

# Scott McCloud: 6 Steps

Chapter 7 of Understanding Comics  
by Scott McCloud reproduced for  
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CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SIX STEPS.

COMICS IS  
JUST *ONE* OF  
*MANY* FORMS OF  
SELF-EXPRESSION  
AND COMMUNICATION  
AVAILABLE  
TO US.

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SO FAR, WE'VE MOSTLY DEALT WITH THE *UNIQUE* PROPERTIES OF COMICS.



BUT THERE ARE PROPERTIES THAT COMICS SHARE WITH ***ALL OTHER*** ART FORMS.

THOUGH IT SEEMS INNOCUOUS  
ENOUGH *NOW*, THERE WAS A TIME  
WHEN SUCH A SIMPLE IDEA  
WAS *RIDICULED*.

EVEN  
*TODAY*, THERE  
ARE THOSE WHO  
ASK THE QUESTION,  
"CAN COMICS  
BE *ART*?"

A black and white cartoon illustration of a man with glasses and a plaid jacket, gesturing with his right hand. He is looking towards the left, where the speech bubbles are located. The background is solid black.

IT IS--

--I'M SORRY--

A REALLY  
**STUPID**  
QUESTION!

BUT  
IF WE *MUST*  
ANSWER IT, THE  
ANSWER IS  
*YES.*

ESPECIALLY  
IF YOUR  
DEFINITION OF ART  
IS AS BROAD AS  
MINE!

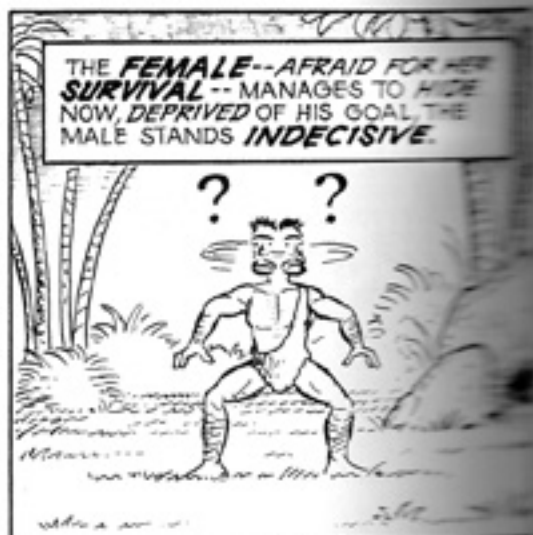
A black and white cartoon illustration of a man with glasses, wearing a plaid jacket over a t-shirt. He is standing with his hands on his hips, looking towards the left. A speech bubble is positioned above him, containing the text: "ESPECIALLY IF YOUR DEFINITION OF ART IS AS BROAD AS MINE!". The background is solid black.



**EXAMPLE:** HERE'S A PREHISTORIC MALE CHASING A PREHISTORIC FEMALE. WITH ONLY ONE THING ON HIS MIND-- **REPRODUCTION**!



SO **STRONG** IS THIS INSTINCT THAT IT GOVERNS HIS **EVERY MOVE**! NOT ONE STEP IS WASTED IN THE **PURSUIT OF HIS GOAL**!



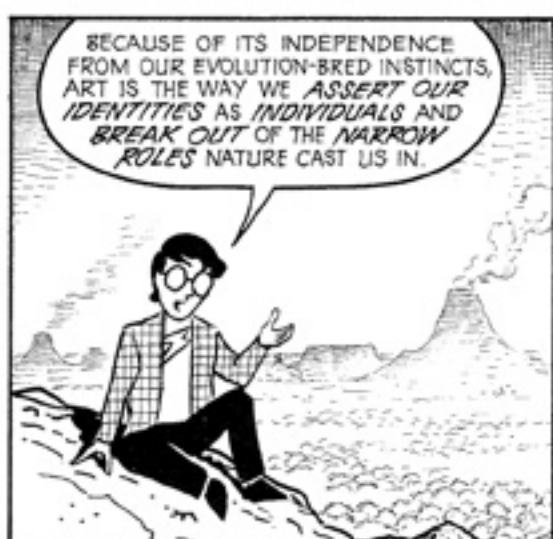
**NOW** ALL OF HIS THOUGHTS AND ACTIONS ARE FOCUSED ON THAT **OTHER VITAL HUMAN INSTINCT-- SURVIVAL**!



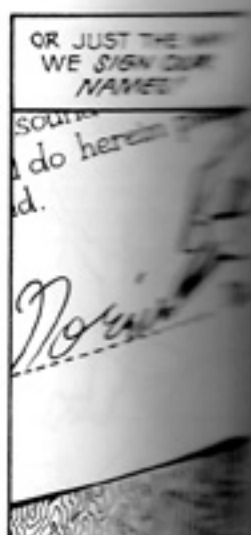
AGAIN HIS LEGS PROPEL HIM FORWARD WITH **MAXIMUM EFFICIENCY**



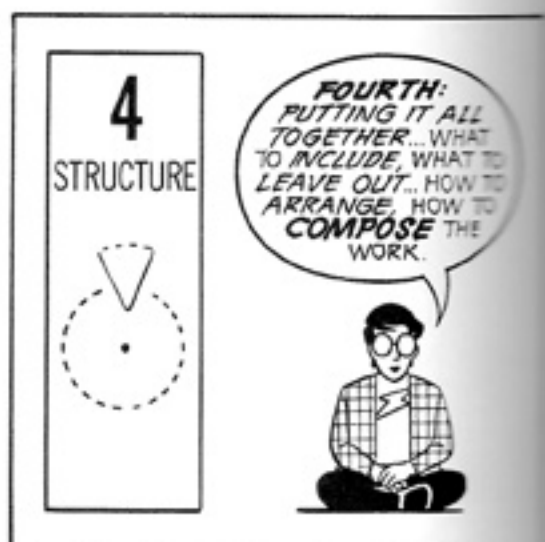
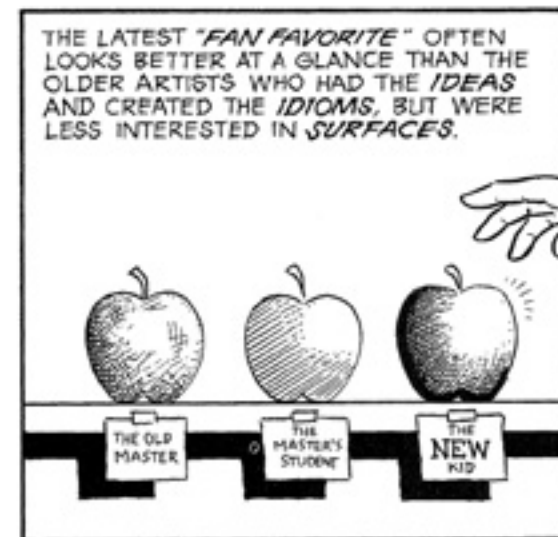
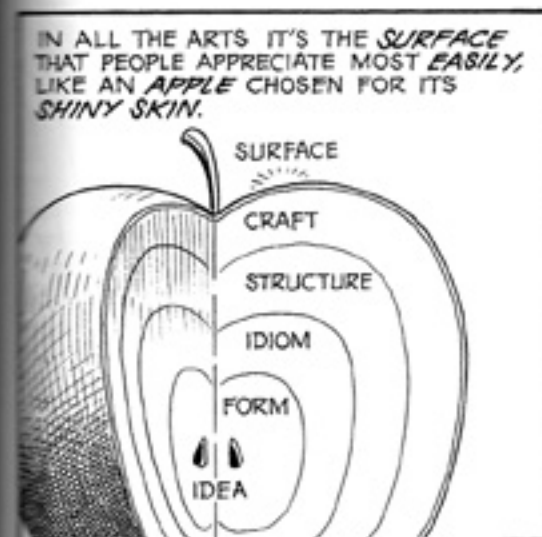
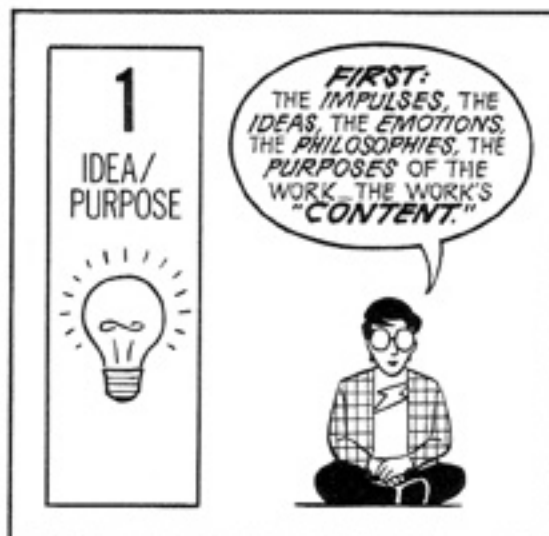
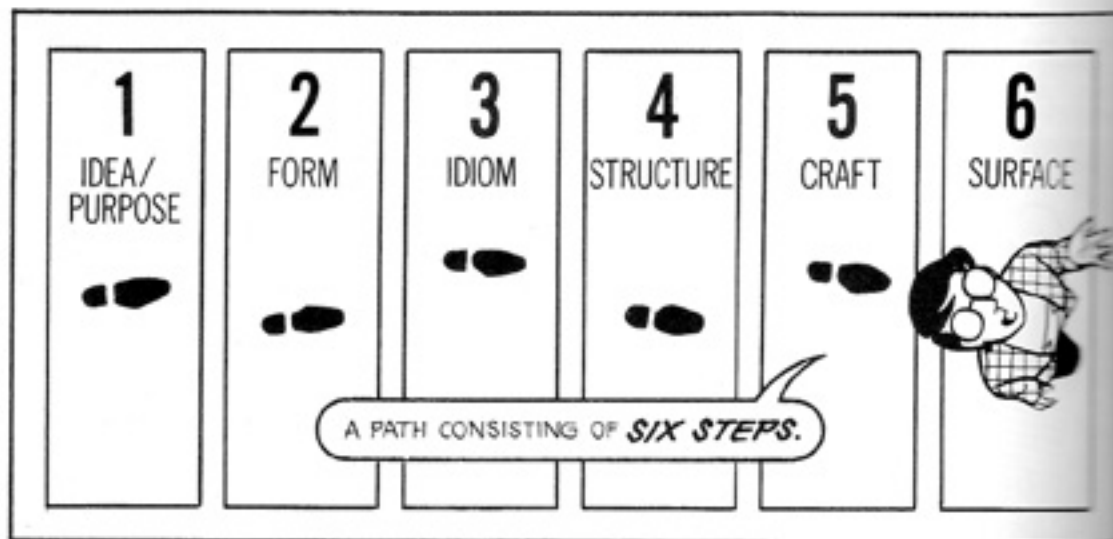


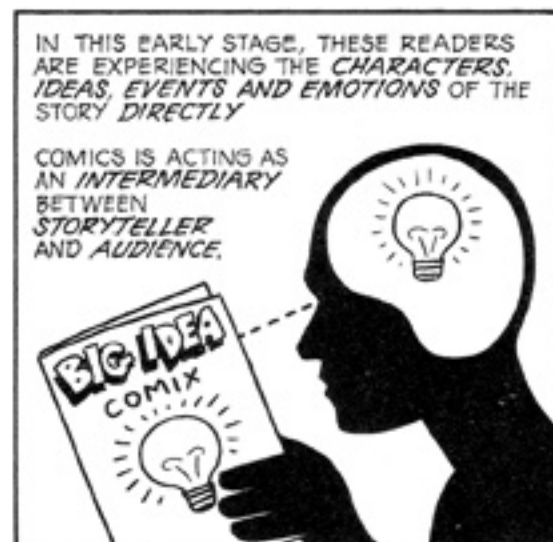


\*ALONG WITH THEIR MANY RELATED FEELINGS AND CUSTOMS.









BUT IN SOME, AN AWARENESS OF THE **FORM** BEGINS TO DEVELOP, AN AWARENESS THAT ALL COMICS ARE JUST **INK ON PAPER**--

--THAT MAKING THEM ONLY REQUIRES CERTAIN **SKILLS**--

--AND THAT THOSE SKILLS CAN BE **LEARNED!**



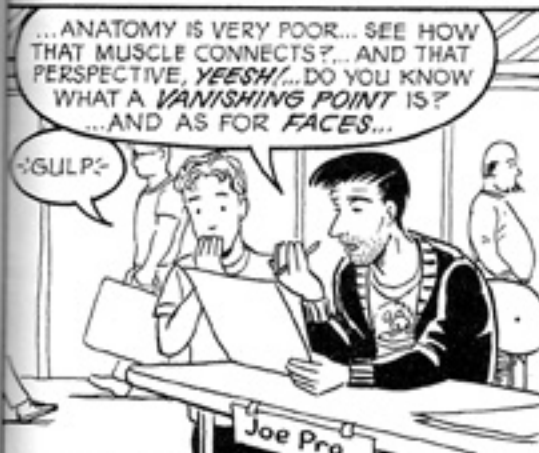
ONE OF THEM--FULL OF **BIG IDEAS**--MAKES THE **BIG DECISION**.



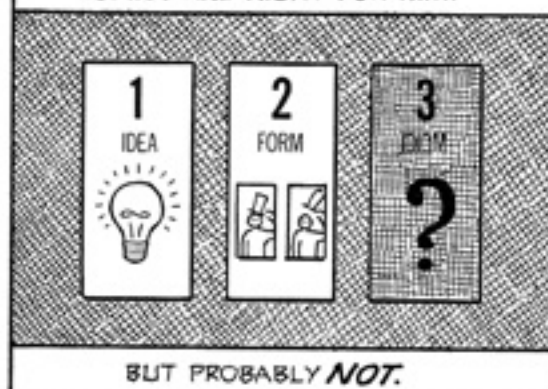
MORE LIKELY HE **POSTPONES** HIS OWN IDEAS AND BEGINS TO STUDY THE **CRAFT** OF OTHER ARTISTS IN HIS ATTEMPT TO BECOME A **PROFESSIONAL**.



BUT WHEN HE BRINGS THE WORK TO A **REAL PROFESSIONAL** AT THE LOCAL **CON**:



HE'S OFF TO A LOGICAL START. HE HAS THE **IDEAS** AND HE'S CHOSEN **COMICS** AS HIS **FORM OF EXPRESSION**. MAYBE NOW HE'LL CONSIDER WHAT **TYPES** OF COMICS ARE RIGHT FOR HIM.





BUT SOMEHOW, IT NEVER QUITE "CLICKS" FOR HIM. MAYBE HE JUST DOESN'T HAVE ENOUGH *SKILL*... MAYBE HE *LOSES INTEREST*... MAYBE LIFE JUST GETS IN THE WAY... BUT FOR *WHATEVER REASON*--



BUT ALL OVER THE WORLD, OTHERS HAVE UNDERGONE SIMILAR EXPERIENCES AND *HAVEN'T GIVEN UP YET!*



BUT MAYBE THIS IS *ENOUGH* FOR THIS PARTICULAR ARTIST, ENOUGH TO JUST BE PART OF THE *ART, BUSINESS, AND COMMUNITY* OF COMICS WITHOUT NECESSARILY *CALLING THE SHOTS*.



BUT *ELSEWHERE*, ANOTHER CREATOR HAS BEEN THROUGH THE SAME SORT OF PROCESS AND HE WANTS *MORE!*



ONE OF THEM IS NOW READY TO TAKE THE *NEXT STEP!* SHE'S STUDIED HER CRAFT ALL THE WAY THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL AND INTO *COLLEGE*.



SHE'S A GOOD, HARDWORKING STUDENT



HE SPENDS HIS *EVERY WAKING HOUR* WORKING OUT THE *DIFFICULT PRINCIPLES* OF COMICS COMPOSITION AND STORYTELLING, THE KIND THEY *DON'T TEACH* IN *BOOKS!*\*



HE DISCOVERS THAT HIS *FAVORITE ARTIST* WAS ACTUALLY JUST A *WATERED-DOWN VERSION* OF AN *OLDER, LESS-POLISHED ARTIST* WHOM HE HAD ALWAYS *TAKEN FOR GRANTED*.



BUT WHEN SHE SHOWS HER WORK TO A *SEASONED PRO...* < YOU'RE A SKILLED *SCRIPTER* AND *DRAFTSPERSON*, BUT YOUR *STORYTELLING* ISN'T GOOD ENOUGH, YOU HAVE NO SENSE OF *PACING*... THESE LAYOUTS ARE VERY *MUDDY*... YOU HAVE TO *COMPOSE* YOUR STORIES... >



HER SKILLS *CAN* GET HER *WORK* AT THIS POINT, BUT ONLY AS AN *ASSISTANT* TO OTHERS. UNTIL SHE UNDERSTANDS THE *STRUCTURE* OF COMICS *BENEATH* THE CRAFT, THIS IS AS FAR AS SHE CAN GO.



HE LEARNS TO SEE *BENEATH* THE CRAFTS OF *DRAFTSMANSHIP* AND *SCRIPTING* TO SEE THE *WHOLE PICTURE*-- *PACING, DRAMA, HUMOR, SUSPENSE, COMPOSITION, THEMATIC DEVELOPMENT, IRONY*-- SOON THEY'RE ALL AT HIS *COMMAND!*



< I'VE DONE IT! I'VE LEARNED *ALL THERE IS TO KNOW!* >

4 STRUCTURE

< THIS TIME I'LL GET MY OWN BOOK, I'M SURE OF IT! >



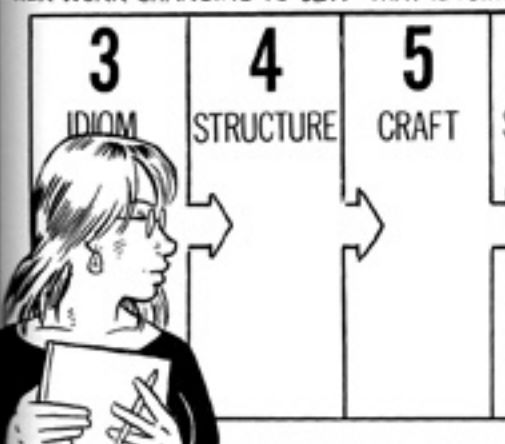
AND LET'S SAY IT **WORKS!** HE **DOES** LAND HIS OWN BOOK AND SOON IS ESTABLISHED AS A CREATOR OF **GREAT SKILL**. HE UNDERSTANDS **COMICS STORYTELLING** BETTER THAN MOST.



HIS WORK ISN'T PARTICULARLY **ORIGINAL**. THE CRITICS DON'T PAY MUCH ATTENTION TO HIM, BUT HE MAKES A **DECENT LIVING** FOR **HIMSELF AND HIS FAMILY** AND THAT'S ENOUGH FOR HIM.



AS SHE CREATES **HER OWN PERSONAL IDIOM** OF COMICS, SHE FINDS THE WHOLE OF HER WORK CHANGING TO **SUIT** THAT IDIOM.



LET'S SAY THAT **FINANCIAL SUCCESS** AND THE **RESPECT OF HER PEERS** SOON FOLLOW.\*



BUT **ANOTHER ARTIST** HAS MADE IT THROUGH THE **SAME SORTS OF HURDLES** AND REACHED THE **SAME LEVELS OF SUCCESS** AND **STILL ISN'T SATISFIED**



SHE WONDERES IF HER SUCCESS **REALLY MEANS** ANYTHING WHEN THERE ARE **SO MANY OTHERS** DOING THE **SAME THING** IN THE **SAME WAYS**. SHE WANTS AN **IDENTITY**



YOUNG ARTISTS BEGIN TO **IMITATE** HER STYLE, BUT MOST OF THEM ONLY SEEM TO APPRECIATE THE **"SURFACE."**



AND MAYBE SHE'LL BE **SATISFIED** WITH THAT KIND OF SUCCESS, SECURE IN THE KNOWLEDGE THAT WHATEVER SHE **DOESN'T** KNOW, SHE'S ON THE RIGHT PATH TO **FIND OUT**.



SHE BELIEVES THAT THERE'S SOMETHING **MORE**--SOME **PIECE OF THE PUZZLE**--THAT SHE **STILL HASN'T FOUND**.



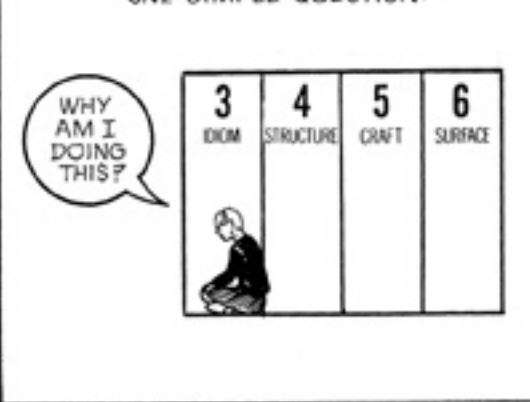
SHE BEGINS TO INVENT **NEW IDEAS** BY SHOWING **"THE SAME OLD THING"** AND DEVELOPS **INNOVATIVE NEW TECHNIQUES** AND STARTS **DOING AWAY** WITH THE **SAME OLD THING** **ALTOGETHER**.



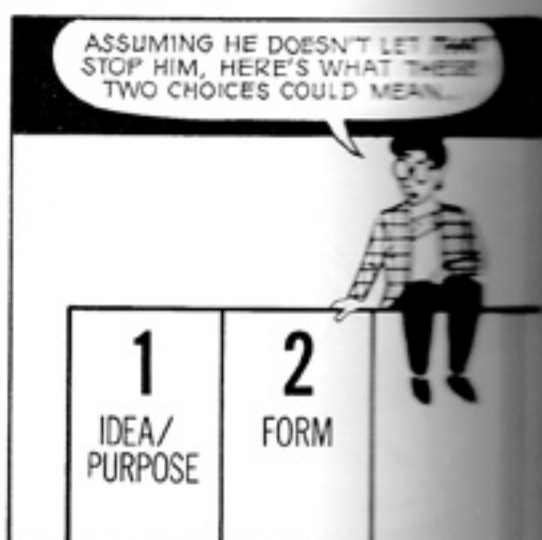
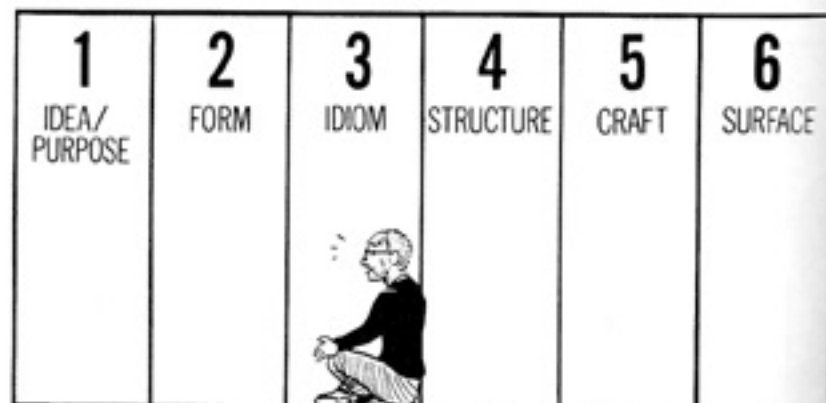
BUT **ELSEWHERE**, **ANOTHER CREATOR** HAS MADE IT TO THIS SAME PLACE AND STILL FEELS **DISSATISFIED**. HE FEELS THAT SOMETHING **VERY IMPORTANT** HAS BEEN **NEGLECTED**...



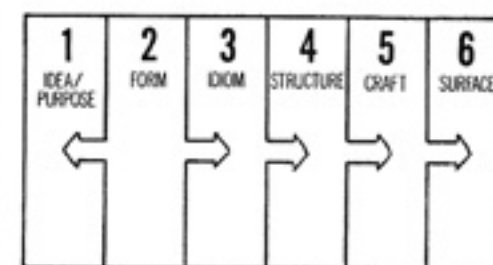
...SOMETHING **FUNDAMENTAL**, SOMETHING AT THE **CORE** OF WHO HE IS AS AN ARTIST. WITH THESE THOUGHTS ON HIS MIND, IT'S ONLY A MATTER OF **TIME** BEFORE HE ASKS THAT ONE SIMPLE QUESTION:







AND HIS ART WOULD NOT *LACK* FOR *IDEAS* OR FOR A *PURPOSE*.



HIS ART WOULD JUST *BECOME* HIS PURPOSE AND THE IDEAS WOULD ARRIVE IN TIME TO GIVE IT *SUBSTANCE*.

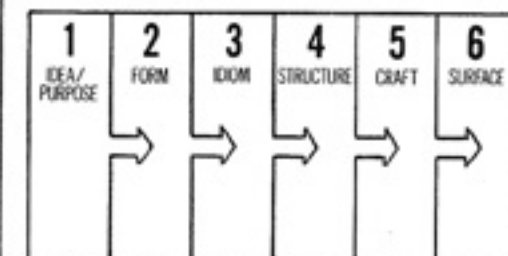
CREATORS WHO TAKE THIS PATH ARE OFTEN *PIONEERS AND REVOLUTIONARIES*--ARTISTS WHO WANT TO *SHAKE THINGS UP*, CHANGE THE WAY PEOPLE *THINK*, QUESTION THE *FUNDAMENTAL LAWS* THAT GOVERN THEIR CHOSEN ART.



(IN *OTHER* ART FORMS: STRAVINSKY, PICASSO, VIRGINIA WOOLF, ORSON WELLES, ETC.)



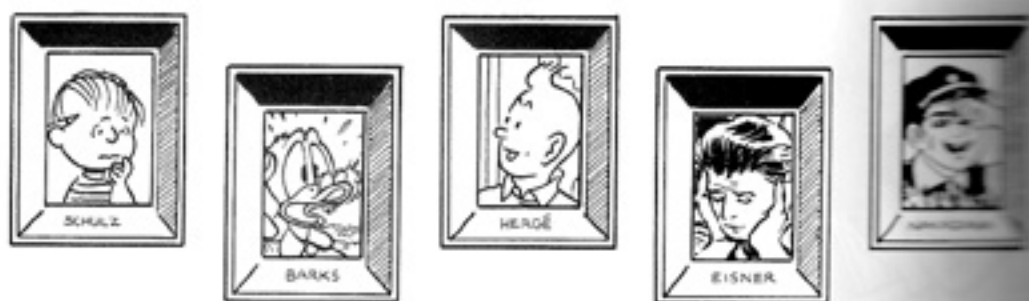
NOW "TELLING THE STORY" (OR IN THE CASE OF *NON-FICTION*, "DELIVERING THE MESSAGE") TAKES *PRIORITY* OVER *INVENTION*.



BUT TELLING A STORY AS *EFFECTIVELY* AS POSSIBLE MAY *REQUIRE* SOME INVENTION. IT OFTEN *DOES*.



THIS IS THE PATH OF GREAT **STORYTELLERS**, CREATORS WHO HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY **THROUGH** COMICS AND DEVOTE ALL THEIR ENERGIES TO **CONTROLLING** THEIR MEDIUM, REFINING ITS ABILITY TO CONVEY MESSAGES **EFFECTIVELY**.



(IN OTHER ART FORMS: CAPRA, DICKENS, WOODY GUTHRIE, EDWARD R. MURROW, ETC.)

FORTUNATELY, THIS CHOICE NEVER HAS TO BE **PERMANENT**.

IT CAN CHANGE AS OFTEN AS AN ARTIST CHANGES **PROJECTS!**

**NO** WORK OF ART CAN BE **TOTALLY** WITHOUT "**CONTENT**" ANY MORE THAN IT CAN EXIST WITHOUT A **FORM**! BUT IT DOES HELP TO SET SOME **PRIORITIES**.

HEY, I'M DRIVING!

NO, I'M DRIVING!

THE MORE AN ARTIST DEVOTES HIM/HERSELF TO EITHER OF THESE TWO FOCAL POINTS, THE MORE DRAMATIC THE CHANGE IF HE/SHE DECIDES TO **SWITCH!**

ART SPIEGELMAN'S AGGRESSIVELY EXPERIMENTAL WORK OF THE **SEVENTIES** AND EARLY **EIGHTIES** LEFT NO ONE PREPARED FOR THE UNASSUMING "**REPORT**" STYLE OF HIS LANDMARK BIOGRAPHY **MAUS**.

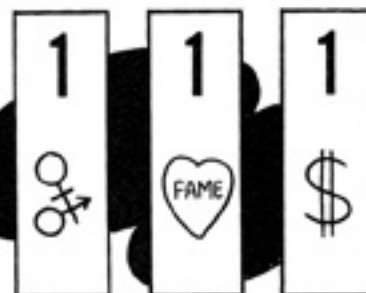
2 FORM



1 IDEA/PURPOSE



PERHAPS IF STRIPPED DOWN FAR ENOUGH, MOST ARTISTS' ULTIMATE GOALS ARE NOT THAT DIFFERENT FROM ANYONE ELSE'S. EVEN FOR THOSE WITH **HIGH IDEALS**, BASIC INSTINCTS EXERT A POWERFUL ATTRACTION.



SURVIVAL → REPRODUCTION

AND WHEN ART BECOMES A **JOB** OR A MATTER OF **SOCIAL STATUS** THE POTENTIAL FOR CONFUSING ONE'S GOALS GOES UP CONSIDERABLY.

THIS IS A PROBLEM IN MANY "**ASSEMBLY LINE**" COMICS WHERE CREATIVE SPECIALIZATION HAS "**SCRIPTERS**," "**PENCILLERS**" AND "**INKERS**" ALL WORKING AT **CROSS-PURPOSES** IN THEIR ATTEMPTS TO GET **NOTICED**.

**CRASH!**

NOT THAT WE "**CREATOR/WRITER**" TYPES NEVER RUN INTO THIS PROBLEM.

DAMN! NEED TO HAVE SOME **DIALOGUE** BUT I REALLY WANT TO DRAW THAT **SHOCK CLOSE-UP**!

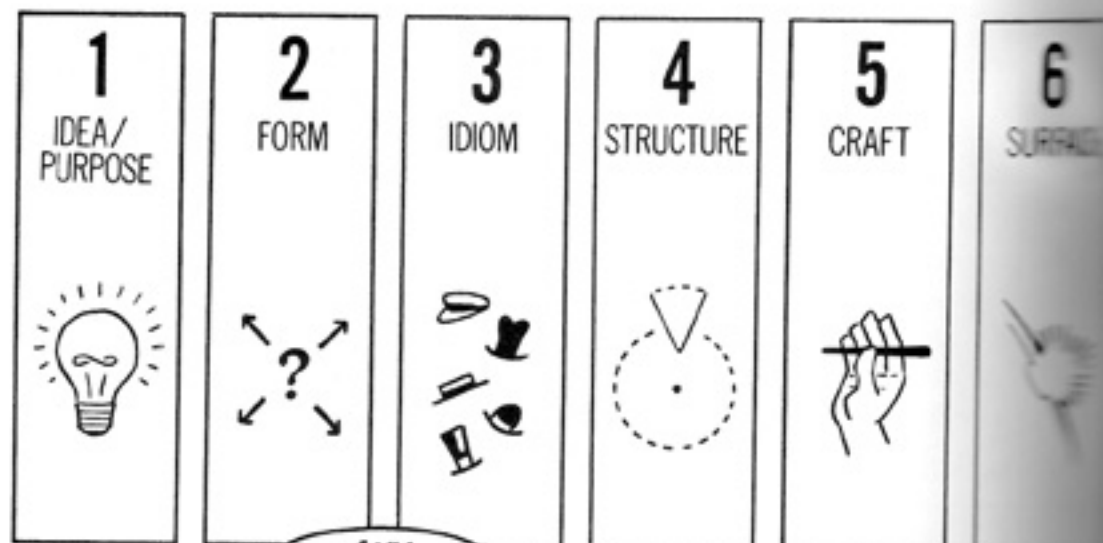
BUT EVEN IF WE TAKE LIFE'S **DISTRACTIONS** INTO ACCOUNT, IT'S STILL AMAZING HOW MUCH **TIME** AND **EFFORT** IS SPENT BY COMICS CREATORS TRYING TO GET WHAT THEY WANT OUT OF COMICS --

-- BEFORE THEY EVEN KNOW **WHAT** THEY WANT!

OF COURSE, NOT **EVERYBODY** TAKES THE **LONG** WAY AROUND. SOME ARTISTS HAVE NO TROUBLE SETTING GOALS AND **ACHIEVING** THEM WITHOUT ANY **DETOURS**...

HERE'S A STORY I DREW ABOUT MY DOG **BUSTER!**

...ESPECIALLY IF THEIR GOALS ARE **MODEST** ONES.



ANY ARTIST CREATING ANY WORK IN ANY MEDIUM WILL ALWAYS FOLLOW THESE SIX STEPS WHETHER THEY REALIZE IT OR NOT.

ALL WORKS BEGIN WITH A PURPOSE, HOWEVER ARBITRARY; ALL TAKE SOME FORM; ALL BELONG TO AN IDIOM (EVEN IF IT'S AN IDIOM OF ONE); ALL POSSESS A STRUCTURE; ALL REQUIRE SOME CRAFT; ALL PRESENT A SURFACE.



AND ALL ASPECTS OF COMICS HAVE THE **POTENTIAL** FOR SELF-EXPRESSION, EVEN WHEN ECONOMIC SURVIVAL IS THE ARTIST'S MAIN CONCERN.

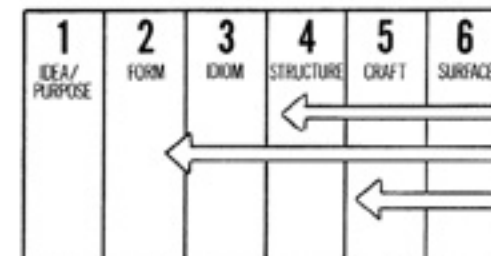
THERE'S ALWAYS ROOM FOR A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF "ART."



IN PRACTICE, ANY ASPECT OF COMICS MAY BE THE ONE WHICH FIRST DRAWS AN ARTIST INTO ITS ORBIT.



STILL, THE LEARNING PROCESS FOR MOST ARTISTS IS A SLOW AND STEADY JOURNEY FROM **END** TO **BEGINNING**,



FROM **SURFACE** TO **CORE**.

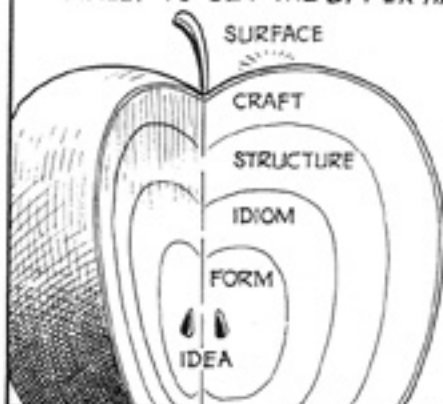


AND IT'S AT THE **CORE** OF ART THAT THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION IS FINALLY ASKED:



"WHY AM I DOING THIS?"

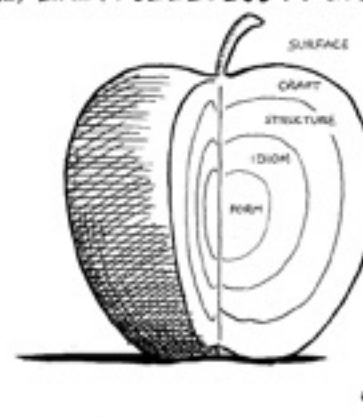
BUT THE MORE A CREATOR LEARNS TO COMMAND EVERY ASPECT OF HIS/HER ART AND TO UNDERSTAND HIS/HER RELATIONSHIP TO IT, THE MORE "ARTISTIC" CONCERNS ARE LIKELY TO GET THE UPPER HAND.



THE ORDER OF THE SIX STEPS IS **INNATE**. LIKE THE ARRANGEMENT OF BONES IN A DINOSAUR'S SKELETON, THEY CAN BE DISCOVERED IN ANY ORDER, BUT WHEN BROUGHT TOGETHER, THEY WILL ALWAYS FALL INTO PLACE.



WHEN **FORM** RULES THE WORK, IT MAY SEEM SOMEWHAT **ARTIFICIAL** AT THE CORE, LIKE A **SEEDLESS FRUIT**.



BUT SUCH WORKS DON'T TAKE THE **SHAPE** OF ART FOR GRANTED AND BY QUESTIONING OUR **FUNDAMENTAL ASSUMPTIONS**--



--CAN ANTICIPATE A *WORLD* OF *UNKNOWN EXPERIENCES*.



WHILE IF *IDEAS*  
RULE THE WORK AND  
*DETERMINE* ITS  
SHAPE, COMICS CAN  
HELP *PLANT* THOSE  
IDEAS *FAR AND WIDE*.

AND THE CYCLE CAN BEGIN AGAIN.



APPROVED BY THE BOARD OF CENSORS