

*Gap or Gag?
On the Myth of the Gutter
in Comics Scholarship*

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This article deals with what can be considered as the biggest myth in comics theory, namely the belief that the fundamental characteristic of comics language is the presence of a gutter, that is an intericonic gap which produces multiple meanings as well as stimulates creative participation by the reader. Although we do not reject the presence of this feature as such and accept its possible contribution to the process of meaning-making, we demonstrate in this essay that this take on the gutter is far from being a universal property of comics, and that its importance has been overestimated due to the success of a particular yet very limited interpretation of comics as sequential narrative.

Comics scholarship pays a lot of attention to the role of the gutter, that is the intericonic space between panels. Not only from a visual point of view, for there are many possibilities to offer variations on the relationships between the frame the panel, on the one hand, and the blank space that separates the frames, on the other hand (Baetens 1991, Groensteen 2007, Baetens and Frey 2014, 121-122), but also – and this point is of course vital – from a narrative and cognitive point of view. From the latter perspective, the white space of the gutter (which can be a *virtual* space, for instance when the panels are only separated by their frames, like in most pages of Claire Bretécher's *Les Frustrés*, or when the drawings are offered with no frames at all, like in many Eisner comics) is supposed to represent something that is told without being shown and thus presents a cognitive question to be solved by each reader, who has to “fill in the gap” in his or her way, to use the terminology of Wolfgang Iser's phenomenology of reading (1980). In a second step, both the material and aesthetic presence of the gap and its cognitive and narrative function are then seen as decisive characteristics of the comics medium, a specific element that helps distinguish it from, for instance, cinematographic or verbal storytelling. In current scholarship, the gap can rightly be considered the most universal and most universally acknowledged feature of the language of comics. It has become a cornerstone, a foundational element, that is part of almost any serious discussion in the field.

However, we argue that there is no reason to give so much weight to the gutter and the cognitive gap that is involved by its presence. Obviously, the gutter is a nearly ubiquitous phenomenon in the visual design of comics and, no less obviously, the panel-to-panel transition is an important aspect of comics making and reading.

But that does not mean that all gutters represent gaps: in many cases, there is no gap at all. Furthermore, the gap – provided there is one – does not always have the decisive importance that comics scholarship tends to give it nowadays. In other words, the shift from gutter to gap as a foundational criterion for comics analysis is an interesting and often crucial element of comics, but it should not be taken for granted that such a shift is a universal feature.

Why is this the case? Why should we take the systematic overemphasis of the importance of the gutter-as-gap as a kind of “myth”? Mainly for three reasons. First of all, it should be stressed that in most cases, panel to panel transitions do not raise any serious cognitive problem. Readers of a comic book move as fluently and smoothly from one panel to the next as readers of a text – that is, of a well-written and well-structured text – move from sentence to sentence (the final stop after a sentence and the capital letter that opens the following one can be seen as the linguistic equivalent of the gutter in graphic storytelling). Moreover, the very link between gutter and cognitive gap is certainly not something that can be mechanically decided. Let us consider for instance pages 54-55 of *The Shooting Star* (Hergé 1961), where a sequence of no less than 6 drawings (the two last panels of page 54 and the first four panels of page 55) details the dance steps made by Tintin. There is definitely a gap here, but it is one that is created with the help of elements such as point of view, angle, and focalization: what we are shown is Tintin dancing, and the transition from panel to panel is so banal that nobody will even think of looking for hidden information in the gutter; what we are *not* shown is the monster that will appear a little later, but this absence is due to the careful framing of the panels, which enables the artist to produce a final surprise effect – as theorized by Hitchcock in his famous distinction between *surprise* and *suspense* (Truffaut 1985: 58-59), and we all know how skeptical the master of suspense was of the use of surprise. Yet this effect does not result from the gutter; it results from the images themselves. Does this mean that the gutter is not interesting in this six-panel dance scene? Yes and no. It will be hardly relevant for most readers, but “informed” readers, for instance readers who reread the story and who may be for that reason less interested by the plot than by the way the plot is visually managed, may start to ponder what is not shown between the panels. But such scrutiny is very different from what is generally understood by those who claim that gutters represent gaps. In the example of Tintin’s dance sequence, there are clearly no cognitive gaps in the gutter; there are gutters, but no gaps, that is, no gutter-related gaps: the gaps that appear in this sequence have a different origin. The following example, a Tintin pastiche made by a fan, makes this point even more clearly, for literally nothing happens “in the gutter” – hence the systematic centrality of the character in every panel and the progressive introduction of “hostile” elements within the panel:



Figure 1: Kaka Nami Rai, “Tintin in New York,” quoted from the author’s personal site “My Own Tintin”, see: <http://myowntintin.blogspot.com/2015/>

A second element that should downsize the importance of the gutter-as-gap is the fact that the visual and narrative logic of comics is not exclusively that of the linear panel-to-panel transition. Next to this aspect, which is of course always there, one also has to take into account a second dimension, namely *tabularity* (Fresnault-Deruelle 1976), the logic of visual composition at strip or page level. Tabularity is not just something that can be added or not, as an optional complement, to linearity; it is a dimension that is as fundamental to the language of comics as that of the linear panel-to-panel transition logic. Here again, let us take the example of the Tintin pastiche above: if we only read this page as a succession of single panels, as if we were watching a slide show or a PowerPoint presentation, the whole effect of the gag would be lost. Indeed, it is crucial that we see that Tintin always occupies the same central position in each panel – and that, for that reason, he cannot avoid the collision with the lamppost in the penultimate panel – while at the same time the repetition of the symmetrical panel structure also produces, at the higher level of the page, a similar

structure – which is also in sync with the grid structure created by the gutter as a visual composition device. In other words, what the gutter is doing here has nothing to do with introducing gaps, but it has everything to do with structuring the page as a visual composition. Its function is visual and tabular, not linear and cognitive. Granted, compositional structures at the page level frequently raise cognitive and narrative questions, but these questions are far from universal. In many cases, the visual-tabular dimension prevails and does not include any specific use of gutters-as-gaps.

A third aspect to which we already hinted concerns the inevitably subjective dimension of the gap. On the one hand, not all gaps are filled in the same way by all types of readers or reader communities. On the other hand, the interpretation of a gutter in terms of gaps will equally depend on personal elements: certain gutters will be recognized as gaps by certain readers while others may not even notice that there is something like a cognitive or narrative gap (the reading practices of experienced or fan readers are very different from those of beginning or uninterested readers). Conversely, from a production point of view, certain gutters are meant to be crossed smoothly and effortlessly, while others strongly underline the fact that gutters really are gaps. Regardless of the way these gutters are processed by the audience – and as argued above, it would be naïve to think that “encoding” and “decoding” always seamlessly overlap in this regard – this distinction at the production stage can be associated with the well-known difference between “continuity editing” and “montage-oriented editing”: in the former case, the panel-to-panel transitions and the page composition that goes along are made in such a way that the reader does not realize that he or she is being moved from one image to another (to a large extent, this is part of what the Clear Line aesthetics is aiming for – and such an objective is very honorable); in the latter, the reader’s attention is explicitly drawn to the clash between images and the gutter-as-gap that separates them (and this as well is of course a perfectly defensible stance).

To conclude: the gutter is ubiquitous in comics. It would be absurd to deny its systematic presence. However, 1) not all gutters function as gaps; 2) gutters can have other functions than narrative-cognitive functions, for instance visual functions, helpful to build tabular relationships; and 3) some gutters-as-gaps are meant to go unnoticed – and it is crucial to always remind the whole gamut of possibilities between the two extremes of the “visible” and the “invisible.” In addition, the analysis and interpretation of gutters – in the sense of gutters as possible narrative and cognitive gaps – should always consider the role of the reader and his or her capacity of ignoring, inventing, and negotiating the gutter.

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