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Eric's Restaurant in Newbury Park, California, january 28, 2004

GS: We met once before at UCLA when you gave a talk. You confirmed my business card as comics by your definition.

SMcC: I remember. Great card.

GS: I'll point the mic at you since there are fewer journalistic implications if I have to paraphrase myself than if I paraphrase you. *[Both our voices recorded just fine.]*

SMcC: I talk fast; I'm notoriously difficult to paraphrase.

GS: I'm just the opposite. I talk slowly enough that a friend of mine said "Do your students record your lectures and play them back at higher speed so they can stand to listen to them?"

SMcC: *[laughs]* **You know my dad was blind and he actually did that back when talking books were all on LP. He had a player that went all the way from 16 1/2**

up to 78 in increments so you could just slide it. He slid it a little faster every day and he was listening to talking books at 45 when they were recorded at 16 1/2. And he'd just sit listening to this *[makes high pitched unintelligible sound]* **all day.**

GS: A speed reader.

SMcC: Exactly.

GS: That's funny. I tried to organize what to ask you and such but something I was thinking about on the way over is completely out of order with everything I'd planned. I was just reading Sight Unseen by Georgina Kleege. She's writing for a project I'm doing. She teaches English at UC Berkeley and is legally blind and has written an interesting book about reading but including reading as. . .

Waiter: You want to order?

[Scott ordered the salmon, Gunnar the ahi.]

Anyway, in Sight Unseen she talks about reading and how books on tape are considered "not reading," that people disparage that experience. She talks about how it's similar and how it's not. It made me think about the way people regard comics as somehow. . . pictures make a book weaker so comics must be as weak as possible.

SMcC: Yeah. We've been scaling that mountain for a while now. Movies had to scale it. Animation had to scale it. It's natural. Any new form has to fight that sort of prejudice. If the form is sufficiently popular that it saturates the population and if there are careers in it then it's easier to scale that mountain. If it's a little more marginalized commercially and in terms of popular acceptance then it takes longer so in comics' case it's taken longer. It's still pretty low on that totem pole where motion pictures managed in the middle of the last century to finally gain a foothold that they didn't have to lose: institutional acceptance, academic acceptance. . . That's alright. Some people in my business relish that fact that we fly a little below the radar; they consider that something of a virtue. Which I understand although I don't mind a certain amount of institutional approval because it means that young artists can pursue their careers without fear of a lack of support from their parents. *[laughs]* **You know. . . and it also means that there's a certain institutional memory that gets perpetuated that skills and wisdom are**

passed down to each successive generation and each generation doesn't have to reinvent the wheel that way.

[bread arrives propped up against a large triangular cracker]

SMcC: That's an interesting little tower there.

GS: A friend of mine refers to your first book as Overanalyzing Comics. . .

SMcC: *[laughs]* **Fair enough.**

GS: It's a funny thing. There's an implication in that you're not supposed to analyze certain things. I wonder how much is connected to an inferiority complex—you know, the unlived life is not worth examining.

SMcC: I've thought for some time that there are probably about four different unnamed tribes in comics—schools of thought—and one of those is the iconoclastic tradition that values the raw honesty and immediacy of comics and feels that something that achieves a certain amount of societal acceptance is likely to also achieve a certain amount of sterility and is often consumed by the interests of the elite and by powerful institutions and whatnot and I think it's a perfectly valid point of view. And that tribe, say in the form of the great underground comics or some of the more iconoclastic comics of today has produced tremendous work based on that idea, that there's no higher value in art than honesty and that too overanalyze something is dangerous in many respects but one in the way that it seems to strive for lesser minds but greater pocket books *[laughs]* **and also in the sense that it can kill the immediacy and the organic simplicity of the form and that having something that is raw and untamed and despised—that there's some precious there that we shouldn't throw away too easily in hopes that we might be hung someday in the Guggenheim. I think half of Art Spiegelman's personality feels that way where the other half has a formalist bent** *[laughs]* **and the two halves are always doing battle with one another.**

GS: There's a funny resentment you see—when people outside the punk scenes started to listen to Green Day people in the punk scene decided that that must be a sign of a reverse moral degeneration of Green Day, that suddenly they were Celine Dion in drag or something.

SMcC: And they're always half right. That is even though that reaction can seem like a knee jerk reaction, there's always some truth to it. A certain amount of vitality does always drain out of something that becomes embraced by popular culture, that maybe it is time to move on if what you're looking for is something genuinely new and raw then by the time it's on the cover of Time magazine then it's probably dead. I understand that. It's perfectly valid.

GS: Although in a funny way it may be. . . you mentioned film as a medium that gained some acceptance. I think film and TV have gone through a development where they were at first cheesy entertainment, and then embraced by people who wanted to make Art out of them and so you have several movements of European art film and finally the French New Wave embracing the cheesiness of film as the center of the art form and then other people learning from that and letting loose of the whole Art thing and starting to make movies that seemed to deal with—what is this form all about?

SMcC: I think you're dealing with two different passions—I think there are just about four, there are those four different passions—and a movement that consists of two different groups pursuing two different passions can seem to be the same movement when they are two different tribes that seem to have a common interest for a time. What you just described is iconoclasts on the one hand, finding joy in junk culture's side effects and on the other hand a group of formalists seeing artistic potential that may be a little bit more lofty. Well, both of them are upsetting the apple cart, both of them are trying to change a medium so both of them seem to be on the same team *[laughs]* **for a time but ultimately they're going to split—you know like the Dadaists devolved into an argument about which was more Modern, a locomotive or a top hat.** *[laughs]* **Eventually you're going to realize that these people are fellow travelers but they have different passions in the long run.**

GS: So you started talking about the different tribes and I interrupted you.

SMcC: Oh, no. That's a whole other thing.

GS: A very interesting thing and very appropriate to what the book is getting to so you have the punk purists, *[Scott laughs]* the iconoclasts, and who else?

SMcC: If you're a punk purist you're an iconoclast. I should that I've been

carrying this around in my pocket for ten years and I've never published this because it' dangerous. It's one thing to classify different kinds of panel transitions and another thing to start classifying people and it gets misused very easily and it gets misunderstood very easily. I try to talk about it in terms of actions or ideals and I always end up talking about actual people, human beings, and at that point I think "No, this is probably going to do more harm than good" and I never *[laughs]* **published it. But the four passions—you can think of them as the four campfires people gather around, you can think of them as four centers of gravity—one of them is that iconoclastic passion where it's truth reigning over beauty: the idea that in order to reach something real you may have to bring in something fairly raw and something unpolished.**

There are the animists—people in comics and I suppose people in art generally whose idea is to bring the work to life in an organic, alchemic sort of way that can't possibly be explained, who want to produce an experience that's truly real. In the case of the narrative arts like comics these would be storytellers, those who think of their stories as arising from some deep, unnameable place. If you hear an author, for instance, talking about how he was surprised at what his characters did. . . waking up in the morning and saying "What are my characters going to do today?" then you're talking about an animist. These are people who don't feel that art can be explained and who measure their art very much in the reactions of their audience, which puts them in opposition to the iconoclasts where the audience doesn't necessarily matter.

Then there are the classicists, those who believe that there is a standard of craft and beauty that can be learned, that there are skills, that there is a standard. They want to create something that could be dug up in two thousand years and can be looked at and still be seen as something beautiful. In some ways they therefore embrace a common standard of beauty, which puts them in opposition to the iconoclasts because the iconoclasts find standards of beauty and popularly-accepted standards of beauty to be a symptom of societal oppression. Instinctively. They'd never use words like that because that would be pretentious. *[laughs]*

So between the iconoclasts and the classicists you have a truth/beauty axis, right? Well, the animists are about content and the other end of that axis is form, so you have the fourth corner of it which is the formalists who are interested in whatever form they're working in, in learning how it ticks. They keep conducting experiments. The formalist—and this is pretty much the gang I found myself with—formalists are very loyal to the form over the content, they don't mind creating something that may be utterly unreadable or un-listenable providing it's interesting. There's no such thing as an unsuccessful experiment as long as

when you're done with it you're smarter than you were when you started. *[laughs]* **They can be accused by the animists and the iconoclasts of creating something that is somewhat sterile because when you're creating any work of art from the basis of intellectual exploration you're bound to wind up with something that may walk and talk like a person but it has no heart, it's dead inside so they're sort of on opposite ends from the animists.**

These four schools determine to some extent what the shared history of each tribe is. If you ask for the history of comics from each tribe, for instance, you get vastly different answers depending on which tribe you're talking to. The formalists will tell you how they—they might go on about ancient forms of sequential art *[laughs]* **totally ignoring the actual continuity of the culture of comics, going on about Egyptian wall paintings and whatever like I do. The iconoclasts would tell you that pretty much everything was shit but that Harvey Kurtzman did some good stuff with Mad magazine** *[laughs]* **and then there was some more shit and then the undergrounds came along and then they turned to shit and so forth. The animists will tell you about their particular sub tribe, they tend to be the most parochial. (Formalists tend to be the most eclectic.) So they will go on about whatever little subset of comics they come from. History begins there. So if they're superhero artists then history began with Kirby and Ditko and then the classicists will talk about the history of fine representational art and fantasy. They'll see comics as part of this broader thing of creating fantastic art and they'll start talking about a bunch of dead illustrators nobody's ever heard of but it will all begin with Michelangelo most likely.** *[laughs]* **So I'm forever seeing these things manifest, even in things as simple as who wants to go out and talk about comics after the convention and who wants to go out to the bar and get drunk** *[laughs]* **and who has the longest lines.** *[laughs]* **Anyway, it's a big giant, gnarly, molten subject at best that I continue to mull over but I've never published it because as I say I think it's potentially toxic.** *[laughs]*

GS: It's a double trick. I suspect that in the years since *Understanding Comics* has come out that you've gotten wrath from two ends, from people who think your analysis isn't analytical enough and. . .

SMcC: The academy, yeah. . .

GS: And people who think that the idea of analyzing this is potentially sucking the life out of everything or is an example of somebody who'd rather talk about something than do it, whatever that. . .

SMcC: Yeah. And they're both fair. You see, because they're both true within the context of the goals and passions that each of these groups represents. Those are totally legitimate in the sense that, for instance, a Robert Crumb when he was eighteen years old, if he'd read my book it would have done him absolutely no good whatsoever. It would not have helped Robert Crumb because his passion was for finding that inexplicable something within himself and just laying it down on paper. And having someone show him the gears of how it all worked might have just depressed him he might have just gone off and become a jazz musician *[laughs]* **so an iconoclast who objects to my book—and some have just on that very basis, you know, that if you overanalyze it you kill it—would be right. For anybody whose destiny is to gather around that particular campfire, they should stay the hell away from something like *Understanding Comics*. Meanwhile, on the other end of things you have some in the academy, say, who are steeped in semiotic theory and post structuralism, who can give you chapter and verse about why the book is naïve and ignores a great body of work on semiotic theory and they're right, too because it does. I backed into semiotics; I just stumbled like Barney Fife** *[laughs]* **into this room and described what I saw and moved on and completely ignored thousands and thousands of pages on how we process images that are already available for anyone who wants that but I thought it was important to give people something that came exclusively from direct observation and, after the fact, learning about others who have written about that is interesting to me and my only restriction about learning much more about that end of academia is time. It's just that I bought a computer and I was off on that tangent** *[laughs]* **for ten years. And I work very slowly. I read slowly; I work slowly and so I have this terribly shallow arc of learning and interest and production so in a hundred years I probably would find that a very interesting side road to go down.**

GS: It hasn't been a hundred years but it's been a while that the book's been out. . .

SMcC: Yes, just about ten years. . .

GS: I'm curious what, if you had it all to do over again, knowing some of the things that people have said and some of the things you've thought—what of it would you keep, what of it would you improve on, and what of it would abandon?

SMcC: In the book itself? The color section *[long pause]* **could have been a lot better. It could have been longer but then the book would have cost more to produce.** *[laughs]* **My publisher was cringing at the idea of the eight-page color**

section to begin with.

My definition of art, which I become strangely loyal to but I don't know if I described it well in the first book. I tried to have a second whack at it in *Reinventing Comics* which came out in 2000 but there I think I'm toying with things that the grownups have already worked over thoroughly and me bumbling about with my ideas (even though, as I say, I've been peculiarly loyal to that definition of art) but still I think that I needed to attack it a little more seriously if I were going to make a case for that—read up on my Hegel. . . *[laughs]*

GS: I've got a degree in art history and spent years teaching in various art departments and I don't think you did it well but I don't think you did it any worse than anybody else. . .

SMcC: *[laughs]* **Fair enough, then. But it's really not as strong as the first three chapters. The first three chapters of *Understanding Comics*, I can stand on that foundation but the rest, which frequently works, I think that even while I was doing it I thought if something is wrong here—I was getting it right to the best of my abilities—but if something is wrong than history will sort it out. It never occurred to me that it might become something of an oppressive standard on its own. But then it's not a prescriptive book. It doesn't prescribe certain courses of action and it doesn't exclude certain other approaches except for the infamous single-panel mention in the first chapter where I'm talking about definitions but other than that it's extremely disinterested in, say, telling good art from bad art so I felt that its damage potential was fairly low** *[laughs]* **and that, generally speaking, in the long run we'd be able to sort it out as to what was right and what wasn't.**

[Fish arrives. The ahi is arranged as a pyramid not unlike the bread.]

SMcC: A visual theme.

GS: Your attitude reminds me of El Lizzitsky's book *A Tale of 2 Squares.* It was a kids' book that starts out as this complete formalist weirdness—here's a square. . . It makes no sense whatsoever but it ends with, essentially, saying "Kids, go out and get some paper and scissors and make your own book."

SMcC: That's great

GS: It rejects the idea of it being the object of itself and in some ways, buried under all your credits at the back of *Understanding Comics*. . .

SMcC: *[laughs]*

GS: Was this "please debate this in public. . ."

SMcC: It took a while, by the way. People were very shy at first. There was some grumbling in the academy but the real backlash didn't happen for a good five years or so.

GS: It must have been four years into it. . . I think it was 1997. I was just looking at a website that was an academic discussion of the book that reminded me of many discussion of books where someone was saying "This was the wrong book." You want to say "The wrong book for what?"

SMcC: *[laughs]*

GS: The discussion was about how you were so naïve that you didn't show how images perpetuated racism. . .

SMcC: I know the one you're referring too.

GS: and my reaction was that it was as if you wrote a book about auto mechanics and included a short, perhaps slightly-naïve thing about how marvelous cars are and how in our current world we can move across great distances and isn't this a marvel and people reacted to this book about auto mechanics by saying "He failed to discuss overall transportation systems and to criticize what the use of fossil fuels is doing to the atmosphere."

SMcC: That particular strategy of criticism comes up again and again—the idea of the book I should have written. I've used an analogy much like what you just did. It's as if I'd written a book about how bicycles work and was criticized for not including a tour book. Gary Groth was particularly annoyed that I never instructed anyone on how to tell good comics from bad. *[laughs]* **I really thought that we seem to have rather a long history of that sort of thing. . . or cultural criticism, talking about the cultural origins of comics. It's very interesting but a lot has been written about that but very little at the time had been written about the mechanics of things which I thought was very interesting in and of itself. I suppose it's a good point when much of the criticism is centered on what you could have written about. Apparently it wasn't too glaringly wrong.** *[laughs]*

GS: I read one of those readers' reviews on Amazon about my book Graphic Design & Reading the person had obvious read some articles I'd written that were real "how to" articles on book design and was very upset that I hadn't done a book on how to do book design. It was as if I were biting into my tuna and saying "This is a horrible steak!"

SMcC: *[laughs]* **When I was a teenager there was a review in the newspaper about some well-known band of the time—the Pretenders or somebody—and it went on and on about how terrible they were and the very last line of the review essentially added up to how they were awful the way all of those rock and roll bands were.** *[laughs]* **You thought "This is not the buyers' guide I was hoping for."**

In my own case I feel like I've been treated very fairly. I've been treated with kid gloves, for the most part. There have been some impenetrable discussions like the one you mentioned where somehow out of left field my discussion of the power of the simplicity of cartoons is transmogrified into some sort of racist allegory about how we're assuming that people are interpreting this as a white face. . . it's just silly. But for the most part, the attacks, say, from one of our well-known—a muckraker in our industry named Gary Groth, tore me a new one on my second book, ***Reinventing Comics*** **about the web. There was a lot of meat in that debate. And he gave me a chance to respond and it was, I thought, a very constructive discussion and he brought up a lot of very interesting points. Some of them were even correct** *[laughs]* **which I was always taught that you admitted in the first paragraph and then you move on.**

Waiter: Everything good, gentlemen?

SMcC: Yes, thanks.

GS: As long as we're talking about criticism of the book there are some things—like I said, I'm a great admirer of the book; I've assigned it to design theory classes; I think it's one of the better introductions to communications media that's around. The web discussion that we were just talking about had comments about how this wouldn't be the kind of thing we'd give to communications classes because it's so dangerously naïve or something. I'd certainly give it to a communications class and point out some things that might be questionable, towards the end there was part that seemed to indicate that communications was something where you start out with an idea, you modulated it, someone else demodulated it, and ends up with the same idea. . .

SMcC: I think I. . .

GS: You undermine that right after, That's what I was going to say, that some of the objections were from someone not reading your book very well then complaining that you didn't read their book very well.

SMcC: *[laughs]* **Most people will tell you that only fifteen or twenty percent of what they wanted to be recomposed at the other end of that process ever makes it. That signal-to-noise ratio is enormously low.**

GS: And you can argue that hanging on to Claude Shannon's model of communication for very long when you're talking about human communication rather than machine communication starts becoming counterproductive. But like I say, most of it really makes sense but there are a couple of things I'm curious about—things that confuse me. One is the way you use the words "icon" and "iconic." It seemed a little fuzzy to me, that is, just like the term in general use means four different things, it seems like you used it two and a half different ways. . .

SMcC: *[laughs]*

GS: and it wasn't always clear what you were doing.

SMcC: I was hoping that I was using it consistently within the work. As far as its inconsistency with the way it was being used elsewhere, I did kind of pick up and run with it. It was beginning to be used in computer graphics to mean a symbol. . . I think my defense is that in the case of the word "icon" and the case of the word "closure" I may have been inadvertently coining a new use of the word but I believe that I define it within the work so even if it requires another numbered notation *[laughs]* **in your favorite dictionary, at least it's self-contained. In the case of "icon" I was using it (I was using it visually, obviously) to mean any image used to represent something—pictorially—so that it contains at least some form of resemblance to the object—mind you it's been ten years since I looked at my own panel—and when I use the term "iconic" like when I talk about cartoons being more iconic, I'll have to look at the book again but** *[picks up a copy of* Understanding Comics*]*. **. . . "To put it somewhat clumsily"—I think I actually said that. It wasn't a very satisfying way to put it. . . meaning that it was more reliant on iconic abstraction, meaning that it moved away from resemblance while still retaining the meaning. .** .

GS: I guess that's where my question is because you start out saying that resemblance is the key part of an icon and that's pretty much the Charles Sanders Pierce approach where you say if you have a physical resemblance between the signifier and the signified that's what makes something iconic. Then you imply that something becomes more iconic by becoming less of a resemblance.

SMcC: As I said, I think it's a clumsy term. To say that something is more iconic is clumsy. I can't find the passage but I think I might have said that in the book. But what's happening when we're moving, say, from a photograph to a cartoon of that photograph is the elimination of one component of that signifier, that is, we're losing what you might call retinal resemblance and this is something that could be debated endlessly—how much a photograph of a person resembles a person—but there are at least some specific criteria that you could present: correspondence of position, say, the position of the eyes over the mouth, if your were to draw a line from the position of an eye on an actual head and then another to the photograph and from the other eye to the other eye, the mouth to mouth, you'd have parallel lines or something like them unless the scale were different. Then they'd be converging but they wouldn't cross. I don't know. I'm shadow boxing here with some semiotic notions or some post structuralist notions that resemblance itself is somehow a fallacy. . .

GS: I personally think that's all a crock.

SMcC: *[laughs]*

GS: My question—I don't think you're wrong in your conclusions. I'm just curious where they came from. That is, you can say photographs may be learned in some way but there is correspondence—physiologically similar responses to a photograph, how your eye works. . .

SMcC: A photograph of one's mother is going to stimulate a certain response. Even if you've never seen a photograph in your life you would still respond to that.

GS: You'd respond to it as your mother in some sense. It is something basic and "natural" in a sense. On the other hand, your mother's name written is something that's completely cultural.

SMcC: Yes. Language is entirely abstract. There's no visual resemblance except

in the case of pictorially-originated languages like Chinese.

GS: It's what people in semiotics would call a symbol or others would call "sign proper," something being an arbitrary connection—what linguists call "unmotivated," there's nothing but a connection in the code. So my question is: Do you have a theory as to what you are calling iconic. Is it an icon in the sense of a natural connection or is it an unmotivated form where we've learned that this is a representation of a human being therefore we can call it any human being?

SMcC: It may be learned but it's learned at a very early age. It's like the notion of innate grammar. We have an innate predisposition to recognize those forms as faces. Probably the best evidence we have of that is children's art cross culturally. It goes through certain stages and the basic placement of those features on a face is one of those stages. It doesn't matter what culture you come from, it doesn't matter what the lineage of that culture is, you're going to see that phenomenon—certain progressions among young children. So obviously you're dealing with some sort of innate ability there. One assumes that without some kind of abstract recognition of things like facial features that human beings would never be able to function if we have to go through our entire database of what our eyes deliver to us in order to affirmatively confirm that somebody is who we think they are. We'd spend all of our lives just processing. . .

GS: There actually is a separate place in your brain that processes facial recognition. Oliver Sacks writes about somebody who'd injured that area. . .

SMcC: *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a. . .*?

GS: Wife for a Hat. Yes. He learned to recognize people by voices or details of clothing and such and he saw a guy staring at him and asked the person who worked at the club who the guy was. It was a mirror.

SMcC: *[laughs]* **That's great!**

GS: So it seems like that could. . . I made myself a list of sources for that and possible explanations from cognitive sciences to. . .

SMcC: I'll tell you where it originated in my fevered brain and that's just direct observation. It's just that sort of amateur Sunday afternoon pondering. I knew

I was going into it very raw, with very little foundation in cognitive sciences, semiotics, in visual language. . . but I thought there was some value in asking simple questions of myself and pursuing that thread as I could and just seeing what I could cook up based on that. The idea of creating something fresh at the outset, putting it out there, and seeing what the reaction was then maybe creating something that was a synthesis of what other people had done after the fact seemed like a good way to do it. It seemed like there were certain sorts of revelations I was much less likely to come up with though cumulative research of what others had said. I think that's a lot of what McLuhan was dealing with too, although he had more of a foundation beneath him and his conclusions were a lot more colorful than mine. *[laughs]*

GS: More colorful but I find more of yours much more useful.

SMcC: Well I'm more practical and I was thinking with an eye toward actual working cartoonists getting a hold of this tool kit. I didn't write a "how to" book. That's probably the next book. I'll finally write about making comics and put that to practical use but there's always a practical dimension to it.

GS: Actually, McLuhan was one of my possible explanations for the notion of simplified self image. . .

SMcC: That one didn't come from McLuhan. Other things in the book did and I actually specifically reference him in a couple of spots.

GS: The whole measuring the temperature of a medium by how much completion was being done by an audience. . .

SMcC: Hence our favorite scene in Annie Hall. *[laughs]*

GS: Cross chapter question—in the color chapter you indicated that things became more real with color.

SMcC: I hope I didn't say it quite like that.

GS: That's probably a grotesque oversimplification of what you said but I'm wondering since we're calling iconicity—I don't know if it's a real unrealness of an unreal realness but something that corresponds to a generic person well—do you

think color subtracts from that by making it more real and less "iconic"?

SMcC: It would have to get a little more nuanced. I have to explain what I meant by real it was—clearly color is one of the things in the tool kit of what our retina actually receives in a day and if you would like to head as far in that direction as you can then color is one of the thing you can bring to bear in that goal. I do think that. . . It's tricky. Black and white films do sometimes, if done well, have a symbolic power that does drain away a bit with the introduction of color. That's not an area that I've given enough thought to explain exactly why but I've seen that. I do think that black and white, line drawn simple comics can transcend the physicality of what's being depicted and get right to the characters and idea being depicted in a way that color comics can't. That doesn't mean that color comics is anathema to that. It's that color offers advantages that are very seductive and in taking advantage of color we can become distracted from the business of direct communication. It doesn't have to be though. It's like introducing a string section can give you opportunities in scoring that if you were just scoring for a single flute. The opportunities available to that single flute in terms of producing a melody that draws or captivates our attention can be diluted by the string section but the opportunity isn't eliminated. I'm having trouble making it clear but I. . .

GS: It's clear to me. Stepping back a bit, that whole question of the Piercean icon, that is, the natural correspondence, visual similarity versus the similarity of most linguistics. Languages are arbitrary but if I'd have seen your photograph before we met I'd say "Oh, yeah. There's the guy" but if I didn't know you and you walked up and said "Hi. My name is Murray Franklin" I wouldn't have said "You look like a Scott McCloud to me."

SMcC: *[laughs]* **Right. Exactly.**

GS: The thing that confuses me most about the book is. . . I think your triangle with the two sorts of abstraction—formal abstraction and iconic abstraction—and realism. . . I think that's incredibly useful, something that the conversation we were talking about before attacked as naïve but they didn't explain anything that made sense to me as to why there's a problem with that. It struck me that they lacked an interest in looking at images and saying "How were they built?" or "Where did they come from?" I thought it was very important for that. The place where you lose me is where it. . .

SMcC: knocks into language?

GS: Yes.

SMcC: I think that's a little tacked on. I was very entranced with the idea of a unified theory. It's very hard having mapped out all of that territory of visual communication to have this one other form of visual communication standing by, up at bat *[laughs]* **sort of jumping up and down and calling my name and saying "Where do you want to put me, huh?" and I put it there for two reasons. One of them was just that—the seductive desire, to see if I could put it together on one canvas and that was the best I could do—the other reason was that even though I couldn't necessarily justify moving from written language from pure abstraction, to formal abstraction (which is where it breaks down a bit) it's kind of a dotted line on that side of the triangle if you know what I mean. I was very interested in the bottom edge and I thought there was a lot to be said about how that abstraction away from resemblance while still retaining meaning would ultimately break past pictorial representation entirely and wind up at written language. That I thought was important and worth talking about because the dynamics of words and pictures in comics is very important but it leaves me with the dotted line. In fact there is a line dividing the pictorial part of the triangle and the language part of the triangle and it's a shaky one and it always has been but that's the thing with unified theories: sometimes things are put together with Scotch tape and popsicle sticks.** *[laughs]*

GS: If you gave me an image and said "Where do you put this on the left hand part of the triangle?" I would have no trouble saying "This is where it belongs." If you asked me to even explain how writing could go from top to bottom on that. . .

SMcC: Right. Obviously we can take writing and make it more abstract. I suppose that *Raygun* would go a little higher up—you know, that magazine from the '70s—would go higher up on the triangle than the lettering in a Dr. Seuss book.

GS: That's interesting. It was from the '90s. It gives you an idea of how. . .

SMcC: *[laughs]* **Was *Raygun* from the '90s? Really? I'd have thought it was earlier.**

GS: It in some ways seems so long ago.

SMcC: The last ten years have run slowly for me. I feel like *Understanding Comics* was thirty years ago. It seems strange that it was only ten. Because I fell down the rabbit hole. I immediately fell into the whole digital thing and ever since then a lot has happened. *[laughs]* **I know that when you get older time goes faster but if you can fill your days with enough you can actually counteract that, apparently.**

GS: I think there's something really interesting in that edge between what you're calling iconicity—I'm sure I'm stepping on a land mine to refer to it as a "natural abstraction". . .

SMcC: *[laughs]* **I tend not to refer to it that way myself but we can say it's natural to this extent at least, and that is that it's innate, that children naturally go in that direction so we have some built in skill for it.**

GS: And then at some point there's—I don't know if it's a hard line or a fade between adaptations of that and something that really is a purely cultural thing. In some ways you can say that the bathroom door guy is iconic in the sense of a human form simplified so it's broadly recognizable as a human form but its meaning of "males go in this room to pee" is purely cultural. We could easily say all language, even if you factor in onomatopoeia and bow-wow theory of language development, still it's all completely cultural where there's an aspect of pictures that isn't.

SMcC: The basic structure of language is open to debate as to how much we're hard wired to recognize grammar. That's a whole other kettle of fish but yes, it's culturally arranged, culturally originated set of signs and symbols.

GS: There's a whole different group of people who argue with Noam Chomsky other than the political ones.

SMcC: *[laughs]* **Yes. Let him take the heat on that one.**

GS: My next question, if you'd have fully defended that right hand triangle was. . .

SMcC: No. It's messy. I'm standing on the base and looking up. I'm standing somewhere in the middle there, in fact, and looking up. It gets a little cloudier at the top and it gets a little cloudier at the right but this is the shape of the land

as I've been able to map it so far.

GS: Let's assume that the unified theory works out and we figure out where the Dark Matter is. . .

SMcC: *[laughs]* **Yes. That's sort of what I'm waiting for.**

GS: Are you imagining this as a triangle with a strong frontier running though it or as a pyramid. That is, does it become three dimensional in your mind?

SMcC: It starts to look like it. To carry the visual analogy to its extreme end, having it be a pyramid gives me an out, doesn't it? If you're turning a corner for language then you've obviously introduced another axis—you know, x, y, and z—but you can say "Yes. It's different. But it's different because we turned a corner." *[laughs]* **It helps, maybe, as a device to think of it that way.**

GS: Actually it could be two sorts of pyramids, that is, we could construct a pyramid by folding a sheet of paper or we could have a pyramid that's solid. While most of us see that as the same shape, topologists—a weird part of mathematics where they deal with surfaces and they can curve them all sorts of ways. . .the old joke is that a topologist is a person who can't tell a coffee cup from a donut. . . because in each case it's a surface with a single hole through it. . .

SMcC: *[laughs]* **That's great.**

GS: So from a topologist's standpoint there's an important distinction. I'm wondering if in your thought that distinction is there. That is, if this is made by a triangular piece of paper that is folded so it will stand up on its own and has surfaces viewable from different directions then it does what you were just describing. I was wondering if in the back of your mind it was solid, that is if we went directly back from the picture plane and directly back from the language plane if there would be something there that would be different from both.

SMcC: I don't currently have any reason to think that. It's a funny question. Needless to say, nobody has ever asked me that before. *[laughs]* **I think that, as with additive color, there are only so many vertices to a given subject. In the case of additive color there are three. Red, green, and blue will, for our visible spectrum. . . I suppose the answer to your question would be something like the**

acknowledgment of ultraviolet or infrared where we're not trained to see and aspect of it. For instance, time is not contemplated by the diagram. So obviously there are other things you can introduce. It's a tool for thinking, it's a filter that you could then go back and look at the world through this filter and see the world differently but there are, of course, many filters.

GS: Your comment about time is interesting. One of the things I think is interesting looking at different media is how they deal with time or how they seem to reside in time. It strikes me that except in very rare cases, films are in the present tense. . .

SMcC: Even if they're depicting something in the past.

GS: Even if they're depicting the past they take the viewers and put them in the past.

SMcC: So the past becomes present. Yeah.

GS: So they normally reside in the present tense.

SMcC: As we reside in the present tense.

GS: But photographs always seem to reside in the past tense. They always seem to be evidence that something has happened. They never give you the sensation that something is happening the way that a movie does.

SMcC: Until you have the sense of replay available in the work of somebody like Duane Michaels—if you use photographs sequentially there's that replay sense because I am experiencing this part of this work now, and that part of the work identifies to me as the present because I have that orientation to identify what I'm looking at now as the present, what's over here *[gestures left]* **as the past, what's over here** *[gestures right]* **as the future because that's my way of understanding narrative arts so it's the singularity of the photograph that renders it in the past because it doesn't require that kind of overlay of temporal understanding and if you don't introduce that it is de facto in the past tense because it is—it' factually in the past. It is a photograph of something that happened in the past. That's also true of film but because film requires us to leap into it and exercise a narrative suspension of disbelief—that this is something that is happening, not just light being projected on the wall—that's why we're back on the treadmill again—of time. We can only occupy one point in time at**

a time. The nice thing about comics is that you occupy more than on point in time at a time. It's different from prose. It's different from movies. It's different from any other medium I can think of where we're experiencing a simultaneity of time where we're looking at a collection of panels.

GS: It's interesting to me that comics has a lot in common with film—and I'm not thinking of them like little storyboards—but when we start to analyze any medium we have to resort to fiction. I loved you ax on form and content at the beginning of *Understanding Comics*. . .

SMcC: Pretty much the poster boy for all those who would separate such things. It's like separating a neck from it's head. *[laughs]*

GS: The way we talk about a painting: We talk about color as if it were a separable item; we talk about shadow as if it were a separate item, we talk about these things to analyze them but they all happen together so there's no color without shadow, no shadow without tone, on and on like that. We do almost the opposite thing when we talk about music: We talk about how we like that song. Just as we never experience aspects of a painting separately, we never experience at all. . .

SMcC: It can be reduced to its component parts but people talk about it holistically.

GS: We experience it over time and then as we discussion we compress it into one thing. It's interesting that comics and film both have both those problems. They're sort of paintings over time so you both have to fictionalize the experienced whole as pieces to consider it and then you do that repeatedly and then you discuss all of those moments as if they had happened together—saying "What was that comic book like?" Film is the other medium I can think of. It's dodgier talking about various interactive things since they tend to be pieces of other media glued together.

SMcC: *[laughs]*

GS: As you know, I'm a graphic designer. Probably the most famous thing ever written about typography is Beatrice Warde's talk that turned into an essay called "The Crystal Goblet." The cartoon way of depicting things strikes me in a funny was as similar to her argument. She was basically advocating plain type that doesn't attract notice. . .

SMcC: That's transparent.

GS: Exactly. She used transparency as a metaphor by saying if I offer you a glass for wine I can tell whether you really like wine by which you choose. One is a simple goblet that is clear glass and barely there and the other is a jewel encrusted gold chalice. . .

SMcC: *[laughs]* **The love of the wine directs you to the clear. She's an animist. She wants the form to present the work in humble devotion. Present the content.**

GS: You self-identify as a formalist. . .

SMcC: I'm totally a formalist. In fact I'm a bit of a freak. Most people have a major and a minor. I'm a 100% formalist.

GS: But you make a large and articulate argument in the book for what you just identified, and I think accurately, for the animist point of view.

SMcC: Formalists can impersonate animists. *[laughs]* **But our passion is always going to be form. In fact, Art Spiegelman was impersonating an animist when he did Maus. There was a caption in the first draft of Maus in the shape of a railway ticket and he showed it to someone he knew named cat yronwode who was also an editor of mine. She told me this story. As she was reading it she said she liked the caption in the shape of a railway ticket and Spiegelman said "I'll take it out." She said "Why? I just said I liked it" and he said "Yes. But you stopped reading." Even though he's done many comics before that where the whole point was to stop your reading every ten seconds to think about the form, this was a case where he wanted you to think about nothing but the story he was telling. So he was a formalist impersonating an animist. You never have animists impersonating formalists but you have formalists impersonating animists.**

GS: In Maus he did something that's fairly sophisticated in any medium which is to use the medium against itself. Even though I told you I'm not a comics person—in fact, my entire collection of comic books is right here, all three of them. . .

SMcC: *[laughs]* **Cool. What are those?**

GS: A Swedish Superman. *Stålmannen.* Now we have the problem if this gets

printed as part of the interview. We have to use the little "a" that looks like the Angels Stadium logo, the Swedish "oh." And two issues of *Honky Tonk Sue, the Queen of Country Swing.*

SMcC: *[laughs]* **I've never seen these.**

GS: I just dug these out the other day. I hadn't seen them in years. He did comics for a newspaper in Arizona. In a way they're the late '70s, early '80s version of what Crumb and some of the underground comics were in the late sixties. Odd social criticism in the form of a comic book.

SMcC: *[looks at the comic books]* **Oh. Boze Bell.**

GS: Spiegelman used the assumptions about the form to twist the way the story was told.

SMcC: In the end, ***Maus*** **was still very much the book of a formalist.** *[laughs]* **It's a very formally inventive and challenging book but for much of the narrative you don't think about anything but what the characters are saying and doing.**

GS: You get sucked into the narrative but the basic silliness of little animals being the cute lightweight thing all set in a death camp set up a series of ironies that were very interesting.

SMcC: And so did he, obviously, because he began to play with them after a while. Because he couldn't resist. It's his passion. He loves to play with the form and investigate the form. He has a scientific bent to him. That's why he's one of the formalist patron saints. But he's not all formalist because he's equally concerned with truth and honesty in the work. That's why you have things like the New Yorker covers which are in many ways very iconoclastic achievements.

GS: I was also thinking about your whole project. There's a place in *Understanding Comics* where you do an analysis of what sorts of juxtapositions people use. Just recently—and I'm, of course, blanking out on his name. I'll make myself look brilliant an articulate by looking it up and sticking it in later—who is a professor of literature but he's not reading or talking about authors or such. . . He's doing analysis of how many books and what sort were published at what time. That, of course, leaves people like Harold Bloom completely disgusted because they think

he's missed the very point. But it's also very revealing because people like Bloom tend to say that we used to be in the Garden but were cast out, that people used to read these important things and now we just watch TV. If you can go back and say who actually did read what and how many people did that props up or pulls the rug out from under a lot of assumptions about the nature of literature and its effect on the culture as a whole.

SMcC: *[laughs]* **Heaven knows it was never the Garden of Eden. It's always been a brutal world when it comes to works of great beauty or subtlety.**

GS: It's interesting that you foreshadow the latest controversy in literary theory by ten years in a discussion of comics. You've been misquoted or, more accurately, misused. You said, at one point, comics is closure. . .

SMcC: In one sense. I said "In one sense, comics is closure." I have been so crucified for that ever since. Let me see if I can find the exact quote. . .

GS: I believe that the quote is "In one sense, comics is closure"

SMcC: Here it is. "Since our definition of comics hinges on the arrangement of elements—then in a very real sense comics is closure." There we have the logical quandary: If comics is closure is all closure comics. People make that flip. They assume that anything that requires closure is comics which, of course, is not what I meant. The substance of comics is made up of that cognitive activity. . . It's really a particular flavor of closure is what comics is.

GS: There's a whole school of where philosophy meets linguistics including semanticists like—I'm not sure if you're old enough to remember Sam Hayakawa—S.I. Hayakawa was a Senator from California after he became popular as the president of San Francisco State College who resisted student revolution. He was a semanticist and part of a group, one faction of which invented a language called E' [E Prime] which is English minus all forms of the verb to be. *[Scott laughs]* The claim is—and it's fairly valid—that any point where you use the verb "to be" you gloss over all sorts of things. If I said "Fred is a homosexual" what does that mean? It makes a claim that I said something and if we both know Fred we may seem to agree but if I said "Today is hot" or "That hill is high" I've said very different things. In one case I've made a statement about a temporary condition and in another I've said something that, at least within our life span, we can consider inherent.

There are so many different situations where we can say "x is y" and we mean such different things. . .

SMcC: I don't know why a person would stop there. If *[laughs]* you're trying to excise any aspect of language that's imprecise then your job is just started by taking out one verb.

GS: Absolutely but it's a great start. An illustration of that is making "x is y" into the equation "x = y" like when you said "Comics is closure," the number of people who said "Okay. Closure is comics."

I'm wondering how you regard closure. One aspect is that certain things that are called closure are effective because they're inviting complicity on the part of the reader or audience. When you set up a running gag or an obvious joke where everyone wants to say the punch line with you, you've made them perpetrators of that punch line. Do you think closure goes beyond that or is that the way you view it, as an invitation to complicity?

SMcC: An invitation to participation, certainly. Putting aside the slightly sinister *[laughs]* connotations of the word complicity. Sure. Participation. Personalization. A sense that one has something at stake. or that it involves personal activity on the part of the reader, the audience—all these things are very attractive. Again, looking at the practical side of comics and of closure, I'm thinking of what things have a rhetorical value for the cartoonist. That's certainly one of them, creating that sense of participation makes it a more pleasurable experience. It focuses attention and keeping the audience's attention on what they're reading is certainly one of the primary goals of any form of narrative arts or any rhetorical activity. This is one of the techniques that allows us to do that. It's one of the peculiar features of comics. As a formalist I'm interested in what comics has that's unique among the art forms.

GS: It's interesting that you mention rhetoric. As graphic designers look at academic models for where graphic design fits in the university, rhetoric is one of the fields that makes sense because it's about both the—I'll use the word perpetrator even though it's sinister, perhaps—the perpetrator and the audience both. It's about the techniques and the history, about looking at what's been done and about doing. It doesn't make the divisions of some fields. One of the reasons comics interest me—I tend to say to people that comics don't interest me but the reason your book interests me is the similarities with graphic design. They're both about image and

word—two very different techniques of narrative—and what happens when those narratives bump up against each other or play off each other. How can they support each other? How can they undermine each other? It makes it a very interesting form from that standpoint and a very natural form. You do that great thing in the book with the little kid showing his robot toy and saying "It does this" then showing. Where language bridges into example and back which is the way we communicate in general—and the way we deal with communication in general.

SMcC: There's a walk signal just out on this corner *[points]* **that the sign over the button says "Press button for" and then there's a picture of a little walking man.** *[laughs]* **It's Piclish.** *[laughs]*

GS: It's funny because that's what you're pressing the button for. You're not pressing the button to walk. You're not pressing the button. . . all the linguistic descriptions would be wrong. You're pressing the button. . .

SMcC: To get the little guy. *[laughs]* **That's where your journey begins, with the little guy.**

GS: Speaking of the journey beginning, since this book is *The Education of a Comics Artist* I suppose I should ask you about your attitudes on education. I know people have come to comics from all sorts of directions but if you were having to categorize—what's the mainly-good direction to come to comics from? What do you think of comics as a major at school? Would someone be better off in art or multimedia or graphic design or writing or something else or do you see this as the hopeful future of comics?

SMcC: I have a couple of answers to that. What you're likely to get out of formal art education like comics majors that we're beginning to see depends on what your passions and goals are. It comes back to the idea of the four tribes. If you have very classical ambitions then your primary job in that context is to acquire a skill set and to work on honing those skills—honing your craft until it meets the standards you've set and to learn about other standards you might not have even known about and how to achieve those. If your goals are those of an animist and you simply want to tell your story then your goal is to gain enough skill that it doesn't detract from your story but your ultimate goal is just to deliver that goal to the minds of your readers. If you're an iconoclast then formal education may not be for you. You might be able to learn some things that would help you

in your work but it is possible that it would not help and actually ruin you a little bit. And if you're a formalist then school is always a fun place for a formalist. No matter what kind of comics you want to make and you do go to school for it you still need to learn a wide variety of disciplines. A comics writer and artist—somebody who wants to write and draw comics—needs to be director, cinematographer, actor, set designers, costume designer, writer, camera man. . . all of these things. And comics has as broad of a base of applicable subject areas as anything so if you were to go to a major liberal arts college that has courses in all sorts of subjects then they can all help you. Take a course in Shakespeare; take a course in set building; take a course in film theory and you'll find that all of these things are ultimately applicable to what you're doing on the page so it's certainly a multidisciplinary art. That may be true of a lot of different arts. It's just that they're seldom approached that way. *[laughs]* **If you're going to be a writer maybe you should just spend twenty-five years on the road taking odd jobs and living in a variety of places.** *[laughs]* **If you want to be a good one.**

GS: Part of what you're arguing for is a broad, liberal education and knowing about all sorts of aspects of the world but if you're identifying a present major that does those things it sounds like film school with some drawing classes might be what you're talking about.

SMcC: There is an advantage to a very focused curriculum—let's say a school specifically designed to educate you about making comics—and that is that the student body will be composed of other people who have similar goals and that can be very exciting. The competition between students can be exciting. The camaraderies, the rivalries, the atmosphere of having dozens or even hundreds of kids who have the same notion in their heads. I'm sure that can be an extremely positive experience. I don't think I particularly enriched when I went to college and I had basketball players on my floor in the dorm. I don't know that it taught me anything that I hung out with basketball players. Except that I was extremely short. *[laughs]* **It would have been interesting if I had had nothing but comics artists around but then my experience would have been stunted in other respects.**

GS: Or if you'd hung out with jockeys you could have been extremely big. When you got out of school you became an inker for DC Comics, is that right?

SMcC: No. I never inked. I worked in the DC Comics production department. It was just a job in comics. That's all it was. I would sit all day long and white out

the places where panel boarders went over the line, made lettering corrections, and just sat there popping Tic Tacs in my mouth, listening to music, and happily puttering away and then I would go home and work on my comics. A year and a half in I created a proposal for my first comic and I was gone. It served a very important purpose for me. Even though it required very little creativity it completely demystified the process of making comics because I was being handed the original art of all of these artists who I respected. By the time I'd been there a year there was no mystique anymore, no magic formula for creating a page. I understood that you cut a piece of Bristol board, you picked up your pen, and you started drawing. *[laughs]* **That was enormously helpful. I wasn't scared.**

GS: You weren't scared but demystified could be a good thing or a bad thing. . . Did it remove the romance for you?

SMcC: It didn't remove the romance for the medium but it removed the romance of the craft and the industry. These were human beings and clearly this was the work of mortals. *[laughs]*

GS: I don't know much about the current industry and what you see as the future industry. I'm thinking of the industry as inferred by reading *Reinventing Comics*, if that opportunity has gone away or is going away. . .

SMcC: Well production is very different, obviously. That side of print comics is evolving fast.

GS: I was curious how someone gets a start these days. Do they just make comics and put them out there or. . . ?

SMcC: Yes. You just make comics and put them out there. I think that's the long and the short of it. No matter who you are, no matter what ambitions you may have, it always helps to have created something on your own, to not wait for permission, to simply make something. Print it. Put it out. Sell it. I think that's enormously valuable. I think you'll be a better cartoonist and I know that the editors that have any brains at the large comic book companies very much respect somebody who is willing to go it alone. Providing the work is good. If the work isn't good I can't help you. There's nothing I can suggest to help a mediocre artist find work in an industry that's increasingly populated by very talented artists. We have more talent in comics today then we had for many years. When

I broke into comics in the mid '80s I honestly believe that there was less raw talent *[tape runs out and waiter shows up to pick up the bill]*

GS: I probably should let you get going but first back to what we were talking about with playing the medium against itself: On your blog you mentioned being told about someone saying that your book was one of the few books that could never be made into a movie.

SMcC: *[laughs]* **I wasn't there for that conversation but it sounds like an interesting one.**

GS: One of the great things about *Understanding Comics* is that it's completely self-referential—it's an comic book about comics. There's a painfully long list of movies that were about movies.

SMcC: In the sense of something like *The Player* or something about how movies work. I haven't seen that yet. I'd love to see that.

GS: There have been movies about film editing techniques and such. Especially in the early '70s there were a ton of movie films: *Alex in Wonderland, Last Movie*. . . about the struggle of a filmmaker but there also have been a few movies about how to make movies. I think it could be effective to make a comic book about how to make movies. In some ways *Understanding Comics* could be converted to *Understanding Cinema* fairly easily. It wouldn't have the advantage—but this is where the online stuff you've talked about could help—suddenly a QuickTime movie showing you something. . .

SMcC: It would help. The ideal format is moving image. Maybe multimedia presentation. But if you want to talk about film, clearly the best way is to have all the tools of film at your disposal then you can say "Notice what happens when this. . ." rather than "This is what happens. Trust me."

GS: It does strike me that a movie about comics—it would require significant translation but it's pretty plausible. It's back to those similarities of film and comics. I think either is potentially a great instructional medium. I suppose we have it in our heads that film is an instructional medium because we have films that range from the Army teaching you how to not get VD to them trying to teach you not to drive drunk and fast in high school. There's a tradition of instructional film so

there are all sorts of products that come with a video telling you how to enjoy your foam mattress or something. But we don't think of comics that way even though you point out in *Understanding Comics* that a lot of instructional materials are. . .

SMcC: They are de facto comics. Right. At least if you go with my particular definition. I've always thought that instructional and other nonfiction comics was a great untapped potential. But there was no popular application for them, no industry that could grow up around them. It's just catch as catch can, this particular piece of furniture you need to put together, you get it presented that way but there isn't a culture that could grow up around it. It's just like how there's no culture that grows up around instructional films, really. They're isolated. They don't have a fellowship around them. The one who creates something for Monsanto about—what does Monsanto do? Chemicals?—about mixing paints or something. There's no sense of camaraderie or collegiality between the one who's making that and someone making a film about keeping your child away from choking hazards where there is a collegiality among the narrative makers of films.

One of my favorite films is made by an industrial filmmaker. Herk Harvey. Out of Salt Lake City, I think it was. He did something called Carnival of Souls back in the '50s. It was an inspiration for the young Romero who went on to do The Night of the Living Dead. It was great. It was a horror film done by someone used to doing industrial films about how this marvelous new detergent will clean your floors. *[laughs]*

GS: That seems like amazing potential for being able to start out doing a industrial, how to film and have it turn into a horror film.

SMcC: What was really great is he used the same actors so the actors were these very wooden, expository, robotic people. It's an amazing film if you've never seen it. ***Carnival of Souls.*** **It came out in '50-something.**

GS: I've read references to it but I've never seen it. I found my copy from 1974—so it's over thirty years old—of Swedish Superman. *Stålmannen.* Someone brought it to me from Sweden when I was studying Swedish at UCLA. I was a bad language student. I am a bad language student in many ways. I'm good at some aspects but the discipline it takes to learn a language is something beyond me. When I got that I was sitting reading parts of it to a friend and someone who was later in a Swedish class with me—she was really good; she was the one who always got A grades in language classes—told me later that she thought I was a grad student or something

because I just so fluent with he whole thing. I was fluent with the whole thing because it was short, simple exposition with pictures that reinforced what it was so when I stumbled over a word I could infer from the picture what it was.

Maybe too much is made of learning styles these days. I've had students who approach me and say "I can't learn from a lecture because I'm a visual learner". . .

SMcC: Oh, no. Is that being appropriated as an excuse now? That's terrible. You see why I don't want to publish the four schools thing? *[laughs]* **I can't do that because I belong to this group.**

GS: Exactly. It gets used as an awful crutch. I'm sure that this is coming out from someone who is trying to do someone a favor by saying "You aren't stupid. It's just that you learn better this way and that's why you weren't learning this" and they interpret that as "I can only learn this way."

SMcC: That's tragic.

GS: The lesson in it for teachers is that if you can teach in multiple ways so that people who have greater talents at learning one way or another way can each have their selective advantages. . .

SMcC: That's the constructive lesson to take from that.

GS: In many ways comics do that. That's why I could seem like I wasn't a struggling bumpkin in Swedish was that the pictures helped me through it.

SMcC: In the mean time all of us reading the English version knew how to spell "invulnerable" at a very young age so it benefited us all.

GS: Do they still make Classic Comics?

SMcC: There have been occasional attempts to revive *Classic Comics* but they've never gotten a foothold again.

GS: I never read The Three Musketeers but I read the *Classic Comics* version.

SMcC: Do you know what Hamlet's last words were in the Classics Illustrated

version of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark?

GS: No.

SMcC: Arrggh!

GS: I like that. *[both laugh]* You can just imagine that finding its way into an essay of a student who's pretending he read the play. "And when Hamlet ended with 'Arrggh!'. . ."

SMcC: *[laughs]* **Oh, man. Teachers must have hated those things.**

GS: A lot of teachers hate *Cliff's Notes*. If they're used to avoid reading the assignment they're horrible but if they're used as a supplement they're useful. I guess if they are read as opposed to not reading anything, it must be better to be semiliterate than to be completely illiterate.

SMcC: The library culture's embracing of comics frequently comes down to "At least they're reading something." And we've accepted that as one step on the ladder of bringing comics out of the muck but we have a little way to go since we'd like to think that comics had intrinsic value other than an association with the higher form of reading prose.

GS: Both of your books are great pleas for comics to become. . .

SMcC: They're media advocacy.

GS: To become something. . . In some ways, implicit in your books is as great a criticism as the people who say "Oh. Comics. That's all trash for thirteen year olds who haven't quite come to terms with their hormones." *[Scott laughs]* That dismissal is "That's all it is and that's all it can be" where you seem to be saying that the real tragedy is that that's not all it can be. It can be so much more.

SMcC: In the end, when I make a statement like comics can be anything or comics can do anything, technically that may not be entirely true. There may be limitations to the medium. I thin my primary feeling is that I do not know of any of these limitations yet. We haven't yet pushed it far enough to find the edge of the world. There very well may be things that comics can't do but how would we

know? It's like thinking that the world ends in dragons and cliffs. How would I know if I've never gone farther than my front door? That's the situation we're in with comics.

GS: There's an impression that *Stålmannen* or his English version is the natural material for comics. It will be very interesting after people have tried and probably failed at stuffy, pretentious art stuff and a whole realm of different things so in retrospect we can look and say "Of course. This is the natural thing for this medium." Not that it would be the only thing for the medium but the thing the medium does particularly well.

SMcC: The manifest destiny argument. That it's comics' destiny to do that.

GS: And not necessarily its exclusive destiny but, say, the novel is a mature enough form that we can say "Here are some things that the novel is particularly good at and here are some things that rub against the form, sometimes successfully and sometimes unsuccessfully." We know that there are some things that television does very well because television has been around long enough that we've seen television attempting to be plays, attempting to be lectures, attempting to be various things and now there are some things that we can say that, while it's not all television can do, it's something television does very well.

SMcC: The problem that comes up is that it's true that over time a medium sorts out things that come to be associated as its strengths. Where we run into trouble is in the manifest destiny idea that this is the state that the medium is naturally going to arrive at. That will sometimes overlook tend to overlook a certain evolutionary serendipity because you can frequently go back to individual artists—individual filmmakers or individual cartoonists or individual novelists—who, if you took them out of the equation, the form might have evolved in vastly different ways. You can also go back to points at which an art form might have been said to be mature—where it seemed as if all history had been leading to this point—where in historical retrospect, say, twenty years later, looks fairly ridiculous. For example, the idea that motion pictures are naturally constituted such that they all should be musicals. *[laughs]* **There was a point in film history where it seemed as if the musical was the apex of all that was motion pictures—the spectacle, the ability to introduce elements of fantasy, the color, the motion, all of it seemed tailor made for musicals. Now that subgenre to motion pictures seems like a big, fat footnote. Now, of course, everyone will tell you that**

the natural place for motion pictures is in special effects blockbusters. *[laughs]*

That's where we are at this historical point. Comics was at the historical point where superheroes seemed to be our manifest destiny and attempts to counteract that, say in the '80s, would have seemed futile if it weren't for what was going on in Japan and Europe where the superhero had never gained a foothold at all. So I think there is that serendipity of mutation that occurs in a form and it's always good to step back a bit and question whether this was our destiny or whether this was just this strange cumulative set of dominoes that led us to this point.

GS: I'm a firm believer that you don't know you're there until you've been thoroughly lost several times. As a graphic designer if you haven't thought of a solution where you said "That was massively stupid. Why did I even deal with that?" then you probably haven't pushed the right solutions enough; you've settled for the convenient.

SMcC: Because wandering around allows you to triangulate the real solution.

GS: Exactly. It seems premature to say "Superheroes are the nature of comics" unless we've seen a whole lot of things where we can say "Someone has really explored this and it was a stupid dead end. This guy wasted his life." I think I insulted Mike Dooley, one of the people behind this book, when I said "I'm not a comics person" and making the obvious disparaging joke about who is. I guess he considered himself. . .

SMcC: *[laughs]* **A comics person.**

GS: Yes. A comics person. But in some ways I think I share your faith in the medium. It's an unfortunate irony that the closest thing to your instruction books—analytical instruction books is the phrase I'd use to describe these *[gesturing toward* Understanding Comics *and* Reinventing Comics*]*—the closest standard thing we call "graphic novels" and that we call these *[gesturing toward* Stålmannen *and* Honky Tonk Sue*]*. . .

SMcC: Yes. When it actually became a book we had to abandon the term. *[laughs]*

GS: I've noticed some academic programs have chosen to not call themselves comic book majors but. . .

SMcC: Sequential art.

GS: Yes. Sequential art majors.

SMcC: You realize that there's a precedent for that, don't you? Most media have a common name and a somewhat loftier, usually longer term for special events and institutions, and formal treatises. So we go to see a movie and then we check out the Oscars to see which motion pictures have been awarded a prize. We love watching movies but when we begin to make them we make film. Or we immerse ourselves in film theory. So comics is going down a similar route. We'll have our academies of sequential art and those that are part of the academies will go out in the real world and make comics.

GS: Although in some ways. . . It's the same problem. Graphic design started out as commercial art, then was advertising design, then graphic design, then communication design, then some of those programs changed their names back to graphic design. . .

SMcC: Graphic design and communication design both have the advantage of their being industry neutral. They're content neutral. They're fairly descriptive and fairly cold.

GS: Each has the implication. . . if we draw circles around them we end up with slightly different circles. "Sequential Art" draws different circles than I think Steve and Michael are drawing for the subject of this book. You could look at a bunch of related stuff and classify cartooning and much of related comics as being the center of things or you could classify Hieroglyphics and much of comics as. . .

SMcC: I'm always fast to distinguish that: Certain Egyptian wall paintings only *[laughs]* **not the hieroglyphics. You see where I make a point of saying "Not the hieroglyphics. Pictorial writing is different." That was bound to get lost in the shuffle. No. No. No.** *[laughs]*

GS: If we re-describe comics and say "What it's really about is the interaction of word and image over a sequence" then much of what we call graphic design is in and non-verbal comics is out. So as much as *Understanding Comics* is about how comics isn't cartooning, a whole lot of the book is about defending cartooning as being one of the most effective forms of communication.

SMcC: Yes. Comics is not cartooning but cartooning is interesting. Comics is not word and image but word and image is interesting. One of comics strengths is that it carries in its arsenal these disciplines, these forms of alchemy. But when it comes down to the definitive part—drawing a dried line around my subject area I found a bigger line, a much bigger polygon was drawn when you say "sequential art" because you do bring in those historical examples and you bring in other possible forms which were, at the time, just theory but have become very important like online comics. There were plenty of people at the time I wrote *Understanding Comics* who would have been only too happy to define comics as being paper and ink. That, for them, was important and I knew instinctively that it wasn't important to me and that it wasn't definitive to me and that reaped dividends in the last ten years as comics has become much less about paper and ink.

GS: It will be interesting if other people do other books how they'll center things or as there's an increase in academic programs or university-based education how they'll redefine the center.

SMcC: One thing we're beginning to see is sequential art majors that take the ambiguity of the term and use it to their advantage by having an animation department and a comics department next to each other. And that's the common denominator that they're both dealing with sequential art. I think that's really interesting because I accepted in my book that the term "sequential art" could describe animation. That's why I used the more—I began to pull it apart into the much more specific definition—but Savannah College of Art and Design which has a comics major has an animation major standing right beside it. I thought that was interesting. So that's where the center lies for them—*[laughs]* in the department.

GS: It will be interesting to see if other centers emerge.

SMcC: Word and image is still alive and kicking. You'll still find people like Bob Harvey, who writes about comics also, feel that that is the essential character of comics. That's what we're talking about when we use the word comics.

GS: A friend of mine—I guess he'd refer to himself as an information architect—does web development. He was addressing the overlapping skill sets. Jobs get defined by what people can do almost as much as by specific tasks. He described it

as "The prayer to Saint Venn. 'Please make me the center of the diagram.'"

SMcC: *[laughs]* **I like that. That's a great metaphor.**

GS: I can see that happening in comics. If we start out with the comic book as being something and saying "What is this exemplary of?" or "What is this a part of?" that people could come to radically different conclusions.

You mentioned a couple of different people. Who is writing? If someone came to you and said "I love your books but there are only a couple of them. What do I read next?" what's the answer?

SMcC: There are not a lot of books that are along these lines, not yet. R.C. Harvey has written *The Medium of Comics*. He follows a more traditional track. More history. Maybe more centered on comic strips and traditional cartooning and the relationship between the two. There are no white picket fences between the single panel cartoonists and the comic strip people as there are in my weird little universe. Will Eisner is certainly a model for what I do and his Comics and Sequential Art is an important book. *Graphic Storytelling* is his follow-up. Will's work has a little more of an eye toward those who plan to make comics professionally so maybe it's more traditional in that respect. And then there a lot of people just writing about comics generally—one fellow named Neal Cohn, he's beginning to run with some of the semiotic potential in my first book and he's been suggesting a much more complex interpretation that draws a bit on things like Chomsky's noun phrase/verb phrase ideas *[laughs]* **which I thought was all pretty interesting. But it's all pretty new. It took a while. People just sort of patted me on the back in '93 and it took about five years until everyone woke up and said "Wait a minute; why are we just accepting this?"** *[laughs]* **and started to dig in and get the debate going. In other words, it's all pretty recent still.**

GS: I guess it was 1996 when I stated assigning it as a text book in classes. Students divided between those who said "A comic book for a text book! Cool" and those who were horrified—"You're making me read a comic book?"

SMcC: *[laughs]* **That's great. I love it when people are forced to read my book.** *[laughs]*

GS: I hope a lot more people will be forced to read your book and I hope your dream of people writing the competitive books comes true, too. There's a lot of

interesting material that you've taken a good bite out of.

SMcC: Thank you.

GS: I should have said this at the beginning of the tape: This is January 28, 2004. Gunnar Swanson talking with Scott McCloud. *[click]*

A small part of this conversation was featured in *The Education of a Comics Artist* Steven Heller and Michael Dooley, editors.