comes from what Panofsky calls “synthetic intuition,” an ability to grasp the overall Weltanschauung or worldview of an artist’s period and social environment. (Panofsky 1972)

While these levels of interpretation are generally reserved for single images of fine art, they are still helpful in interpreting meaning within a work of sequential art, particularly when looking at covers and splash pages (pages dominated by only panel which generally depicts
an important event in the story).

To further assist in the interpretation of *Binky Brown*, I turned to Scott McCloud’s text. In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud breaks comics down into smaller elements and explains how and why the various elements are used most effectively. The major analytical elements presented in McCloud’s work are:

*Panel Transitions* - The various ways closure happens within the mind of a reader who is required to connect one panel with another in a narrative sequence. These transitions fall into six categories according to McCloud (Fig. 32,33).

- *Moment-to-Moment* - Very little action from panel to panel, requires very little closure.
- *Action-to-Action* - A single subject transitioning from one action to the next.
- *Subject-to-Subject* - Bouncing between different subjects within the same scene.
- *Scene-to-Scene* - Transitioning from one scene to the next, often involving a change in location and/or time. This requires more reader involvement.
- *Aspect-to-Aspect* - Stopping time, in a sense, to show different perspectives or areas of the same scene, often used to create the setting for a story at the beginning of the narrative.
- *Non-Sequitur* - Disparate, unrelated images in panels placed next to one another.

*Word and Image Combinations* - How words and images relate to one another within a single panel to create a narrative. McCloud identifies seven kinds of combinations (Fig. 34):
- **Word Specific** - Images illustrate but do not significantly add to the mostly complete text.

- **Picture Specific** - Words add little to the straightforward imagery.

- **Duo-Specific** - Words and images sending essentially the same message.

- **Additive** - Words elaborate upon the imagery shown, or vice versa.

- **Parallel** - Words and images seem to follow two different narratives at the same time, without intersecting.

- **Montage** - Words become a part of the created image.

- **Interdependent** - Words and images work symbiotically to create a narrative one could not tell without the other. (McCloud 1994)

* *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* starts off early in Binky’s life. The story shows him having a strong sense of guilt for any wrongdoing as he attempts to atone for every infraction with his own personal forms of penance. He does everything from Rosary and Act of Contrition recitations to repeatedly slamming his head into his headboard before bed. The majority of Binky’s guilt stems from sexually “impure” thoughts. He also develops a complex centering around “penis rays” which radiate from his genitalia, threatening to destroy his moral standards. This particular neurosis accelerates until Binky starts seeing his fingers and toes as phallic which radiate the same destructive rays, causing utter ruination to religious structures and icons around him. In adulthood, Binky tries to combat these terrifying neuroses by any means necessary; drinking, drugs, sex, masochism, etc. Eventually, he attempts to come to terms with his neuroses by performing a ritual of sorts involving statues of the Virgin Mary. In the end, the ritual is successful and Binky is freed of the Catholicism-fueled neuroses in his life.
Sectioning the Story

To make the analysis of Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary a more manageable task, I divided the narrative into sections. When parsing out the work, I took into consideration both the logical breaks in imagery, which can be analyzed from an Iconographic perspective, as well as the general flow of thematic elements within the story in order to give the entire work the attention it requires for a thorough analysis. The sections are as follows:

Cover - p. 1 - Green uses a reimagining of the Strength tarot card to set up his story showing the Virgin Mary urging Binky to have the strength and courage to open his mouth and speak.

Introduction - A Confession to my Readers - p. 2 - Green introduces himself as a hanging prisoner drawing comics and confessing to the readers why he needs to create this story. Presumably, he is a prisoner to his sins and neuroses and needs to confess them in order to be “absolved,” so to speak, and overcome them.

Sect. 1 - Idiosyncrasies Introduced - pp. 3-5 - Binky is shown accidentally breaking a statue of the Virgin Mary (which sets up the running theme of the story nicely and directly ties to the ending) then he is shown trying to atone for his “sin” in a variety of ways. The sequence ends with Binky slamming his head into his bed and singing to stave off terror and silence. Then, he ultimately falls asleep to dream strange dreams.

Sect. 2 - Innocence Lost - pp. 6-11 - A young Binky is seen experiencing a type of sex education through various means such as a drunk family friend using the toilet at the same time as Binky and offering to “sword fight.” One of Binky’s friends gives a juvenile description of intercourse, as well as other instances, culminating in an encounter with a former nun who taught Binky. The former nun is very kind and
happy to see Binky, but he seems especially put off by the woman’s broken commitment in leaving the church, setting up Binky’s deeply entrenched Scrupulosity.

_Sect. 3 - “Believe it or Burn” - pp. 11-16 -_ Here, Binky’s Catholic School education is introduced with a rundown of many different beliefs and rituals within the Catholic Church. Binky begins to question and worry about the fate of his Jewish father’s soul. He also develops new neuroses centered around these beliefs and begins to wonder how literal the Old Testament stories might be.

_Sect. 4 - Discovering Girls, Indulgences and a New School - pp. 16-23 -_ Throughout this section, Binky’s interest in girls is explored as well as his difficulty fitting in with other kids, both male and female. The story sidetracks onto the topic of indulgences within the Catholic church after Binky has an altercation with some boys from school and panics at the thought of his sin. This section culminates with Binky attending a new, primarily Jewish, school with the same old problems. For example, Binky is shown being thrown into the girl’s locker room by some boys.

_Sect. 5 - Strange Visions/Homoerotica - pp. 23-25 -_ Binky is shown pulling away from society and living in his own head while having strange visions centered around Biblical judgment fueled by his Scrupulosity. Binky’s visions, fixations and fantasies also tend to end up with with a phallus as their focus, much to Binky’s dismay.

_Sect. 6 - Penis Rays Begin - pp. 26-30 -_ The most jarring of Binky’s neuroses reveals itself as he begins to imagine morality-destroying rays emanating from his penis. The neurosis only gets worse as Binky begins to imagine every phallic point on his body (fingers, toes, etc.) to be shooting a destructive ray. Ultimately, this section shows
how guilty he feels about his own hormonal surges of sexual desire.

Sect. 7 - “Noyatin” and the Height of OCD - pp. 30-36 - Binky tries harder and harder to suppress his “impure” thoughts and desires even to the point of inventing a word, “Noyatin.” Binky uses this word as a device meant to serve as a general denial of sin. The more Binky suppresses his thoughts, the more fierce and vivid his visions become, pushing his OCD to new heights.

Sect. 8 - Leaving the Church and Burying the Neuroses - pp. 36-38 - Finally, the weight of sin becomes too much for Binky and he both literally and figuratively leaves the Catholic Church behind. Despite leaving the Church, Binky’s guilt and neuroses still follow him, penis rays and all. Now, instead of trying to atone for his sins, Binky tries to bury them in drugs, music, masochism, and more.

Sect. 9 - Anti-Ray Ritual - pp. 39-42 - When Binky is unable to find any way to get rid of his burden, he decides to perform a ritual of sorts using several statues of the Virgin Mary. Binky strips down, surrounds himself with the statues, and proceeds to destroy them. The strange ritual concludes in a catharsis which leaves Binky unburdened by the penis-rays.

Afterward - Cheap Psychological Advice - p. 43 - In this one-page postscript, Green sums up the manner in which he defeated his neuroses and dubs the page “$5000 worth o’ psychiatric advice for a mere 50 cents.”

Back cover - Freedom? Advertisement? - p. 44 - Like the front cover, the back cover is also a play on a tarot card, this time The Tower. The Tower represents disruptive change and transformative freedom symbolizing Green’s own freedom from his Church fueled neuroses.
Formal Analysis

While it would be ideal to give a full analysis of every section of the work, I decided to take a look at only a handful of images and sequences in order to make room for self-analysis as well. Particularly, I analyzed both the front and back covers along with the Introduction and a sampling of the interior work, Sect. 6 pages 26-30. These three pages and the interior section will provide very fertile ground in which to explore the story of Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary in greater depth. The front and back covers along with the introduction serve as deeply symbolic images which can be readily decoded, primarily using Panofsky’s three levels to create a thorough iconographic analysis. I also looked at the narrative elements of these full-page compositions using McCloud’s system of interpreting sequential art, though it is a less useful system when it comes to standalone images. The interior section, on the other hand, made great use of all of McCloud’s elements while still using Panofsky’s system on a select few panels.

To begin my analysis, I looked at the three stand-alone pages (front and back covers, inside cover introduction) and assessed them on the three levels of Panofsky’s Iconographic analysis system, building one upon the other.

Cover (Fig. 35):

Level 1 - The overall structure of this page is arranged with words in the top third and a scene with figures and houses in the rest. The top portion of the page contains the words “Binky Brown” in a fuzzy green lettering style. Next, it says “meets the holy” in a plain orange script. Finally, it says “Virgin Mary” in a more elaborate script. The price tag is 50 cents and the book is meant for older readers, per the “Youngster’s Prohibited” text. There is also a picture of a strange green head wearing a crown of roses in the upper left corner. The strange head has the words “Last Gasp” written by it. In the bottom portion, there is a woman who is
trying to open a young man’s mouth. The woman is Caucasian, and she is dressed in a blue robe, red dress and sandals along with a white head covering. Around or radiating from the woman’s head, there are white and pink lines. Within these lines are six heads of young men with wings on them. Five of the heads have fair complexion with rosy cheeks. The other winged head has a dark complexion. The young man in the scene is also Caucasian, and he is wearing a purple sweatshirt with the letter B on it, blue jeans, and black and white shoes. There are dialog balloons indicating the woman is saying, “Speak, my son.” There are also dialog balloons indicating the young man is saying, “But-my thoughts, no! Impure thoughts, no!” Taking this at face value, one could say this is a mother and her son, and he seems to be struggling with tainted thoughts, but what these thoughts might be are of no consequence at this point. There is a home in the background with a Caucasian girl hula hooping with a pink hoop. Also in the yard, we see a basketball hoop and a yellow car parked in the driveway. The young woman is wearing a blue t-shirt, green plaid skirt, blue knee-high socks, and white shoes. Also in the yard, there is a snake slithering out of a tree, between the legs of the young man and towards the woman. Lastly, there is a large dark cloud covering most of the sky behind the text of the title.

*Level 2* - The text “Binky Brown meets the Holy Virgin Mary” is the title of the comic. The fuzzy green lettering for “Binky Brown” may be interpreted as neon signs which would help in dating the story’s setting a bit as the height of neon signage popularity was around the 1950s and 1960s. The fancier lettering for “Virgin Mary” is a gothic script and a reflection on the solemn and reverent nature of Roman Catholic writings and practices. Considering the 1972 publication date, the 50 cent price mark indicates this is not a mainstream comic of the time because DC and Marvel titles were selling for 20 or 25 cents at that point. Also placing
the title in the Underground Comix movement is the “Youngsters Prohibited” tag common to the underground books of the time since they were not under the Comics Code Authority. Further showing this comic is off the beaten path is the “Last Gasp” logo, indicating this title was published and distributed by Last Gasp which was active from 1970 to 2016. Last Gasp still exists as a publisher, but they switched to strictly book publishing. The woman in robes is a depiction of the Virgin Mary; this being another indicator the book deals with Catholicism. She is shown urging a young man to speak while attempting to physically open his mouth. We can assume the young man to be the titular character, Binky Brown, due to the title *Binky Brown meets the Holy Virgin Mary* coupled with the letter B on the young man’s chest. Binky is in a kneeling position, a popular position of reverence within almost all major religions, particularly Catholicism. Binky also has his hands clasped in front of him which could be interpreted as a sign of respect as well. However, after reading Binky’s response of not wanting to speak due to his impure thoughts, one might assume he is actually shielding his genitals. This position is supported when reading the content inside the comic book as Binky is depicted as having developed a neurosis involving destructive rays emanating from his penis. These rays have the power to sully and destroy religious structures and icons. In the background there is a young woman dressed in what looks to be typical Catholic school girl garb, further entrenching the content within the Roman Catholic Church. The girl is also hula hooping which helps establish the time period of the story’s setting in the 1950s. A couple of more indicators to place the story is the 50s would be the general suburban look of the homes and neighborhood coupled with the car with tail fins in the driveway, a popular automotive design feature of the 1950s. The snake slithering on the ground can be looked at a few ways. First, as it crawls from the tree one can see it as a reference to Satan’s temptation
tormenting Binky, much like the Devil’s temptation of Adam and Eve at the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. Next, with the coloring of the snake and the way it is wrapped and draped around the tree, the snake might be more of a figment of Binky’s imagination, and in reality may actually be a simple garden hose. Yet another interpretation, given the coloring of the snake and this time the positioning, the snake may be representative of a phallus and Binky’s own impure thoughts. The light around the Virgin Mary’s head is a common theme in religious art depicting angelic or saintly figures, and the winged heads within that light are a common way to depict cherubs, though these cherubs seem to be in the likeness of boys about Binky’s age rather than the usual infantile depiction. They may represent other children from Binky’s Catholic School classes. The composition as a whole is Justin Green’s own adaptation of the eighth card of the Major Arcana Tarot card, “Strength.”

Level 3 - The overall meaning of the cover’s imagery, as it relates to the source material of the “Strength” card within the Tarot, is that of Binky (and by proxy, Green) being urged to have the courage “...to speak; to trust that his personal truth, however bizarre and blighted, would have an ultimate validity.” (Green, 2009) The original card is a depiction of a female deity calming a lion, but Green flips that around a bit with the Virgin Mary urging Binky to be the one with strength. In the afterword of the 2009 deluxe edition of Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary, Green indicates the cover was done first while the hard storyline still loomed as a daunting prospect. (Green, 2009) It seems as though this cover was created to help give Green the strength to see this project through and coax the story out of him. To my own eye, the cover reads like an attack from the Virgin Mary on Binky or rather the Catholic Church on Justin Green. This is not surprising considering Green’s experiences with the Church, the neuroses he built around the Church, as well as, the overall cultural climate and
public sentiment towards the Catholic Church. The setting of Green’s story coincides with a fair amount of church and state separatism within the United States. The 1950s into the 1960s saw legislation restricting aid to religious organizations, particularly Catholic Schools. One might have expected anti-Catholic sentiments to lighten in the 1960s given the election of our first Roman Catholic President in John F. Kennedy and the milestone Vatican II reformations, but the 1960s into the 1970s only saw further legislative restrictions and separations which did not lighten up until the 1980s and 1990s. (Berg, 2001) This places Green’s work within a trend of the times. In the comics world, Green was certainly not the first to speak out about his experiences within the Catholic Church, nor the last. Around the same time as Binky Brown, creators such as Robert Crumb and Dave Sheridan were publishing anti-Catholic stories in various anthologies as well as a post-Binky Brown book titled *Tales from the Leather Nun*. Perhaps the most striking example in comics from the pre-Binky Brown era are the “Chick Tracts” by cartoonist Jack Chick, or as he calls them “Crusader Comics”. Chick first started publishing and distributing small comic strips called tracts which contained anti-Catholic sentiments in the early 60s. These “Chick Tracts” are still around today and have a bit of a cult following, but they are perceived as more of a joke than anything else due to their absurd messages. Moving on from Binky and Mary, the idyllic 1950s suburban backdrop serves as an interesting juxtaposition to the turmoil in the foreground and the ominous dark cloud from which Binky and Mary seem to emerge. The peaceful setting seems a wholesome veneer from which Binky is completely disconnected. The scene comes complete with an innocent, young-Catholic school girl hula hooping away despite the strange act being carried out in front of her. While Green himself has proclaimed the girl to be modeled after his sister she seems to be a symbol in the middle ground, acting
as a figure on the border between childhood innocence and an object of adolescent desire. The snake too seems to bridge the peaceful and the tumultuous since it appears to be like a garden hose in the background, but morphs into a snake in the fore. The snake acts both as a symbol of Satan’s temptation and a physical symbol of Binky’s sexual desires in the form of a fleshy phallus emerging from betwixt his legs, and moving between the Virgin Mary’s legs. The cherubs flocking around Mary’s radiant aura seem more than a simple religious trope. Instead, they appear to be bow-tied symbols of Binky’s Catholic schoolmates who fawn over the Virgin Mary with ease and with none of the inner turmoil Binky feels. Finally, it is worth noting the image of the Virgin Mary in this context also represents Green’s girlfriend at the time, Nancy Griffith, sister to cartoonist Bill Griffith of Zippy the Pinhead fame. Green credits Nancy with helping him speak his truth, get the story out, and “…produce my very best work at full capacity.” (Green, 2009)

Introduction (Fig. 36):

Level 1 - This page is divided into two major sections with the upper three-quarters primarily containing a man hanging by his feet alongside some dialog while the lower quarter contains a bearded man with his hands together in front of him. The man in the upper section has his hands tied behind his back. He is hanging from his ankles in a dark room while drawing boxes on paper using a steel-nibbed pen dipped in “Dad’s Blood.” The man is naked and his ankles are in shackles. His ankles are bleeding and the shackles are hung on a hook along the wall. The hook also seems to be a pulley. The man’s head is wrapped, only one eye is visible, and he is talking. There is a candle on the floor, lighting the room. The hanging man seems to be fastened in place by something around his shoulders and/or neck. There is a sickle positioned between the man’s legs. Next to the page on which the man is drawing, there is an
ink well labeled “Dad’s Blood” sitting in a pool of liquid. Next to the bottle, there is a brush of some sort. There is also a record player emitting the words “Ave Maria.” There are two cherubs flying in the top left corner of the page. One is breaking wind while holding toilet paper and a toilet brush while the other is holding a plunger. The balloon containing the man’s words is nailed to the wall and constricted by barbed wire. In the bottom quarter of the page, there is a bearded man with a stocking cap on. There is also a phone receiver affixed to the man’s face by his beard. This man is looking up towards a light with his hands pressed against one another in front of him. Below him we read the word “Patron.” Around the page there is a decorative border and a floral pattern.

*Level 2* - The man hanging in the room is another depiction of Justin Green, this time as a tortured slave to his own story. Green shows himself bound, hanging from his feet, dressed in rags and creating the story the reader is about to start using only a dip pen in his mouth and an inkwell filled with his father’s blood. Green’s tortured form is also hanging over a sickle, threateningly poised between his legs. This is only a portion of the whole image, but it is rife with symbolism. Green seems to be expressing how torturous it is for him to express or confess, as it were, the story within the comic. His father, too, seems to be a piece of collateral damage as exhibited by the inkwell of “Dad’s Blood.” At the same time, despite how torturous it is to express the story within, it seems as though it would be more damaging to the hanging man to keep closed-lipped and not confess for then he would endure the pain of the sickle. There are two cherubs in the top left corner of the page, depicted as flying babies this time rather than the flying heads of the front page. One cherub is breaking wind while wielding toilet paper and a toilet brush while the other is trumpeting on a plunger. This seems to be a nod to the “toilet humor” common within the Underground Comix movement.
The title of this introduction is “A Confession to my Readers” which again uses the ornamented Gothic style lettering, as seen on the cover, referencing the Catholic themes within. The title, calling the page a “Confession,” is again a reference to the common Catholic practice of reconciliation through the act of confession. The word balloon which holds the confessional text has a distinct fleshy look to it, adding to the torturous feeling of the page. The text itself reads as a jaded prayer/plea from the creator, Justin Green, that all who read should not judge his story too harshly. The record player is playing the common Catholic song *Ave Maria* and, judging from the look of the text and music notes, it is a very distorted rendition. There is what may be yet another another toilet brush next to the inkwell with “Acme” written on it as another nod to the toilet humor, perhaps. At the bottom, the bearded man is Ron Turner, the comic’s publisher, depicted as the Patron Saint of the comic, further adding to the Catholic aura. There is also copyright information at the bottom which is laden with Catholic references as well. The whole page itself can be identified as an interpretation of the twelfth card of the Major Arcana of Tarot cards, “The Hanged Man.” Finally, the page is bordered and embellished as if it were a part of a sacred text.

*Level 3* - Justin Green’s primary inspirations/references for the introductory imagery are that of the Crypt Keeper of EC Comics fame as well as the twelfth card of the Major Arcana, “the Hanged Man.” As for the Crypt Keeper, the resemblance is more on the surface with this page showing a somewhat gnarled man introducing the story within. The introduction is in the form of a long (for comics) and rambling diatribe, very similar to the start of EC’s popular *Tales From the Crypt* comics from the early to mid 1950s. Yet again, Green is using 50s pop culture as a reference and anchoring point for the time period of his story. As for the imagery of “the Hanged Man,” the original card is representative of sacrifice, martyrdom,
and letting go (to name a few) as the man depicted on the original card seems to be there of his own volition. With Green’s version, the man may be hanging by choice, but more out of necessity as he is depicted with perils such as the sickle aimed between his legs. This suggests the man needs to remain imprisoned at this task of telling his story with the threat of injury until the story is seen to completion. Otherwise, the man would not tell this story without being forced. The imagery has a strange contradictory feel about it, showing gruesome imagery in the style of a sacred text with decorative borders as well as depictions of normally pure and innocent cherubs shown farting and brandishing bathroom implements. Not only is the imagery fraught with conflict and contradiction, but the text is too as Green peppers his “confession” to his readers with crass language such as crotch and food-tubes, yet he caps off the speech with an Amen. Another interesting aspect of this page is the fact that it depicts a second iteration of Green within the same story in the form of the Hanging Man. This continues with the strange interplay of contradictions as he plays both protagonist and narrator throughout the comic yet never referring to the Binky Brown character as being representative of himself. Coming back to the influence of EC Comics, it is interesting to note the impact EC Comics had on the Underground Comix movement, in general. The creators of the late 60s and 70s very clearly grew up reading the likes of *Tales from the Crypt, Mad, Weird Fantasy, Two-Fisted Tales,* etc. as exhibited by this introductory image of *Binky Brown* and many others throughout the Underground Comix community.

**Back Cover** (Fig. 37):

**Level 1** - Like the front cover, this page is broken up into two sections. One section is text in the top third and the other section is imagery in the bottom two thirds. In the bottom section there is a humanoid being with green skin, horns, a snout, and pointed ears standing with one
arm and one leg up in the air. The being has a mask of a woman hanging from its face, a green and white robe, red dress, yellow socks with garters, and brown shoes. The being also seems to have a braided tail with a spike at the end. There is a part human, part lion figure biting the ankle of the green humanoid, drawing blood. The lion being is wearing a bit of purple fabric with the letter B on it. The green figure and the lion are in the middle of a street. Lining the street are shops, cars and a billboard. One shop says it is “Discount” and has a sign in the window which says “Rug Riot.” Outside this shop, there are cars. One car has a license plate number of 2549. The billboard is situated above this first shop and has a picture of a baseball player along with the words “Dunce Boy Hair Oil, Slugger’s Choice.” The other shop has a shed behind it with a pig statue on top of the shed. There is a vehicle in front of this shop with the word “Mel’s” written on it as well as a sign in front of the shop in the shape of a bucket with a picture of a white haired man wearing glasses and a white suit. The sky is dark and streaked with lightning. The lightning is striking the sign outside the second shop, breaking it. In the sky, in the top quarter of the page, the words “Must reading for neurotics of all creeds” are written with the word “neurotics” being written in in all different shapes and colors.

*Level 2* - The back cover seems to deconstruct the imagery from the front showing the resulting catharsis of Binky confessing his struggles with his neuroses. The main figure on the back, the green being, shows the torturing Virgin Mary from the front cover to be a sham. The green figure is wearing the same robes and head covering as the Virgin Mary from the front, complete with a Virgin Mary mask; all of which are falling off. This figure is also being attacked by a humanoid lion which seems to be a therianthropic form of Binky Brown as exhibited by the purple banner on his back with the letter B. The lion form acts as a
physical manifestation of the courage and strength it took Green to confess this story. This links the imagery of the back cover with the Tarot card which inspired the front cover as the original strength Tarot card shows a woman with a lion. The text at the top is pretty straightforward except for the jumbled look of the word “neurotics” which highlights the jumbled, over stimulated nature of neuroticism. The tailfins on the vehicles place the image within the setting of the 1950s. The sign outside the far right shop on the road suggests it is a Kentucky Fried Chicken, as exhibited by the picture of Colonel Sanders on the bucket. Inside the shop there is a vague bespectacled character which may be Colonel Sanders himself. This image looks to be Green’s interpretation of the sixteenth card of the Major Arcana Tarot cards, “the Tower.”

*Level 3* - The Tarot imagery of the back cover relates very directly to the conclusion of *Binky Brown* as “the Tower” represents sudden change and upheaval and Binky’s final catharsis certainly fits this bill. The direct relation of the imagery itself to the card, however, is not as clear as the other reimagined Tarot cards. On the original tower card, there is simply a large tower being struck by lightning as the focal point and figures falling from the tower. With the back cover of *Binky Brown*, the focal point is instead a sham Virgin Mary being bitten by a lion version of Binky while a tall KFC sign is struck by lightning in the background. The back cover seems to be a more self-expressive composition than its other Tarot-inspired counterparts as it seems to deal directly with Green’s struggles with neuroses. The main figure is an unmasked version of the Virgin Mary from the front cover. The unmasking could mean a couple different things. Green has said he studied the theories of Carl Jung who was very much about unmasking the shadows of oneself, so this composition could be interpreted as unmasking the Catholic Church as being a detriment to Green rather than a force for good.
Another way one could interpret this image would be as a revealing of the true source of Green’s neuroses to be something other than the Catholic Church. That is to say, the rituals and practices of the Catholic Church simply provided a medium for an underlying mental disorder, such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), to attach itself. This is an interpretation Green has affirmed. What makes this idea all the more interesting is in 1972, OCD was not a specifically identified disorder. It was something still being thought about and hypothesized rather than written about by or with any sort of authority. In many ways, *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, was at the forefront of a great many writings on the subject of OCD. In this case, the lion form of Binky attacking the unmasked Mary is a representation of Green’s objective with this work in that it is an attempt to ferret out and attack the demons which trouble Green in order to find some relief. Moving along to the rest of the work, the vehicles and shops in the composition place the work in a 1950s setting. However, the shop that seems to be a KFC breaks this idea slightly. KFC had only just started franchising in the early 1950s, starting with a restaurant in Utah, so it is unlikely to be a recognized brand of the 1950s. It wasn’t until the mid-1960s KFC began to take off. The use of the KFC bucket could be Green’s idea of overthrowing the status quo by using a prolific icon of the time of the work’s publication date. In 1972, KFC was one of the most heavily advertised brands in America.

There is not much of a precedent for analyzing single panel images with McCloud’s system of analysis as he does not consider standalone panels to be in the realm of comics as shown by McCloud’s own definition of comics laid out in *Understanding Comics*. In his definition McCloud states, “Comics are juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the
viewer.” (McCloud 1994) However, there are a few aspects of these three full page compositions which bear observation in regards to McCloud and his system of categorization. First, when looking at the word and picture relationships on the front cover, the relationship is an additive one in that the words elaborate upon the image to give clarification as to what is going on. The image alone may send a strong enough message for most, but the words really put a fine point upon it, clarifying what exactly is going on between Binky and the Virgin Mary.

Moving on to the introduction page, there are actually two panels on this page which may be evaluated in a few different ways in terms of their transition type. These panels could be seen as being subject-to-subject as the patron below may be seen as a new person who is a part of the same scene, or this could be a Scene-to-Scene transition which transports the reader to completely different setting. An argument could also be made for the “patron” panel as a non-sequitur as it could be seen as an unrelated image with there being no mention of a patron within the text at hand. The words and pictures within the larger panel interact on an interdependent level. They both help illustrate and explain what is going on in their own way. The bottom panel, however is a bit different. The best descriptor of this word and picture relationship would be a parallel one as neither aspect relates to the other. That said, the label of “Patron” below the man could be seen as being in an additive piece of text which explains the identity of the man pictured.

On the back cover, there is not much to evaluate other than the bit of text at the top which is perhaps additive in nature. However, the text doesn’t really deal with the imagery directly, yet it still follows a similar course as it speaks to the comic on the whole so it is not necessarily parallel. This image is difficult to analyze from a McCloud stand point because it
is almost more of an advertisement piece than a straightforward narrative.

To really apply McCloud’s analytical aspects of comics to the work of *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, I took a look at the interior pages. Rather than breaking down the entire book, I used Section 6 of the book as I have detailed above in my page breakdown of the comic. Working with this smaller sample set, I first took a look at the general breakdown of panel transitions along with Green’s use of word and picture relationships, paying attention to any trends in regards to the transitions/relationships as they relate to the themes and narratives to which Green applies them. I also took a look at whether these choices were generally successful and postulated what solution may have worked better, if any. To a lesser extent, I analyzed the interior section with Panofsky’s three levels using a few notable panels with intriguing imagery rather than breaking down every panel. Finally, I used my own perceptions of the work and took a look at the style, flow, readability, etc. of the work. To organize this analysis, I broke down this section of the story into eleven scenes to which I applied each subsequent mode of analysis. Also, it is worth noting this practice of dividing the selection into scenes inherently identifies the scene-to-scene transitions from the beginning.

*Panel Transitions/Word and Image Combinations:*

Scene 1 (p. 26, panels 1-3) (Fig. 38)- This episode generally contains subject-to-subject panel transitions though they are not cut and dry examples based on McCloud’s definition. Going from panel 1 to panel 2, for example, the focus switches from 2 subjects to 1 indicating a possible subject-to-subject transition while Binky and the priest converse, but it is not a distinct focus from one character to the next. In the next panel, the focus pulls out further to simply show an outside view of the confessional as the conversation continues. Instead of the
traditional “talking head” transitions that bounce back and forth between whichever subject is currently talking, Green runs through this short scene as if he were running a camera focused first just on Binky, then pulling out to show both subjects and finally showing the setting. Perhaps one reason for this decision is the amount of dialog Green tends to use. If Green were to switch subjects in a new panel every time someone new was speaking he would have a much longer book on his hands. While McCloud gives no precedent for multiple styles per transition, I would be inclined to classify the transition between panels 2 and 3, where Green pulls the scope of the scene out a bit to show the confessional and give a sense of where the characters are interacting, as having aspect-to-aspect tendencies. This confessional panel shows a different aspect of the current scene but time does not stop (time stoppage being one of McCloud’s caveats in the aspect-to-aspect description) as the reader can still see the conversation carrying on within the confessional. To me, while panels such as these would technically best fit into McCloud’s definition of subject-to-subject transitions, I would argue they could be aspect-to-aspect as they provide a sense of place to the narrative. In terms of word and image combinations, there is a general sense of interdependent interactions between the words and images. The scene would feel rather incomplete if one or the other were left out. That said, the running narration at the top of many panels could stand on its own, making that portion of the text seem word specific. At the same time, the work could stand on its own without the narration as they tend to send the same message making those panels with narration duo-specific. While the running narrative text at the top may not be necessary from a storytelling standpoint, it is still an interesting technique to tell an autobiographical story. Green seems to use layers of alter-egos (Binky Brown and the Cryptkeeper-like narrator from the Introduction) as a way to distance himself from the
painful practice of confessing his struggles with neurotic tendencies.

Scene 2 (p. 26, panels 4-6) These next three panels could easily be taken as a continuation of the first scene with the priest, if not for the fact the priest changes and the narrative text at the top of the panels indicates as much. The setting does not change, but the subjects do, indicating a passage of time, yet the panels are arranged in such a uniform grid and retain such a similar composition that they all feel like they are a part of the same scene. Green may do this to illustrate Binky’s obsession with being clean in the eyes of the Catholic church, making it seem as though Binky is the more permanent fixture in the confessional and the priests are the rotating cast. The final transition of this scene, panel 5 to 6, is the first bit of action on this page. This is a bit of a departure from the typical superhero comics most people are familiar with which are packed with action. The word and image interactions in this scene are much the same as the previous scene which makes sense considering the close similarities between the two scenes. From a symbolic standpoint, Green uses the word balloon from panel 4 as a reflection of the text as Binky talks of a “penis-shaped thing” and the balloon itself is also penis-shaped.

Scene 3 (p. 26, panels 7-9) - This short sequence of events illustrates the start of Binky’s most significant neurosis, the destructive penis rays. At first glance, the imagery in these panels could be classified as moment-to-moment transitions as they almost look like the frames of a flipbook. However, the girth of text and dialog lengthens the perceived passage of time between panels and pushes these transitions into the realm of action-to-action. From a word and image standpoint, there are a couple interesting interactions. First, unlike the previous scene, the words and images are very much interdependent, despite having some of the narrator’s running commentary in each panel, since neither element could fully stand on
its own and still convey the same message. Next, there is a good example of additive text in panel 7 where Green decides to uses words to convey the meaning of the image much more explicitly. In this case, he uses the words “A slight tremor” with an arrow pointing at the jagged lines radiating from Binky’s groin.

Scene 4 (p. 27, panels 1-5) (Fig. 39)- Here is another sequence consisting mostly of actions, except the transitions to and from panel 2. Here, again, Green pulls the perspective of the scene out to show the entire setting. In this case, Binky is stuck between two churches and must decide which one to sully with his penis ray. This idea of pulling the viewer’s perspective back is a very common one within even the most simple of comics. Man use this device to set a scene and break up the normal sequence of talking heads in conversation. Read a handful of Dilbert comics by Scott Adams and inevitably you will see a smattering of single panels showing an office building, from which the characters are speaking, peppering each strip. This device is especially common in the Sunday strips where the panel count is larger. For the purpose of this analysis, I am inclined to amend McCloud’s description of aspect-to-aspect transitions to include these wide angle perspectives within scenes in which time still progresses. Most the the panels have an interdependent relationship between words and images, with a couple exceptions. Panel 2 is narrative heavy and a good example of a word specific combination. In terms of rhythm and storytelling, it is a well placed and well used panel as Green pulls the reader out away from the story to slow the forward momentum in more than one sense. The narrative exposition holds the reader on the panel for a moment and the pulled-out view of the scene moves the readers eye out to take in the entirety of the setting. Even the character of Binky comes to a full stop in this panel to contemplate this troubling circumstance. Another interesting portion of this scene is panel 4 as it is nearly all
image, making it picture specific, along with a bit of additive text in the form of an onomatopoeia-style “Dong!” indicating the noise from the church bell.

Scene 5 (p. 27, panels 6-8-p. 28 (Fig. 40), panels 1-2) - This scene also follows the general trend of actions transitioning the panels with one interesting exception. On p. 28, panel 1, Green gives a good, straightforward example of an aspect-to-aspect transition. This transition is rather unique in that it occurs within the panel itself. Green stops time for a moment to both gauge Binky’s emotional state and build a little tension in the reveal of Binky’s gumball bargain with God as Green inserts a round panel within the larger panel to play the reader’s eye between both the gumball and Binky. Though this is more in line with McCloud’s definition of aspect-to-aspect transitions, it is a very small and fleeting one. Compared to Japanese Manga, for example, Green’s time stoppage is quite insignificant. In the East, it is common to set up a scene in its entirety by stopping time and alighting the eye upon several panels of details within the scene. For the words and pictures, this scene follows the general trend of interdependent word and image combinations with the odd gumball panel being a notable exception as it is very picture specific with the running narration adding very little to the panel.

Scene 6 (p. 28, panel 3) - This scene lasts for a single panel and is word specific in nature. The narration gives all the necessary information while the image and the text below are merely color. Green’s depiction of Binky’s penance reinforce the unimportant nature of the elements outside the narration as he caps off Binky’s 259th Hail Mary with a series of “Blahs.”

Scene 7 (p. 28, panel 4) - Another single panel scene which is also word specific as we see the imagery directly illustrating the narrative text which speaks of the phallic nature of
Binky’s fingers and the rays which now emanate from them.

Scene 8 (p.28, panel 5) - One more single panel scene, however, this one is duo-specific in nature in terms of the words and images. At first glance, the previous panel may seem like it should belong to this scene considering the ray coming from Binky’s hands as he attempts to pray to the Virgin Mary. However, Binky is now in different clothing than his polo from the vacation sequence.

Scene 9 (p. 28, panel 6-p. 29 (Fig. 41), panel 1-2)- In terms of the transitions it is the standard action-to-action progression. However, there is a little inset panel/thought bubble on the first panel of p. 29 which I feel falls into the category of aspect-to-aspect as it shows Binky’s focus on his fingers while he tries to deny their phallic nature. This scene is split between word and picture interactions with the first panel being duo-specific in nature and the last two being interdependent.

Scene 10 (p. 29, panel 3-5-p. 30 (Fig. 42), panel 1-2) - The first panel in this scene is unique in that it contains a small progression and transitions in and of itself. Green uses a round inset panel with an aspect-to-aspect transition to break up the action-to-action transition within the panel showing Binky riding a bike and hitting a bumpy stretch in the road. The small inset zooms in and shows where Binky’s Rosary is located, indicating he is concerned by its close proximity to his groin. The transitions continue in an action-to-action manner until the final panel. One might see the final transition of this scene as subject-to-subject given the change in focus from Binky to the Holy Trinity. However, Binky is still present in the panel and in the midst of completing an action, giving further credence to the idea of panels exhibiting characteristics of multiple transition types. The word and picture interactions in the first panel seem to be more word specific as there is a great deal of exposition, while the rest of
the panels are more interdependent in nature with each element adding to the narrative.

Scene 11 (p. 30, panel 3) - Ending this section is a single panel scene which shows Binky’s guilty conscience due to his perceived impurity carrying on throughout the day and keeping him up at night. The words and pictures here are very interdependent in nature.

As I continued to look at the interior panels, there were a couple which could do with a bit more interpretation. Panel 4 on page 27 and panel 5 on page 29 are both more symbolic in nature rather than the general representational aesthetic of the rest of the section. For that reason, I performed a more in-depth Panofsky-style interpretation of those panels.

**P. 27, panel 4 - Level 1** - There is a young Caucasian man in the foreground wearing plaid shorts, knee-high socks, black loafers and a polo shirt. His legs are twisted together and his head is twisted around. There are several arrows radiating from him, circles around him and puffs of smoke and drops of water coming from his head. The young man is on a stairway. In the middle ground, there is a building with stained glass windows and a bell tower which is falling off. In the background there is a car on the road and a building with a sign that says "Doc’s." In the sky there are clouds and the word "Dong!"

**Level 2** - The young man is the titular character of Binky Brown as reflected by the other panels on the page. He seems to be spinning around, as indicated by the circles around him, and the arrows are an indicator of the penis-ray by which he has become tormented. Binky is imagining the ray is lopping off the bell tower of the church in the middle ground. He seems very dazed and distressed by this development as indicated by the sweat and steam coming from his head. The bell is tolling as the “DONG!” onomatopoeia in the sky indicates. To give some scale and perspective, a car driving on the road by a gas station is seen in the background.
Level 3 - The style of this panel is very different from those around it. The character and objects are slightly more simplified, Binky’s movements are exaggerated to inhuman capabilities and the contrast of the page is much higher. The only mid tone is on the stairs and the only shading is some stippling by the clouds, which is very different from the more realistic and heavily hatched panels around this one. The style is much more akin to other artists of the time who Green admired but had a more “cartoon” style, such as R. Crumb and Gilbert Shelton. The rest of the panels reflect the more realistic works of artists like Bill Griffith and S. Clay Wilson. Green actually asked Griffith if he would finish the rest of Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary for him, should anything happen to Green during it’s making. The change in style seems to symbolize Binky’s unrealistic imaginings of the destruction caused by his perceived penis-ray, a manifestation of his OCD induced neuroses.

P. 29, panel 5 - Level 1 - At the top of the panel, there is text stating, “Binky finds the orgasm extremely disquieting.” In the main body of the panel, a young man is riding a strange bike. The young man is wearing a sweater, jeans and loafers. He has his tongue sticking out, x’s over his eyes, and puffs of smoke coming out of his head. The bike looks like it is very flexible with fuzzy tires and a snake for a seat. There is also a glowing cross floating behind the young man and a pile of feces next to the back tire of the bike.

Level 2 - The young man is a distorted representation of Binky Brown as he looks similar to and is wearing the same clothes as Binky from other panels. The tongue, smoke, x’s on the eyes, as well as his posture are a reflection of Binky’s reaction to the orgasm, as stated in the text atop the panel. The bike overall looks to be one big evil snake, perhaps, as it is the cause of this “disquieting orgasm.” The snake bike looks to be hissing at the cross behind Binky, in mockery of the Holy Catholic values to which Binky tries to adhere so strictly.
Level 3 - Just like the previously analyzed panel, Green is changing styles to indicate a break from reality. He is instead illustrating how Binky perceives the situation through his lens of neuroses. The snake bike itself is quite phallic, and the positioning of a tail at Binky’s groin reinforces this. It seems to be a symbol of Binky giving in to evil and temptation. The snake imagery is an interesting reflection of the front cover to the comic where the snake is slithering out of the tree and between Binky’s legs in the midst of a moment of temptation. The image of the cross is perhaps a symbol of Binky’s immediate feeling of judgement for this impure act. Looking at subsequent panels Binky is immediately contrite, pleading for forgiveness or at leniency as he didn’t mean for anything to happen. Then, he envisions manifestations of the Holy Trinity observing, following and judging him.

These analyses could go on and on. A thorough and lengthy analysis would make for a fairly sizeable and very interesting text, but that is a project for another day, perhaps. For the purposes of this paper, a sampling will do as I am not currently concerned with doing an exhaustive study to add to the growing academic repository of research on comics.

When I started this analysis, I had only passing knowledge of Justin Green and his most important work, *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*. Now, I feel I have an extremely firm grasp upon the material and what it means to me, to Justin Green, and to the Comics community as a whole. Some of my interpretations may not be accurate in terms of what Green aspired to convey, but for my own purpose of analysis, I accomplished all I set out to do and more. For me, this study has been more about learning to dig deeply into a text, figure out what it means to me, how it makes me feel, express those meanings and feelings, and learn from them in order to better inform my own artistic pursuits.

Reading interviews with Green as well as other artists, reading articles about Green’s
work, and studying the work itself have all helped me see what is effective and what is not when creating a work of sequential art. The biggest takeaway I have had during this study is the importance of being brutally honest with oneself and extracting pure truth by any means necessary. *Binky Brown* resonates still, nearly 40 years after the fact, not because it is a flawlessly executed technical wonder, but because Green painstakingly forced himself to take an honest look at himself and own up to his struggles. In doing this, he created his own special form of therapy to help him deal with his Obsessive Compulsive Disorder at a time when the field of Psychology was ill-equipped to treat such a thing. Green repeatedly talks about how difficult it was to create *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* and how important it was for him to use exercises, such as reimagining tarot cards or expressing Jungian theory through his work, to get him through times of doubt. He also credits those around him with encouraging him to be strong and continue his work.

**Analyzing My Own Work**

This idea of putting together a method for formal analysis within the realm of sequential art and applying the method to an important text within the history of the medium is certainly a noble pursuit, in and of itself. But one might ask if there is a deeper reason for this pursuit beyond the purely academic purposes. In short, what’s in it for me? I first became interested in the idea of Iconographic analysis within the realm of comics for the purpose of understanding what inspired some of my favorite works, and I wanted to learn how to infuse my own inspirations and interests into my work in interesting ways. Over the course of this analytic exploration, I feel I have learned a great deal and found ways to accomplish what I set out to do in the first place. Ultimately, my purposes have been more selfish than anything, but I am not studying to be an academic. I am studying to be an artist. As an artist, I am by nature selfish. Concerned, above all, with my own feelings, agendas, ideas, interests and
interpretations thereof. Overall, this project has been more than successful in helping me interpret and express works I admire as well as helping me use those works to inform my own artistic endeavors.

Through the practice of breaking down *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, one insight I gained was how to integrate my influences and interests into my own work in varying degrees. Looking at Green’s single page compositions of reimagined Tarot cards and seeing the many details he inserted within them helped me see how I might accomplish a similar task in my own work. For example, I was struggling to come up with a cover concept for a graphic novel I am collaborating on called *Howl*. While I didn’t conceive and write this story, I have become embroiled in its universe, helped create new elements and have placed my aesthetic stamp upon it. I am fully invested and want to do the work justice. Covers are both freeing and intimidating as they afford a great deal of artistic liberty yet the infinite possibilities make it difficult to settle on a single concept. In the end I settled on a concept rife with religious imagery, probably due in part to the preceding analysis. However, the religious implications are not extremely overt (Fig. 43).

At the base level, the cover is of a woman floating in space in the center of the page. She is dressed in a simple shorts and tank top outfit. Her hair is flowing all around her and mingling with or morphing into or from many tentacles. The tentacles are coming from the foreground on all sides of the page and reaching towards the woman, creating a tunnel and/or boarder effect around the woman. The woman is relaxed and has her hands open, palms facing up, and her face looking up towards the main light source.

Looking a bit deeper one can assume the woman is a character in the comic book and the tentacles play a part as well. Reading the comic, it is clear she is the main protagonist,
Oksana, and the tentacles are a part of Root, the main antagonistic creature. The setting of the comic is in outer space and the woman is either superhuman or not human at all as she is not wearing a spacesuit, or the visual is more symbolic so one must suspend belief.

Going deeper still, the imagery of the woman seems at first to be messianic in nature, due to her cross-like posture. However, there are stronger parallels to the Virgin Mary in terms of her posture and gender as well as the positioning of tentacles around her. It is almost like she is a statue set in an alcove of a church facade or altar. Images of tentacles are always ominous in nature. In terms of dream interpretation, tentacles generally mean aggression, attack and danger in the depths. All of these connotations are very fitting for the creature of Root as the main characters fly deeper into the solar system towards Root’s source, encountering more and more danger along the way. It is unclear whether she is drawing the tentacles near or if they are reaching out to attack her. This particular mystery carries on throughout the story arc until almost the end. The tentacles could also have a phallic connotation which is also fitting due to the strange and mysterious nature of Root and Oksana’s relationship.

An examination of an interior page from another work I have been creating, *Perception is Everything* (Fig. 12), helps me to think through how to construct a page which tells the story in a clear manner. The general layout goes from a wide establishing shot, down to some details, focusing on the main character, Gregory Jameson, and culminating Greg’s first, big, life changing event of the story. The whole page occurs within the same scene and consists primarily of action-to-action transitions with the exception of the first transition, which I would call subject-to-subject as it goes from an establishing shot of a factory with no distinct focus of a human character to a shot of one of the characters from the factory floor,
Greg, getting ready to leave work for the day.

The word and picture relationships are parallel in nature for most of the page as the text is a voice over of Greg speaking of the mundane nature of everyday life. However, at the end of the page the two parallel elements crash into one another creating an interdependent relationship between words and pictures as the text culminates in the words “Sometimes...” While Greg is struck by mysterious internal brain trauma, drops his bag and begins to stumble to the ground. The phrase picks up on the next page with “...things happen.” as Greg lays on the ground, clearly seriously injured.

Both of the examples above were created during my examination of *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* and were thoughtfully crafted and informed by this idea of critical examination of sequential art. My process has become a series of internal examinations throughout the creation of any given piece. Instead of making sketch after sketch based mostly on aesthetic feel, I now continually think about what I want the piece to say throughout the process and make subsequent sketches based on what any given composition conveys. When I take a step back and contemplate a work, I see what a quick run through of Panofsky’s three levels says about the visual. I think about McClouds elements of comics and how the composition relates to those around it and how it relates to the text. In short, this exploration into critical examination has changed the way I perceive art on all levels.
CHAPTER 4. FUTURE

The pursuit of this Graduate degree is, of course, about much more than simply adding a Master’s degree to my accomplishments. It is about gaining knowledge and setting myself up to forge ahead in a career of creative pursuit. I have worked the last 12 years of my life at a job which serves its purpose as a means of support for my family quite well. However, I desire more than simply meeting that singular need. I desire a more challenging and fulfilling career which utilizes the talent I have been blessed with and have worked to hone throughout my education. To state this in a more specific manner, I would like to teach, create comics, and produce stand alone works of art for the enjoyment of others and myself.

The desire to teach has been instilled within me by watching the many wonderful teachers I have studied under along the way as well as seeing my wife’s impact upon her own students. As a father, I am a teacher every day, whether I intend to be or not. Children always look to their parents, young children especially, and are influenced by what they see and hear. Just as I want to be a great role model for my own kids, I want to instill a love for self-expression and the exploration of one’s own thoughts and desires as well as the joy of perfecting a technical challenge within the eager minds of the world who come looking for knowledge.

Teaching is truly a job that keeps giving. Just as I give credit to the teachers I have had along the way, I see my wife hearing from students she has had crediting her with their successes in life; students from everyone her 12 years of teaching and beyond into her student teaching and years as a camp counselor. I know I will have to learn to be effective, but everyone has to start somewhere and I’m generally a quick learner when it comes to academic pursuits.
In addition to teaching I plan to continue creating works of fine art. While I love to tell stories in a direct manner through writing and comics, I also enjoy telling them in a more obtuse or indirect manner through standalone works of expression. Sometimes ideas and feelings are best conveyed through a single image rather than a long form story. As the cliché goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. That said, a great work of art can be a source of an endless parade of words, not just a mere grand.

Lastly, I of course plan to continue developing stories and producing comics, writings and everything in between. I am currently collaborating with the writer Zach Lisabeth and we have begun the process of pitching our work to publishers. There is something very addicting about taking something you have created and presenting it for analysis in hopes of unleashing it upon the world at large. It’s both exhilarating and terrifying at the same time as you put a piece of yourself in the hands of another. Admittedly, the practice has a rather selfish element as I hope to put enough of myself out into the world so as to leave at least a bit of an artistic legacy within the world. Though, whether that happens or not the simple act of creation is fulfilling enough in and of itself. This is a practice I hope will never lose its appeal.

I have no lack of ideas. Some are suited for a long and/or ongoing format, while others seem more suited for short forms or single, refined images, but no matter the form my desire to create is prevalent and stands to continue to be a lifelong pursuit. Just as anything in life there will be ups and downs, but the act of creative expression will always be good.
REFERENCES


Berg, Thomas C. Anti-Catholicism and Modern Church-State Relations, 33 Loy. U. Chi. L. J. 121 (2002)


Fig. 1 *Spider-Man* #26: *With Great Responsibility* (30th Anniversary Special - Marvel Comics - November 1, 1992)
Fig. 2 *DC/Marvel Crossover Classics* vol. 1

Fig. 3 *The Count of Monte Cristo* part of the Waldeman Great Illustrated Classics series.
Fig. 4 A still-life from my first-year painting course at Iowa State University.

Fig. 5, 6 Sequential images from narrative project
Fig. 7 Will Eisner title page to *The Spirit*

Fig. 8 One of my pieces which explores the integration of text and image.
Fig. 9 The IDW Publishing reprint cover to *The Maxx* #1 by Sam Kieth and William Messner-Loebs, originally published by Image Comics.

Fig. 10 The cover to Zero Girl #1 by Sam Kieth, Homage Comics.
Fig. 12 Page 2 of *Perception is Everything*
Fig. 13 Pages 3 and 4 of *Perception is Everything*

Fig. 14 Pages 5 and 6 of *Perception is Everything*
"Each person is at each moment capable of remembering all that has ever happened to them, and of perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe. The function of the brain and nervous system is to protect us from being overwhelmed..."

"And confused by this mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge, by shutting out most of what we should otherwise perceive or remember at any moment and leaving only that which is likely to be practically useful."

-Alous Huxley quoting Dr. C. D. Broad in The Doors of Perception and Heavenly Hell
Fig. 16 Page 8 of *Perception is Everything*
Fig. 17 Page 9 of Perception is Everything
WELL, IT WILL BE SOME TIME YET, BUT NOT AS LONG AS EXPECTED, YOU ARE ASTONISHINGLY LUCID FOR ONE WHO'S BEEN OUT SO LONG. EVEN THOSE OUT FOR ONLY A FEW DAYS WERE IN WORSE SHAPE.

HOW LONG HAVE I BEEN OUT? IT FEELS LIKE YESTERDAY I WAS CLOCKING OUT, THEN BLACKED OUT.

MR. JAMESON,

YOU'VE BEEN IN A COMA FOR CLOSE TO FOUR YEARS NOW.

GREG!

THAT CAN'T BE RIGHT! NO WAY! GET ME A PAPER! TURN ON THE TV! NO WAY I'VE BEEN OUT FOUR YEARS! NO...
Fig. 19 Page 11 of *Perception is Everything*
Fig. 20 Page 12 of *Perception is Everything*
Fig. 21 Page 13 of *Perception is Everything*
Fig. 23 Page 15 of *Perception is Everything*
Fig. 24 Pages 16 and 17 of *Perception is Everything*
Fig. 25 Pages 17 and 18 of *Perception is Everything*
Fig. 27 Page 20 of *Perception is Everything*
Fig. 28 Pages 21 and 22 of *Perception is Everything*
DON'T GO USING MY POETRY TO ANNOUNCE ME, BARK. REALLY CHEAPENS THE ART, MAN.

I DON'T UNDERSTAND.

YOU'LL HAVE TO EXCUSE BARK HERE. HE CAN BE A BIT CUT OFF OF TOUCH.

DON'T CALL ME BARK.

YOU KNOW WHO I AM, GREG?

THE ONE AND ONLY.

FAIR ENOUGH, I NEVER SET OUT TO BE UNIVERSALLY LOVED.

SURE, THAT GUY FROM THE DOGS.

I ALWAYS HATED YOUR MUSIC.

...DIDN'T YOU CHOOSE ON YOUR PLIKE AND DIE?

NAH, OD'D. BUT, AS YOU CAN SEE, YOU PAY YOUR BRAIN JUST SO...

YOU CAN TRANSCEND TO A HIGHER PLANE.

AIN'T THAT RIGHT, BARK?

PLEASE, JIM, IT'S BARCHIEL.

SORRY, BARK'S A BIT TOUCHY.

SEEMS A WASTE TO KEEP A JUNKY LIKE YOURSELF AROUND.

HA!

I LIKE THIS ONE, BARK. HE'S GOT SPIRIT.
Fig. 30 A *Family Circus* Sunday strip showing one of Billy’s wandering adventures.

Fig. 31 Panofsky’s table detailing his three levels of interpretation.
Fig. 32 The first three panel transitions from McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*.

Fig. 33 The last three panel transitions from McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*. 
Fig. 34 McCloud’s word and picture combinations from *Understanding Comics*.
Fig. 35 Cover to *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*. 
Fig. 36 Inside cover to *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary.*
Fig. 37 Back cover to *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*. 
Fig. 38 Page 26 of *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary.*
Fig. 39 Page 27 of *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary.*
Fig. 40 Page 28 of *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary.*
Fig. 41 Page 29 of *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary.*
Fig. 42 Page 30 of Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary.
Fig. 43 Cover to *Howl*, a graphic novel I am collaborating on.