

# Signs of Change: Visualizing Deafness in Fraction and Aja's *Hawkeye*

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In his book, *The Medium is the Massage*, Marshall McLuhan writes society is heading to an “all-at-once-ness” through a global village. He posits that, due to electronic communication, time and space are no longer as distinct as they were in the print age. His argument rests on the idea that before the press oral traditions unified people in tribal-like communities and there was a shared sense of being lost in the age of literacy. Since the publication of this book in 1967, even more technology has facilitated the togetherness and unification that would support his argument “at the high speeds of electric communication, purely visual means of apprehending the world are no longer possible; they are just too slow to be relevant or effective” (McLuhan and Quire 63). However, comic books as a medium can complicate McLuhan's claims, and comics that center on deafness and sound complicate the claims even further. Despite being a print medium that could be prone to fragmentation under McLuhan's theory, the aural-visual relationship in comics allows us to straddle cultures built through oral tradition and print-based societies where “seeing is believing.” The complication is made possible due to the formal elements of the comic book such as panels, speech bubbles, gutters, as well as the conventions expected of the comics genre.

To understand the formal functions of comics, I turn to an application of phenomenology: Thing Theory. Martin Heidegger writes in *What is a Thing?* that a thing can, in part, be defined by its function (25) and in “The Question Concerning Technology,” he challenges the casual power of something's thingness by arguing that technology's thingness lies in revealing or “bringing-forth” (13). Meanwhile, Bill Brown explains in his book, *Thing Theory*, that our understanding of things depends on moments when the things cease to function for us (4). This paper focuses on the metaphorical, interstitial space between “functioning” and “ceasing to function,” and the interstitial spaces that, in and of themselves, reveal the artifice

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of how we structure and organize the media that we create. Dale Jacobs and Jason Dolmage explain in their essay, “Accessible Articulations,” that comics have “gained new rhetorical tools, more accessible articulation” (qtd in “Seeing Sounds/Hearing Pictures”), which affirms my position that comics have formal elements that function in ways that comic creators have reinforced through repetition, and those elements can be then manipulated to be more accessible to a wider audience. Through this, genre can evolve to accommodate new modes of telling stories without having to invent new technology. This consideration provides as a means of understanding how comics already evolved to tell stories – especially those with Deaf narratives.

Comic books and many other media historically have had a contentious relationship with the representation of people with disabilities. However, there are now several texts made by people with disabilities or including characters with disabilities that create an inclusive reading experience instead of an alienating one. One of these texts is *Hawkeye* #19, a single-issue comic written by Matt Fraction and illustrated by David Aja that depicts the deaf superhero, Hawkeye. By examining the formal elements of comics, we can then extrapolate how they work, what functions they serve, and how they can be manipulated to offer inclusive ways to tell stories. For example, a comic is a comic even if its panels do not have gutters. It is still a comic even if its speech bubbles are empty. However, how we choose to fill that space and how we choose to teach media that uses that space in inclusive ways is where the heart of my research resides.

### Sound, Vision, and Attention

McLuhan’s argument of electronic media’s movement towards “togetherness” builds on a claim he makes earlier in the book, relating a fragmented society that privileged isolation-imprisonment as a form of punishment due to a society shaped at a time when “perspective and pictorial space was developing in our Western world. The whole concept of enclosure as a means of constraint and as a means of classifying doesn’t work as well in our electronic world” (62). The easiest line to draw could arguably be to the fragmented panel of the comic. The page itself is divided into prison cells called panels, and each panel is separated from another through the space known as the gutter. Without the gutter, the composition of the comic page seems squished, claustrophobic, and possibly even amateur. However, too much space in the gutter gives the impression of a great deal of time or space

passing between panel one and panel two. At first blush, it could seem that the panel imprisons a story in a similar way to the punishment through isolation given by literate societies, but comics scholar Neil Cohn describes panels not as isolated fragments of the story, but as attention units. Within each of these units stand morphemes as well as gestural, temporal, and spatial elements that exist in oral communication and tell stories differently than traditional print media. Consider the frame in Figure 1 from Scott McCloud's book, *Understanding Comics*:

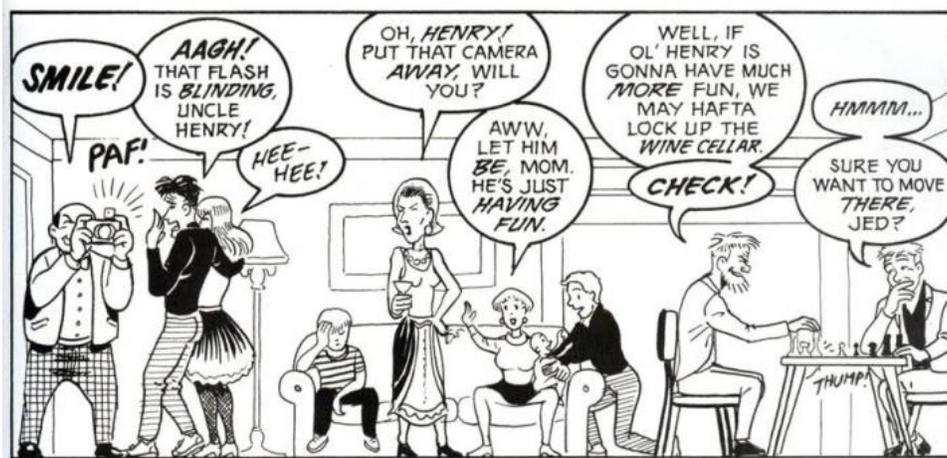


Figure 1. *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud, pg. 95

There are those who liken comics to films because comic panels provide snapshots similar to frames in a film. These snapshots are isolated moments in a larger scene. However, this panel and many other panels contradict that notion and complicate the relation of the isolation of a panel to a prison. Even a film with the lowest frame rate will have each frame capture a single moment and only that moment. The comic panel can have a duration of an instant to something much longer, and that duration is, in part, determined by speech and sound. The panel in Figure 1 cannot ever be contained in a single film frame because it contains three groups of conversation, all of which responding to the others, and having multiple responses within each conversation group. “Seeing is believing” works less here because the “imprisonment” of the panel may trick us initially into believing this is a singular moment until our aural/oral minds reinforce that it is, in fact, a longer moment rife with human relationship. McCloud then presents the same panel, in Figure 2, now with time in the balloons instead of text, to draw attention to how

time passes throughout the single panel according to how much time most likely passed during each character’s response.

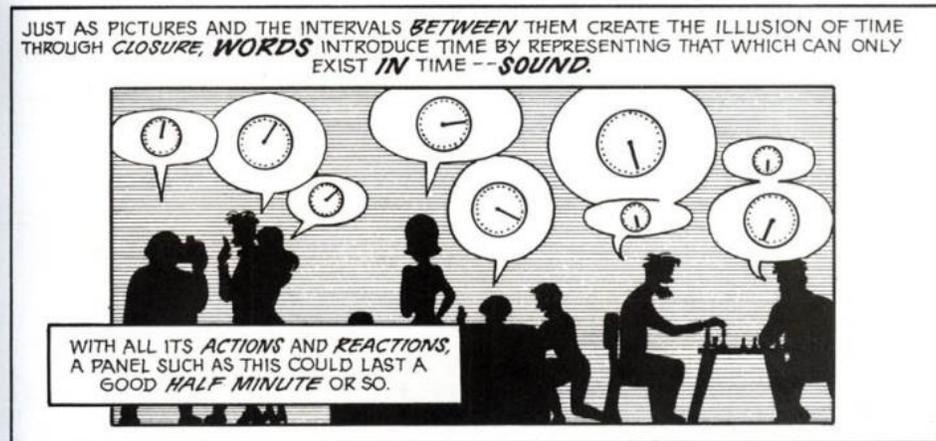


Figure 2: *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud, pg. 95

McCloud states “A silent panel [...] could indeed be said to depict a single moment [...] if sound is introduced, this ceases to be true” (98). Comics, although print-based, are not barren of sound. This singular example can trouble the argument that print media isolates rather than unifies, because the temporal and spatial understanding of the comic panel draws from the experience of togetherness, of existing in a space where people respond to each other and talk with one another. It relates to existing in an aural environment, and to interacting orally with other people. When reading with this panel in this medium, the readers must not draw just on their verbal literacies, but also their experiences as members of their communities.

### Affective Sound

Several comics scholars quote Sarah Ahmad in terms of discussing the “stickiness” of a disability. However, very little is said about the context in which Ahmad created this term. Ahmad creates this term in her 2004 book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, to describe the affective quality of emotions. She says, “emotions are ‘sticky’, and even when we challenge our investments, we might get stuck. There is hope, of course, as things can get unstuck” (Ahmad 16). In this way, she describes how certain emotions and metonymous relationships are formed in ways that are

often problematic and therefore, requiring a consideration of “stickiness” in terms of how we can “unstick” these relationships. However, comic scholars use “stickiness” in terms of discussing how visible disabilities are stickier than invisible disabilities. As such, comic scholars should consider stickiness in terms of how to continue to associate the disability with the character and not erase that particular representation. It is interesting how the term is borrowed and transformed within the comics studies discipline, but it does bring me to discuss how comics and popular culture scholars can use affect theory to understand representations of sound in the mute medium of comics.

While comics traditionally do not aurally make sound, sound is everywhere in comics. It is in the onomatopoeia of every BAM, WHAM, and POW. It is in every speech bubble, every panel, and it is interpreted in every reader’s mind. Sound also exists in the silent panels, where there is no text or even no images. The silence in these black, barren, or wordless panels provides a break between comic noise and makes sound even more prominent when it is represented in comics. Jonathan Sterne in *The Audible Past* writes “Deafness was at the very beginning of sound reproduction” (41) because sound engineers studied deafness to understand how we can reproduce sound. Sterne explains early sound technicians treated sound reproduction as “a problem of reproducing effects, rather than reconstructing causes” (48). Comics primarily work in the opposite manner; they reproduce causes of sounds rather than attempting to construct effects. Readers do not hear characters talk, but readers know they are talking because of the iconic and symbolic elements readers are trained to understand as sonic elements in comics.

However, comics can also visually reproduce the effects of sound. For example, Damian and Adrian Wassel’s *The Gifted* is a story about a wolf scavenging for food. In the story, it encounters humans and the speech bubbles show words in the phonetic alphabet, meaning the wolf is able to hear the physical sounds that are being produced, but it does not understand the meaning of them. The choice of the phonetic alphabet positions the reader to hear sounds instead of words, and therefore, focuses on the effects of this reproduced sound in a way *Hawkeye* #19 does not attempt. However, both choices place the reader in a position to have to do more work to understand the meaning of the symbols and icons on the page, either by translating the phonetic symbols to English words or translating the ASL icons to English. *Hawkeye* artist David Aja tweeted in defense of their choice to not translate the ASL because they intended to frustrate hearing people so they would be more sympathetic to the frustration deaf/Deaf people experience when they are

not included in an accessible conversation. Scholars can relate back to stickiness in terms of using affective emotion to ensure the stickiness of a character's invisible disability.

### Who Is Hawkeye, and What Is This #19?

Clint Barton, also known as Hawkeye, was first introduced in the 1960s as a regular human with incredible ability using a bow and arrow. He became deaf in the 1980s when he sacrificed his hearing while setting off a sonic arrow bomb to stop the villain, Crossfire. In the two decades Hawkeye was deaf, his disability was rarely acknowledged, partially because the character canonically did not want people to know he was deaf, and because writers claimed inventor Tony Stark was able to make hearing aids that were practically invisible. The representation of Hawkeye's disability worsens when Franklin Richards restores his hearing in the early 2000s. Casey Ratto writes about disability in comic books using the concept of stickiness to describe how difficult or easy it is to remove a disability from a character. She writes, "the stickiness of disability in superhero comic books is dependent on visible signs of disability and those without a visible sign are either 'cured' of the disability or it is erased via a retcon" (Ratto). While earlier writers cured his disability through retroactive continuity, Fraction used the retcon to bring back Barton's deafness and he challenged the previous iterations of *Hawkeye* by having Clint be open about his deafness instead of hiding it. Ratto later writes "In retconning Hawkeye's origin story to include his deafness instead of making it a random plot point, both Fraction and Aja shift away from the medical construction of disability and towards the social construction of disability." This is a point confirmed by other scholars such as Jay Dolmage ("Accessible Articulations"), Naja Later (in *Uncanny Bodies*), and David Lewis ("Seeing Sounds/Hearing Pictures").

Matt Fraction's *Hawkeye* #19 visualizes both sound and deafness. In this comic issue, the protagonist Clint Barton becomes deaf after an injury and the reader experiences much of the issue through Clint's perspective. The comic uses the formal elements of the medium to represent the existence of sound even when the protagonist cannot perceive it. As depicted in Figures 3 and 4, Clint can understand the qualities of the speech-sound in terms of the volume of the voice but is not able to understand what is being said. This is shown through the outline of a speech bubble, which Cohn describes as a comics morpheme. In linguistics, a morpheme

is a basic unit of meaning even though the unit does not have meaning in and of itself. Some examples of a morpheme would be “un,” which is not a word of its own, but indicates “not” when attached to another word. Although Cohn describes speech bubbles acting as a basic unit of meaning for comics, it is clear speech bubbles are not a morpheme because they still consist of smaller elements such as their size in relation to the text, their outline, and their color. All these smaller elements can build to the larger meaning of the qualities of the person’s voice, as is demonstrated with the “indoor voice” speech bubbles and the “shouting” speech bubble. Figure 1 presents a moment where the comic both is functioning and ceases to function. Although there is no text carrying discernable information for the reader, readers can still understand a difference between the voices in the two separate panels because the outlines indicate a speaking versus a shouting voice.



Figure 3. *Hawkeye* #19, pg. 2



Figure 4. *Hawkeye* #19, pg. 7

Meanwhile, in the series of panels below (Figure 5), the reader can see a young Clint Barton sitting in the doctor’s office as the doctor discusses something with his parents. The panel depicts scribbles in the speech balloons, meaning Clint can partially hear, but not well enough to understand what the doctor and his parents are saying. Therefore, the reader knows the younger Clint Barton was partially deaf and then became fully deaf as an adult. Therefore, the comic is still functioning as a comic even when the fundamental element of text in speech bubbles is stripped away. The comic visualizes how the character processes what is said differently than how it would be heard. On the tenth page of the issue, Clint begins lip reading and the text is shown as wobbly with somethings mixed in as Clint misses words that are clearly said, but not clearly perceived.





Figure 6. *Hawkeye #19*, pg. 16

Additionally, there are temporal and spatial elements to which these two panels draw attention. The first panel in the figure is a close-up of Barney’s lips because Clint is lip reading. This feature is put in high focus, but it is unclear what the time relationship is. McCloud’s example of speech and sound acting as a determinant of time is helpful because the reader know what is being said and can infer the tone and pacing by the speech bubble shape, font size, font type, and character body language; the reader can infer how much time has passed. However, this panel is left ambiguous. No one can read Barney’s body language in this panel; the shape of the bubble betrays the qualities of Barney’s voice, and what Clint and the reader perceive does not match what is being said. Furthermore, the second panel of the sequence is left without a border, suggesting an open interpretation for how long this moment lasts. At what point did Barney grab Clint’s shirt? How long do they remain in that position before time progresses to the next panel?

Another way *Hawkeye #19* complicates McLuhan’s “seeing is believing” argument is through Clint’s interpretation of sign language. Throughout the comic,

Fraction includes panels of sign language, but it is not always clear whether people are signing or talking, and Clint is interpreting the speech mentally into sign language. There are panels in the comic showing the characters physically signing, but there are also moments when the characters are replaced by icons. For example, Figure 7 shows a conversation between Barney and Clint. In this sequence, the reader must interpret the conversation through sign language, and may have assumed the conversation is happening through sign, until the final panel shows Barney acknowledging Clint is lip reading. The reader's visual input is once again called into question – was Barney speaking or signing? Was he signing up until the last panel? Depending on the answers to these questions, the reader is then called to question the temporality of each panel. The time it would take to sign a certain word does not always correspond to the time it would take to speak the same word. The panels are also numbered in sequence as one would interpret sign language, but the syntax of spoken language also differs from the syntax of signed language. Therefore, the temporality is changed both in terms of time taken as well as the chronological order of these words and how they are interpreted.



Figure 7. *Hawkeye #19*, pg. 15

### Regarding Staring and Icons

In a 1979 interview conducted by Dennis O'Neill, science fiction author Samuel R. Delany says, "Viewers can control the speed their gazes travel through the [comic]

medium, they can control how far away or close they hold the page, whether they go backwards and regaze – and going back in a comic book is a very different process from going back in a novel to reread a previous paragraph or chapter” (40). Comic readers can stare and consume the images on the page as closely and for as long as they want. Daniel Preston in “Crippling the Bat: Troubling Images of Batman” argues because the panel can be stared at for any length of time, the panel serves as a freak show where the character is displayed for the reader’s consumption (213). The character serves as an object of information for the reader to stare at for their own gain. Preston argues that often in comics the panel serves as a means of putting the character’s disability under a microscope to showcase body horror or to invoke pity for the fallen superhero. *Hawkeye* #19 removes the character and replaces them with iconography, which eliminates the readers’ ability to gather information on the character. Instead, they must gather information on the meaning from the signed language. Once again, McLuhan’s “seeing is believing” argument is called into question because an invisible disability such as deafness would not register to the reader no matter how long one could stare at a single panel. *Hawkeye* #19 manages to affirm an invisible disability while simultaneously removing the character from the microscope.

The choice of using an icon instead of a character functioning as a universalizing tool as well. Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* explains the cartoon icon allows the reader to forego realism and focus on a separate idea: meaning. He says, “when we abstract an image through cartooning, we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details by stripping down an image to its essential meaning” (McCloud 30). The iconography of the sign language in *Hawkeye* #19 draws the reader to understand the language conveyed instead of the disabled-ness of the character. The reader is not tricked into forgetting Clint’s deafness, but instead they are immersed in it and guided to focus on the specific detail of making meaning as they are visually deafened by the comic. McCloud then goes on to explain “the more cartoony a face is [...] the more people it could be said to describe” (31). By depicting the unrealistic icon as opposed to a more realistic drawing of the characters, Fraction and Aja universalize deafness. It is not meant to represent solely the characters in the comic, but anyone who would have to communicate when someone cannot hear.

One drawback to this version of iconography is expression plays a large role in American Sign Language (ASL); therefore, the faceless icon like in the comic would not be able to represent the full scope of the language. Expression in ASL is

categorized as non-manual signals (NSM), and can give the tone of voice intended while signing, all the way to changing the meaning of the particular sign. In Figures 6 and 7, expression is circumvented by placing the question mark symbol to indicate a question is being asked, but the literally blank faces of the signing icons do not provide the reader with the NSM elements of ASL.

## The Social Construction of Deafness

Earlier in this paper, I explained how multiple scholars affirm *Hawkeye* #19 focuses on demonstrating the social model of disability. What this means is a disability is socially constructed by architectures and attitudes which make places and other things inaccessible. This is modeled in part by Fraction and Aja's making speech bubbles unreadable to disable their reader. Dolmage writes this decision was "meant for the reader to experience the inconvenience of an inaccessible world" (364), and to highlight "the realization of human interdependence" (365). *Hawkeye* #19 demonstrates this dependence in the latter half of the comic, where the people around Hawkeye support him and learn to communicate with him rather than finding measures where the burden is on Hawkeye to integrate back with the hearing world. The comic demonstrates three elements of telling deaf and disabled narratives that can operate as a means of erasing barriers of access in fiction: the messiness of becoming, reclaiming agency, and normalization.

*Element One: The Messiness of Becoming.* Clint is not fluent in sign language, nor does he have a complete grasp on lip-reading, and the reader is placed in Clint's perspective as he struggles to make sense of the aural world around him. Deaf scholar Naja Later explains how comics traditionally are accessible to people with hearing loss because the words, sounds, and other noises are all illustrated. Furthermore, Clint isolates himself in the comic upon becoming deaf as he comes to terms with his disability. The portrayal of a character with disabilities during their time of becoming or while they are still "making do" is an important rhetorical choice so readers can understand having a disability is an altering experience that requires time to adjust both emotionally and practically. When Hawkeye canonically first became deaf in the 1980s, writers sanitized his disability by having him request a "practically invisible" hearing aid from technology genius, Tony Stark. This immediate near-retcon of his deafness resulted in readers not seeing the immediate changes that occur on several fronts – functionally, emotionally, physically – when someone must adjust to a loss of one of their senses. Fraction

and Aja's *Hawkeye* #19 combats this shortcoming by showing Clint practicing how to sign and lip-read throughout the issue rather than skipping straight to a point where he is comfortable with his disability and knows how to skillfully navigate the sonic world.

*Element Two: Reclaiming Agency.* The comic issue begins with Clint losing his hearing as the result of abuse and from an accident while fighting villains. Both events were beyond his control and, during both times of hearing loss, Clint was positioned in the comic where he was not able to enter the conversation regarding his own deafness. The panels show Clint with a mixture of shame, sadness, and anger, but the comic does not leave Clint there. Instead, it shows his process of reclaiming his agency from having others labeling his disability to communicating his disability and his needs himself. Figure 8 shows Clint addressing his neighbors by explaining he is deaf, he is going to practice sign language by signing to them, and his brother will translate so they understand. Furthermore, Clint does not have to abandon his role as a superhero because of his disability. By the end of the issue, the neighbors and Clint devise a plan together on how to stop the villain and Clint's deafness is not labeled as a debilitating factor. Instead, it is a new development of his character he is learning to navigate.

*Element Three: Normalization.* It is a crucial decision that *Hawkeye* #19 demonstrates hearing people learning how to communicate with their deaf neighbor, Clint. This choice led to his hearing neighbors learning the signed for "we," as seen in Figure 9. This moment in the comic positions Clint among others as they learn how he communicates instead of forcing him to exclusively must adjust to communicate. By normalizing the use of ASL among people who can hear, the comic models that it is the responsibility of able-bodied people to try to learn how to communicate with those who are deaf/Deaf or need other methods of communicating.



Figure 8. *Hawkeye* #19, pg. 17



Figure 9. *Hawkeye* #19, pg. 19

Fraction and Aja’s *Hawkeye* had a lasting impact on Clint Barton as a character. Later writers made Hawkeye’s deafness explicit, thus giving more legitimacy to the canon of Clint being deaf. In the 2015 *Hawkeye vs. Deadpool*, Clint has several conversations about his deafness or by communicating in sign language. Deadpool also spends much the issue with his facemask up so Hawkeye can read his lips. In *Comic Book Fandom and Cultural Capitol*, Jeffery Brown explains fan cultural

capital exists on the collection and knowledge of canonical texts either “by plot or creator significance.” He also explains a large part of fan culture is the creation of text and art featuring pre-existing characters. Through the continued acknowledgement of Fraction’s run of *Hawkeye* by other Marvel writers, the fan-made texts also gain legitimacy by featuring a canonical version of Hawkeye instead of something deemed a one-off or a fan-made fantasy.

### The Outro: Concluding Thoughts

The representation of sound in comics is a worthy endeavor to explore, especially in terms of considering accessibility and the representation of deaf/Deaf people. *Hawkeye* #19 provides us with a template of how the form of comics to visualize sound and certain disabilities. It is one of the few mainstream comics that explicitly represents a character with disabilities. Many autobiographical comics exist in terms of representations of disabilities such as *Stitches*, *El Deafo*, *Something Terrible*, *Hyperbole and a Half*, and *My Degeneration*, so there is a wide array of examples to pull from to understand how comics provide access to different voices and how those voices are visually represented. In the wake of a long history of troubling images and representations of minority groups in comics, scholars have provided ample and necessary criticism on how comics have failed. However, I posit it is now time to focus on the comics which model a shift in equitable representation and *Hawkeye* #19 is an example providing us with signs of change.

So, what does that leave us? McLuhan argues the visual isolates while aural unifies, but comics provide a sticky riposte to that line of inquiry. Some scholars, such as Cohn, have tried to isolate elements of a comic to justify how these elements act, but even that approach is flawed and can be broken down into smaller elements. Perhaps thing theory, where a thing’s “thingness” comes from, offers an approach to its (dis)function. Does *Hawkeye* #19 fit this description because it no longer functions as a traditional comic a reader can easily sift through, or does it continue to function because it still uses the elements of a comic through different means? Rather than dwell on the prescriptive features of a thing, I think it would be more fruitful to consider comic’s thingness not in what it is or what it does, but what its relation is to others. For this, I draw on Alexander Galloway and Mackenzie Wark’s mapping of communicative practices to Greek gods. They write:

Iris differs but she doesn't defer. Unlike Hermes, she does not traffic in the foreign. She is a goddess of nearness. Hers is an unmotivated expressive

surplus of expression. There is never anything lacking in what she communicates. On the contrary, there's always a little too much. Where with Hermes representation always falls short; with Iris expression always exceeds. The iridescent is the too-real. (155)

The thingness of a comic connects to this definition. Comics are a surplus of expression. Comics have elements which are overflowing but often overlooked, such as sound, since even scholars like Marshall McLuhan do not give credence to it implicitly because of its printed nature. Furthermore, many comics scholars even overlook the aural elements of comics since the hybrid medium is so vast and rich with interconnectivity, it is difficult to talk about everything and at the same time, it is difficult to talk about one thing because of its relation to the other elements of the medium. However, in considering comics as a surplus and as its relation to itself and to its reader, comics and popular culture scholars can better understand how it proves to contradict McLuhan's argument in some ways while embracing it in others.

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