To Switch Back (and Forth): Early Cases of Alternation in Comics and Cinema

It has long been accepted that the historical emergence of comic books happened around 1900 – along with the emergence of mass media. This point of view could be challenged, for it is based on a retrospective determinism, or a teleological approach to the history of comics. In fact, this so-called historical emergence is associated with the success of only ten or so famous American strips such as Richard Felton Outcault’s Yellow Kid (first appearance in the newspaper in 1895) and Buster Brown (first appearance in the newspaper in 1902). As we know, in other forms aside from newspaper strips, comic book history had started long before the turn of the century (one only has to think about the work of Rodolph Töpffer). At the same time, some aspects of the medium, most particularly those relating to narrative or spatial practices, were yet to be institutionalized. And even if comics came to be recognized as an art (the 9th), no norms came to regulate its form as it was the case with cinema. For instance, while the frame’s width-to-height relationship has been standardized throughout the industry during the evolution of film – almost squared (an aspect ratio of 1.33:1), then rectangular (1.66:1, 1.85:1, and 2.35:1) –, no such standardization occurred with the format of the page in comics. The same could be said for the size of the panel, which is one of the most expressive strengths of the medium. Comics vary both in format and layout, and in type and frequency of publication (newspapers, illustrated magazines and albums around 1900). Yet, these variable elements are more than crucial for the understanding and the pleasure of reading comics.

In “The Importance of Being ‘Published’: A Comparative Study of Different Comics Formats,” Pascal Lefèvre highlights that “[o]nly understand the huge variety of comics, one must not only take the authors’ creativity into account, but also the way in which these comics are published. The publication format may seem to be independent of its method of creation, but nothing could be further from the truth.”

Having to tell a story in only a few pictures – the strip or the “grid” – or through many pages – the album – obviously has an impact on the way the actions are drawn. In the words of French historian Henri-Jean Martin, the layout (la mise en page) is the main characteristic of the bookish message (“la spécificité du message livresque”). The layout plays a sig-
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significant role in conveying meaning. While this holds true for traditional books, it is even more important with illustrated magazines and newspapers where comics were usually published. Especially when one is, as we are in this article, interested in studying the configurations of alternation and the consequent act of reading in early comics and cinema.

Such considerations are due to the fact that the mechanism of comics rests on a dynamic reading of picture(s). This holds true especially when actions are divided because in comics a division in action leads to an alternating gaze. This is the case both with an artificial partition — when two actions occur in the same space as on a theatrical stage — and with a genuine one — when two events take place in two different locations. Comics and cinema share the need to represent the actions in a framed and sequential manner, which in turn leads to new perceptive and narrative practices. Thus, it is appropriate to use a very specific term that was first used in the 1910s to describe filmmaker David W. Griffith's technique of inter-cutting between two scenes:

The Redman and the Child was apparently Griffith's Opus 3, and The Fatal Hour (August 18, 1908) appears to have been the first of his films to be edited into "alternate scenes" at the climax, inter-cutting between the progress of the rescuer and the dangers of the to-be-rescued. This technique, also called the switch back or cut-back (because the action cuts back and forth between simultaneous happenings)[1] should not be confused with the flash-back, in which from one point in time there is visual recall of the past. Those who wrote about Griffith and film-making slightly later considered the development of the switch-back to be his foremost contribution.5

We would say that the gaze has to switch-back (and forth) between various elements. In comics, the reader has to address not only the sequential continuity between the panels, but also the spatial montage of those panels. The page, or the plate, is in fact the privileged form/format of expression of the French illustrated magazines, such as La Caricature, Le Petit français illustré, L'American illustré, Fillette. Rather than presenting pictures in a linear order with a complex storyline that progresses through many pages (la bande dessinée in French), French turn-of-the-century comics shows co-existing frames in a tabular configuration and a coherent space that can be taken in at a single glance (la planche dessinée we would say in French).

We want to illustrate how those spatial limits of the page lead to temporal constraints, which explains the relatively elliptic or condensed characteristics of a large number of playlets revolving around short gaps in French illustrated magazines. As a narrative device, these short stories are better adapted to the page format seeing as they are perfectly suited to a quick reading. This principle also prevails in the early practices of cinema where the animated views were only staging one action. In order to shed new light on the cinematic notion of alternation, we wish to emphasize the graphic and narrative potentialities of the various practices of alternation, and also to insist on the act of reading, which is necessary to understand a drawn playlet unfolding in one page. Insofar as, with exceptions like Abel Gance’s experiments with Polyvision, the only time cinema has seen a significant change in its format was in the 1950s with the introduction of the widescreen, it is revealing to examine the comments of critics and spectators alike regarding the introduction of this technique, and to underline the questions raised later by the split-screen. We do not wish to make an anachronistic association as much as we wish to use this comparative study to grasp the obvious relationships between early comics and cinema. For example, the fact that Joseph Marie Lo Duca thinks that “widescreen should not be considered as an innovation intended to drastically change the rules of the cinema layout" might not be that relevant in itself. Things get more interesting when the critic insists on the very fact that the size of the screen can considerably affect the spectator’s perception. For him, in addition to the switch-back and forth between the words and the pictures in front of an original version with subtitles, the widescreen is introducing a “dispersion of attention at the two extremities of the frame.” Since the spectators need (more) time to read the picture, the simultaneous
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presence of various elements on the screen is therefore of consequence to the ways the directors stage their actions and edit their films – by slowing down the rhythm for instance. The same observation can be made regarding the split-screen. If it is significant to notice that such a device was in the Griffith’s era “essentially graphic embellishments,”8 and that Abel Gance used his aforementioned Polyvision “less as an extension of the visual field than to multiply, in the space, the effects of montage,”9 it is as relevant to ask what the split-screen implies. Following Jean-Baptiste Thoret: “What happens to time representation when the simultaneity of the shots replaces their succession? What type of connections are the two halves of the frame supporting? What remains of the offscreen space? Is it increased, abolished or simply transformed?”10

A machine that turns space into simultaneity

Given that we are relying on a previous article (published in French),11 in order to expand our thoughts, to clarify some intentions, to exhibit other noteworthy artifacts and to polish up some analysis, it is necessary to go back over the main points of our theoretical basis. Although we are comparing comics and cinematic practices, we do not, by any means, aim to assimilate the two institutions, nor do we aim to consider one dependently of the other. It is rather the opposite that interests us. Comics and cinema are indeed two distinct cultural institutions. Our article supports one of the arguments put forth by the French theorist Francis Lacassin:

Anteriority does not necessarily entail influence. Comics and cinema independently drew the elements of their language from the same heritage that was developed, over the centuries, by the fine arts. The former was ahead of the latter thanks to the fact that the narration in pictures, printed and conceived on paper, had undergone its genesis long before animated views burst onto the scene.12

The link between comics and cinema is so obvious and thus so difficult to ignore. The manipulation of pictures in both the film and the strip is very similar. It is, in both cases, impossible to consider time and space separately, this is why we are greatly interested in the formal aspect of the alternation or, to put it differently, to the formal tabular alternation.13 The analysis of comic “strips” or “grids” allows us to take a critical look at filmic configurations of alternation. While making the spatial aspect of alternation explicit, the work of the cartoonists of French illustrated magazines emphasizes that it is necessary not to allow this aspect to be overshadowed by the narrative and sequential alternation. Since we want to think about configurations implemented before classical techniques of film editing, it becomes relevant to call attention to the practice of putting in (mis en in French): putting in drawing (mise en dessin), in panel (mise en case), and in page (mise en page, i.e. layout)14 for comics, putting in scene (mise en scene), in frame (mise en cadre) and in line (mise en chaine) for cinema.

If the similarities between the 7th and the 9th art are, as Benoît Peeters and his colleagues’ theoreticians have noted, more superficial than one believes, it is first because of the practice of putting in frame. In classical movies, the framing is restrained to the space of the screen; it is fixed, and so to speak irreducible, while being inscribed in the material reality of the film. Its sole and only remarkable transformation came with the advent of the different shots – i.e. the apparent distance from camera to subject which is defined from long shot to close up. In some ways, the changes in scale make the screen behave, or act as a panel. Indeed, in early cinema, the centrifugal action15 in long shots made the screen to appear more like a page (or a tableau). As a result, the spectator had to scrutinize this space in a way that allowed her to grasp what was going on. Spatio-temporal analysis has been systematized by the classical montage, making it an important narrative tool. But while the
framing of a scene (or putting in frame) in film (long, medium and close shots for instance) remains entirely determined by the screen format (standard or widescreen), the putting in panel of the comics is, as Peeters says, variable and elastic: “Outside of the general format of the page – traditionally fixed by the publisher –, the only requirement is to divide up the plate in a certain number of segments in order to separate the actions that follow each other in the narrative. The possibilities of intervention on the picture size, rare enough to the movies, are here nearly infinite.”

The division of the page, whose format is different in nature in albums and in illustrated magazines and newspapers, introduces a second fundamental distinction of any comparative analysis of comics and films. Alternation of pictures is usually described as a process which allows the expression of simultaneity between several lines of action. In comics, such a definition is in itself redundant, even pleonastic. The nature of the comics entails a coexistence of panels in a shared space. One can understand the page like a macro-unit and the panels like micro-units. As such, the reading of a comic page implies from the outset the notion of simultaneity. As Peeters explains:

Cinema might be described as immediately narrative: in a movie, every single shot is – even without considering its content – unexpected: one could never foresee it. […] On the other hand, the narrative is less obvious in comics: each double-page [in the album] can be taken in at a glance, before being deciphered panel after panel. An unanticipated effect could be seen before being read: one could have seen this picture before having read it.\(^{17}\)

Peeters considers the page like a “machine that turns space into succession: because of the reading direction in the West, the right panel is considered to come after the one on the left.”\(^{18}\) From this point of view, alternation rests as much on a global or synchronic vision (tabular) as it does on a linear or diachronic way of reading (sequential). The reading path allows the reader to consider simultaneously the overall compartmentalization of the page and the sequential narration unfolding through the panels. Therefore, when one considers the first part of the aforementioned path, one should not forget that the page will also and always remain a “machine that turns space into simultaneity.” This is, as we have underlined it, one of the specificities of comics.

The switch-back and forth inside a single-scene

Despite the Western tradition of reading from left to right, the putting in panel (mise en case) and in page (mise en page, i.e. layout) in comics involves an alternating gaze. In various cases, the reader has to successively consider various points of the same page. To refer to Lo Duca’s previously quoted comment about the original version with subtitles, the reader has, for instance, to switch-back and forth between the words and the pictures in comics. This operation describes what Harry Morgan has called in *Principes des littératures dessinées* a “relay” that is a “transition from the text to the drawing or from the drawing to the text in the transmission of the meaning (as in the race of the same name).”\(^{19}\)

However, it is once more relevant to take into account the advent of widescreen in cinema when defining the type of reading we are talking about. Of course, we do not intend to imply that widescreen is dependent on comics or *vice versa* – rather we wish to compare the two. As John Belton explains in his seminal study *Widescreen Cinema*, Cinemascope was more than a technological innovation. Belton quotes several contemporary accounts that clearly show how widescreen was offering an entirely new category of spectatorship – that is, in fact, a greater sense of participation, the possibility to enter in the screen instead of watching it.\(^{20}\) James Spellerberg also points out that advertisements emphasized the fact that “due to the immensity of the screen,
few entire scenes can be taken in at a glance, enabling the spectator to view [...] as one would watch a play
where actors are working from opposite ends of the stage.”21

Some testimonies underscore as well the changes entailed by widescreen in the putting in scene (mise-en-scène),
in frame (mise en cadre) and in line (mise en chaîne). For instance, André Bazin has claimed: “Better than the
depth of field, [Cinemascope] destroys once and for all montage as the main element of the cinematographic
discourse. The montage, in which one has wrongfully seen the essence of cinema, is indeed due to the exiguity of
the classical picture which had condemned the director to the “segmentation” of reality.”22

The planarity, or the two-dimensional aspect of the picture (panel or screen)23 involves an alternating gaze, a
reading of the picture in its width. Following Bazin’s quote, it is fascinating to discover how the gag of the sprinkler
sprinkled (L’arrosoeur arrosé) has been staged, how it is read, and then to compare the early version drawn
by the well-known French cartoonist Christophe, to the Lumière’s Brothers’ cinematographic adaptation, as
well as to some variations on the same old theme in French illustrated magazines. The gag is built on a clear-
cut situation where two actors play their part in a single-scene artificially divided by the opposite direction of
their gaze – one doesn’t see the other. The classical situation stems from the switching-back and forth between
two actions echoing each other repeatedly:

A. An innocent gardener and his hose.
B. A mischievous boy behind him cutting off the water.
A. The gardener puzzled by the unusual fact that the water suddenly stopped.
B. The mischievous boy letting the water flow again.
A. The gardener being sprinkled in the face.
B. The mischievous boy laughing.

In Christophe’s version, “Histoire sans paroles/Un arroseur public,”24 the action takes place on a public street
and is presented in six squared panels forming a perfect grid. Because of the squared format of the panel and
of the exiguity of the frame, Christophe splits the action between the foreground and the background.
Considering the two-dimensional plane of the picture, the action is therefore centered (figs. 1-2). This will not
be the case with the Lumière’s film (figs. 3-4).

With a more rectangular format, and with a frontal point of view, the cinematographers take advantage of the
two extremities of the frame. In order to accentuate the fact that the gardener doesn’t see or feel the boy
behind his back, they have separated them as much as possible. There is no alternation per se. But to under-
stand the ins and outs of the situation, the viewer has to switch-back and forth between the two. Such use of
the width of the image is even more exploited in the illustrated magazines where, this time, the flexibility of
the format will enable the creation of real horizontal oblong panels like the ones found in “Le Trempeur trempé”
by Ymer (fig. 5) or “Un bon tour” by Pierre Falké (fig. 6).25

As we know, although we have four different pictures in each case, those pictures represent a short event
unfolding before the same landscape, what we could call a single-scene. To refer to Bazin, the horizontal oblong
format of the panels keeps the cartoonist from having to divide up reality. They don’t have to cut the action into
multiple shots, that is, to rely on sequential or temporal montage. It is still possible to make use of another type
of montage, namely the spatial montage or the formal tabular alternation we have introduced earlier. Most of
the time, as on a theatrical stage, this montage simply operates by the location of the characters in the scene.
This means that whether they are alone or together, or if they are located at the far ends of the frame, leaving
the middle of the picture empty, the spectator has to follow their movements around scene. On the page, they
stay on the same side and create a tabular pattern. Considering those positions (A on the left and B on the
right), the following of the sequential action leads to an “A-B-A-B” combination. What’s more, in the Western tradition, the comic apparatus makes one reads from left to right and from the top to the bottom, making the gaze alternate on the page. Then, in all likelihood, the more complex staging of the gag in “Le Trempeur trémé” calls for an alternation in the picture itself. The last one ends with the little girl on the left laughing at the boy. As her finger points at the boy, the reader switches back to the gardener laughing on the right. To really grasp all the effects of the situation, one has to sweep over the pictures more than once.

What we call formal tabular alternation is a practice that highlights the real potentialities of the medium, which allows the articulation of elements according to visual conventions that are specific to comics. These conventions involve a process of compartmentalization – that is, precisely, spatial montage – relying both on the capacity of every panel to produce sequential and linear links between them, and on the alternating gaze that allows the reader to regard the overall page as a significant unit. The above examples of the sprinkler sprinkled illustrate how comics can rely on alternation while respecting the units of space, time and action. Moreover, these playlets have something in common: they all take place in what we call a single-scene. This makes formal tabular alternation even more specific, since, in its basic and most common acceptance – that is, in film –, the practice of alternation refers to repeated changes between two distinct locations in order to express the idea of simultaneity. This spatial relationship can then establish that the two locations are close (adjacent spaces) or far from each other (disjoint spaces). The latter is the one we especially want to focus on in the present study.

From this viewpoint, rather than looking at alternation in a single-space, we will now focus on the switch-back and forth in what we will call a split-scene.

The switch-back and forth inside a split-scene

The figure we are drawing attention to is often used in comics as well as in films. In order to show two actions occurring in nearby spaces, cartoonists resorted to a split panel showing the two simultaneous actions. While we would normally use the expression alternating scenes to refer to such articulation, it seems inappropriate to bring into play the notion of multiple scenes since the event takes place in just one location. In fact, it becomes more apposite to talk about split-scene alternation. This is obviously not that different from the technique of split-screen. Nevertheless, the putting in panel (mise en scène) remains different than the optical putting in frame (mise en cadre) of two pictures that could not otherwise be seen close to each other. In a single-scene, a location is literally split in two within one panel or one frame. This device is brilliantly displayed by cartoonists who divide their panels by using diegetic and natural elements dividing a space in two. The common visual separation, namely the gutter, is replaced by, or depicted as walls (or floors)\(^\text{27}\). This configuration, obviously very much appreciated in turn-of-the-century comics, rests on a double idea: proximity and division.

This technique has allowed the cartoonist to graphically express hostility between neighbours. One example is “The Philosopher’s Revenge” by George du Maurier (fig. 7).\(^\text{28}\) It shows a philosopher (A) who, driven mad by the lady pianist living next door (B), uses a hurdy-gurdy to trick her neighbour into believing that her piano is possessed in order to make her flee. The compartmentalization and the overall structure of the vertical strips operate through a repetitive composition underlining this hostility. The vertical gutters are dividing the same diegetic space. But unlike the usual gutters, these partitions are not expressing temporal disjunctions. The frame and space surrounding the panels somewhat negate the partition effect and the entire panel is paradoxically read as if these two spaces were actually the same. In other words, the gutter allows simultaneous events and an alternation between the two neighbors. Quite few \textit{histories sans parole} display a rigid compartmentalization; “Entre voisins”\(^\text{29}\) would be an excellent example. Since we already analyzed it in our previous essay.\(^\text{30}\)
we will refer here to yet another representative case, “Musique et littérature,” by famous Émile Cohl (fig. 8). In the left part of each panel, we see a musician practicing his flute (A). In the right part, we see his exasperated neighbour trying to write in silence. Since the musician does not stop to play as the neighbour is knocking on the wall, the writer leaves the frame in the fifth panel returning shortly with a helicon (B). The instrument's intensity disturbs the flutist and, finally, destroys the wall between the two neighbours. If it is possible to view the respective spaces of the neighbours as two distinct panels, they do depict in reality just one location. What could be seen as a gutter in the middle of the panel is in fact a natural partition, i.e. a thick black wall dividing two neighboring flats. The spatial articulation is expressing simultaneous actions.

This kind of compartmentalization and structure, as seen in “Musique et littérature,” brings us back to the notions of succession and linearity, which introduce alternation. As a reader, you need to go from left to right, alternating between the two spaces in order to grasp the nature of the quarrel. While the storyline deals with an altercation between the two characters, alike “Entre voisins,” the visual structure of the grid itself also echoes a sort of discord in its layout and compartmentalization; the visual division created by the use of gutters (both real and implied) gives the feel of spatial proximity and discord. The grid of the page creates a sort of mise en abyme by depicting the conflict between the neighbours through the tabular configuration of the plate, while reading the whole page, the reader sees an alternation between two adjoining spaces (spatial conflict) and learns about the dispute. Like Jean-Baptiste Thoret has said about split-screen in the quote we referred to earlier, the offscreen space is here transformed. The repetitive and accumulative configuration necessarily means an evolution between each panel: the writer works, the writer protests, the writer goes off his room, the writer, returns with an instrument, the writer plays the instrument. While one reads the space A, something new is played in the space B. If such a playlet were presented in film using “alternating scenes,” one of the spaces would not be visible while the other is being shown. The overall structure and layout involves a series of switchbacks in the same space, with no intervening elements but a gutter that expresses time jump cuts. Another example of this fascinating use of split-scene is given in “Portait du propriétaire ou, trois termes en retard” by Caran d’Ache (fig. 9). Representing an even shorter break of time between each frame, the cartoonist fully exploits the potential of such a division of the diegetic space. Here, a stereotypical artist gets out of trouble by painting a portrait of his landlord who has come to collect rent. Separated by a door, the space of the panel is divided on the right between the landlord behind the door (B), and on the left, the artist in his room (A), who is alternately observing the gentleman through the keyhole and painting like lighting. The visual division contributes to the humour of the playlet since the landlord is oblivious to the flurry of action within the apartment, and since both of the characters are acting independently of one another. It is also more than interesting to note that the illustrations are reminiscent of traditional picture by picture animation in terms of the movements and the continuous flow between each frame, acting almost like a flip book.

From stage to screen

The division of space and the split-scene are not just the product of comics or cinema. In fact, the same technique can be seen in theatre and vaudeville, even if directors were reluctant to divide the stage up until the mid-1800s. The concept of putting in frame (mise en cadre) is perhaps less fundamental in theatre but, according to Percy Fitzgerald in The World Behind the Scene (1881), the first attempts to divide the stage in several parts go back to the 1830s with plays such as Jonathan Bradford, or the Murder at the Roadside Inn, where “the interiors of four rooms were placed simultaneously upon the stage at one time.” The author of Stage to Screen, Nicholas Vardac goes even further: for him, this practice was used by several producers who.
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Recognizing the growing taste for realism, yet not wishing to sacrifice the scenic speed necessary to the play nor its pictorial variety, used box settings of dual or even triple nature. Discarded and clumsy conventional scene changes were thus eliminated, and cross-cutting between parallel lines of action could be managed without scene waits. The device of the dual box set was an old one. Early in the century the same romantic tendencies had been given this type of realistic treatment.  

As a device used to express and to show overlapping or simultaneous actions, the multiple-room set is already well established into the turn-of-the-century public’s sphere. The theatrical device that allowed for set changes without intermissions — what Varda calls “without scene waits” — will be translated in cinema by a “managing without cuts.” Recalling the relationship between Cinemascope and theatre, we can note that wide frame allows for the exploitation of all the space of a given scene without cuts. The widescreen will for instance be an alternative to the traditional, yet conventional shot/reverse-shot editing. David Bordwell recalls in his book On the History of Film Style:  

Cinemascope, Elia Kazan remarked, called for a more “relaxed” arrangement of figures — “more like a stage” — more “across.” “The greatest kick I get,” Darryl F. Zanuck confessed in a memo, “is when one person talks across the room to another person and when both of them are in the scene [shot] and near enough to been seen without getting a bead close-up.” Many early Cinemascope films subscribe to this “clothes-line” staging principle.  

In this staging principle, it is the alternating gaze between the figures that will make up for the alternating montage. The division of space and the simultaneous actions require the spectator to switch back and forth between several parts of the stage. Thus we can see that the practice of partition, and consequently the idea of split-scene, arose through theatre and comics, which explains, in some ways, the emergence of this practice in cinema. The compartmentalization of the stage is, as Brewster and Jacobs have stressed, frequently used in cinema up until 1910 to represent simultaneous actions in distinct spaces. To illustrate this, the authors use the example of films put out by the company Vitagraph, such as Foul Play (1907), Father’s Quiet Sunday (1907), and Circumstantial Evidence (1908), where the mise-en-scene depends on a wall dividing the screen in two. The dramatic potential introduced by the wall is significant; the characters can now put their ear against the wall to listen to the sounds on the other side of the wall, as they can peak through a keyhole to see what’s on the other side. A film like Les Locataires d’à côté, directed by the former cartoonist Émile Cohl (1909) is indeed noticeable for such staging and framing construction (figs. 10-13). The space in the frame is divided between two rooms and two actions. In the left part of the screen, a young loving couple are kissing and talking (A), and in the right part of the screen, in another room, an old and obviously tired couple are reading and knitting (B). As the old couple hears their neighbours having a nice, romantic dinner, they decide to drill a whole in the wall and spy on them. As the young couple discovers the voyeuristic action, the man uses “magical powers” to trick the inquisitive old folks. The left screen is then used to exhibit Emile Cohl’s animated drawings and stop-in-motion objects. Here again, the film does not consist of alternating scenes, but rather of an alternation in a split-scene, that is a single space (one floor apartment) split in two scenes (taking place in two rooms). The division of the screen allows the viewer to watch two separate actions occurring at the same time within different spaces.

L’Hôtel des voyageurs de commerce by Georges Méliès (1906) uses the same kind of split-scene, this time in a hotel where a room on the right side of the screen (A) is separated from stairs on the left side of the screen (B) by a wall and a door (fig. 14). A drunken patron is making a racket while getting ready for bed (right side of the screen), bothering some other guests in the Inn. Amused by the poor man, three guests in the corridor are watching him through the half-open door (left side of the screen). After getting undressed with some difficul-
ty and going to bed, the patron gets up again and goes in search of the toilets. While he is away, the three men decide to trick him by placing a dummy in his bed, hoping to scare him and have a good laugh. When the patron comes back, the three lads are already gone, waiting for him to go to bed. The patron then discovers what appears to be some sort of a ghost, screaming and running, while the three men have a laugh. This chassé-croisé depicting various comings and goings recalls at the narrative level the switch-back and forth taking place on the viewing level between the corridor with the three men joined by ladies (A) and the bedroom with the scared patron (B).

Whether we are talking about comics or films – or even about theater –, the problems of putting in panel or in frame (mise en case and mise en cadre in French), and putting in page or in line (mise en page and mise en chaîne) lead us to see the alternation in terms of juxtaposition and simultaneity. In other words, the question of the device or the medium remains secondary in regard to the practice of alternation. By taking into account the formal tabular configurations, and insisting specifically on the act of reading a picture (moving or not), our study shows all the graphic potentialities of the alternation practices. This makes us aware that before being an institutionalized figure relying on a temporal articulation of shots (the famous A-B-A-B), the seeds of parallel editing or cross-cutting montage were already present in the single-scene and the split-scene that we have identified in this article. In the end, alternation is all a matter of switching-back and forth.

Illustrations

3-4. L’Arroseur arrosé (L. Lumière, 1895).

Notes

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2 P. Lefèvre, “The Importance of Being ‘Published.’” A comparative Study of Different Comics
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1 The term “strip” is not used here the same way as French comic theorist Thierry Groensteen’s sense: “First appropriation of the space.” Th. Groensteen, *Système de la bande dessinée* (Paris: PUF, 1999), p. 50. We therefore prefer to employ the term “grid,” used by Fresnault-Deruelle in 1976. See P. Fresnault-Deruelle, “Du linéaire au tabulaire,” in *Communications*, no. 24 (1976), pp. 7-23. In our research, “grid” refers to a single-page layout which takes into account both the length of the story (i.e. “playlet”) and the size of the page in an illustrated magazine.


3 G. C. Pratt, *Spellbound in Darkness. A History of the Silent Film* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1973), p. 36 (italics added by the authors). Epes Winthrop Sargent has also defined the switch-back in these terms: “One or more returns to a previous action, either to avoid the showing of prohibited action to raise the effort through contrast or to quicken the action.” E.W. Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay* (New York: The Moving Picture World, 1913), p. 360.


11 “Tabular” is referring, in comic books theory, to the spatial arrangement of the panels in one page. We are talking about formal tabular alternation (layout) by opposition to a narrative tabular alternation (a layout which is, in the end, closer to a “putting in line,” as in Töpffer’s works for instance).

12 For instance, Thierry Groensteen prefers to notion of “layout” to this of “montage” when it comes to talk about comics. See Th. Groensteen, *Système de la bande dessinée* (Paris: PUF, 1999) pp. 118-119.


16 *Ibid.*, p. 86 (translation). And it is read from the top to the bottom, one should add. As we know, manga are read the other way around, that is from right to left, but still from top to bottom.


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The page or the screen remains two-dimensional. It is through conventional depth cues – such as relative size and linear perspective – that the reader/viewer sees the picture in three-dimension. Therefore, when the reader/viewer is seeing elements in the foreground or background at the extremities of a frame, he is in fact still looking at the picture from left or right.


The fact that these two were published the same day (but two years apart) is sheer coincidence. We also have to underline that we have cropped “Un bon tour” at the extremities of the panels.


It is for example the case in É. Cohl’s “Une douche soignée,” L’Illustré national (December 17th, 1899), “Les Aventures piquantes de Thimothee et Citrouillard,” La Patrie (March 4th, 1905), or even “L’Usurier superstitieux,” La Jeunesse illustrée (June 10th, 1906).

Out of the four vertical strips composing this playlet, we are showing here the first and the third ones.

“Entre voisins,” La Caricature (September 20th 1890).


The repetition of our analysis shows that we are dealing here with a trope. Since the beginning of our research, we have indeed found many examples showing that such cases are not unique.


N. Vardac, op. cit. The author refers to a play called Forbidden Fruit, produced for the first time in 1876 by Dion Bouicault. See also J. H. McDowell, “Historical Development of the Box Set,” Theatre Annual, no. 4 (1945), pp. 65-82.

Malgré la défense de sa maman, Guy, profitant de l'absence du jardinier, joue avec la lance d'arrosage.

Avisant sa soeur Simone, le méchant espèce l'inonde de son jet d'eau. Mais le jardinier qui revient, voulant mettre fin à cette douche...

... pose son pied sur le tuyau. Guy, surpris, examine la lance, voulant voir d'où provient cet arrêt. Mais, à ce moment...

le jardinier, qui veut lui donner une leçon, ôte son pied de dessus le tuyau. Guy, à son tour, se trouve douche d'importance. Avant de qu'il ne l'a pas vu!...
1. — Tiens on va monter sur le tuyau pour voir ce que ça fait.

2. — Ça coule déjà moins fort !

3. — Ça ne coule plus du tout !

4. — Cette fois-ci c'est un peu trop fort !!