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Gumball Astronauts: Establishing a Space-Time Vocabulary for Genre Bending in Picture Stories

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GUMBALL ASTRONAUTS

ESTABLISHING A SPACE-TIME VOCABULARY FOR GENRE BENDING IN PICTURE-STORIES

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by Henry Uhrik

This paper attempts to redefine genre as a set of bodily experiences rather than a collection of thematic objects. Beginning with the western genre as a whole and ending with my own comics work, I pull apart elements within specific narratives and analyze them as mechanical divides that disrupt the reader's experience of time and space. This paper explores the transmedia quality of these time and space manipulations as these generic arcs branch from film to comics to video games. The first section of the paper pulls apart the approach I take when looking at genre, one that is influenced by Bahktin's idea of the chronotope, a time-space defining of genre. Focusing on the example of a cowboy's hat, I look closely at the object, pulling out implied meanings and understandings to better understand what effect seeing the object has on the viewer. I also look at the basic mechanics of how comics work. The second part examines parody in genre and how time and space work to emulate an established pattern within a genre, only to turn that genre upside down. This section discusses the kind of whiplash that parody evokes and its connection to humor. The third part of this essay looks at religiosity as a genre and the profundity that deliberate slowness evokes. It pulls apart one of my comics, *Two Tigers*, and looks at how its elements of density, simplicity, and flatness give the reader a sense of slowed time and symbolic space. I conclude the paper looking at the wider applications of this kind of analysis, especially as it applies in a teaching environment.

A number of years ago, in a dark and musty college dorm on a Saturday night, everything I thought I knew about genre fell apart. Our weekly movie screening brought us to a small movie, not one that any of us had ever heard of, but that existed as a rumor or whisper amongst our classmates and around the niche archived posts of internet forums. The description of the film on the dvd box read "Ramen-western" a phrase that, up until the production and proliferation of that film, to the best of my knowledge, had never been used. The film was *Tampopo*, a Japanese comedy from 1985.

Tampopo is a western without squawking trumpet solos, cowboys, deserts, or Segio Leone. There's very little that actually connects *Tampopo* to the lineage of the genre of western that the sub header on the box claims to be a part of, including the story which features an out of towner training a small time cook to make the best ramen through a series of *Rocky*-esque training montages. On top of that, there are several other plots or gag lines that exist completely independently from the main story, one of a woman squeezing fruit in a grocery store and another of people slurping noodles. The pleasure and experience of eating, something this movie spends so much time on, is a motif that, to the best of my knowledge, has never even been attempted in the western genre. In that case, what makes *Tampopo* a western?

More often than not, genres are categorized in this way, almost as a collection of elements within a narrative container. Sometimes these elements are related to the plot. Many romantic comedies and action stories follow formulaic boy-meets-girl or hero's-journey structures that have been codified in a way that makes it almost impossible to create work that exists within that genre that doesn't fall into the same patterns. Sometimes these elements of genre are woven in as aesthetic trends. Noir finds its way into comics through the usage of stark black and white and window blinds that seem to cast shadows in every room. Sometimes these elements of genre are indicated through leitmotifs and allusions to other works of the genre. The beeping chiptune soundtrack of any game automatically links it to that of its predecessors.

While all of these attempts to try and understand and define genre are useful in some regard and maybe partially answer some questions about how to categorize different types of media into these camps, they still don't completely address the question of *Tampopo*. There is something fundamental to the experience of watching *Tampopo* that evokes the bodily sensations attributed to the western genre in a way that most attempts to define genre fail to address because of their fixation on more surface level elements of the narrative. While this is one way to

understand genre and be able to quickly group several narratives together, there is a superficiality to this approach. I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with superficiality as a whole, in fact I'd probably say the opposite considering how often narratives relish in superficiality in order to show a greater truth. Instead, what I'm saying is that this superficial approach is limited and often breaks down when we consider narrative genres across mediums.

What I'm proposing is a conception of genre that is less tied to counting and grouping the physical elements that are housed inside a narrative. An example of what genre definitions tend to do is this: A western is a western because there's a cowboy in it. Instead, I'm advocating for an understanding of genre as it relates to how we actually experience a narrative, particularly through how narratives establish and disrupt our sense of time and space. Using this approach allows us to think about my previous example as such: A western is a western because it feels like a western. While at this point that explanation seems vague, what I'm arguing in this paper is that the way a story is constructed within a narrative text is informed by temporal and spatial experiences and an author's desire to recreate them in a microcosmic form. What this means is that genres are traditions of specific kinds of time and space manipulations more than they are *mise-en-scene* elements, characters, or plot lines.

While any claims at total universality are impossible seeing as I cannot conduct this research from the eyes of a 18th century muscovite nor a 25th century KL-ite, this research still offers a degree of analysis that opens a door into further research and understanding of genre and its functions. In this essay, I posit a particular method for approaching the discussion of genre. As a thinker, reader, viewer, and creator of narratives, this puts me in a unique position to look at narratives from a variety of different angles, those of a consumer of this kind of media as well as a producer of it. A character in Italo Calvino's *If on a winter night a traveler*[1] talks about the sanctity, beauty, and uniqueness of being a reader who has no desire to write stories of her own. While I appreciate that kind of perspective, one that has limited vested interest in the craft or creation of a story and is therefore inclined to see the work in a way that might be seen as more detached and objective, knowing a craft from the inside out has special merits too.

A question that comes to mind when talking about renovating an existing term or concept, especially one as nebulous as the word *genre*, that is largely regarded as little more than a search key term is, "why fix something

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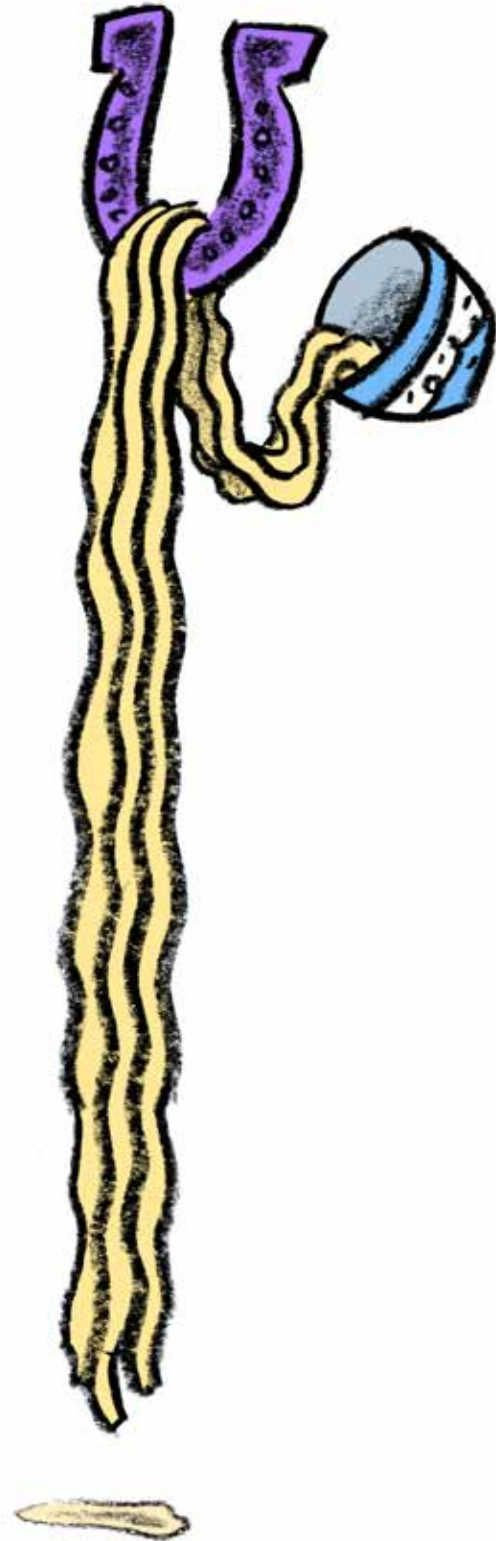
1 Calvino, Italo. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler.* Mariner Books, 1982.

that isn't broken?" To this, I respond that thinking about genre in a new way is fundamental for future generations of creators and scholars on the subject. In our changing world, we exist in a world where the walls between mediums are being broken down on a daily basis. The novel has expanded and broken past pages of paper books to the realms of disciplines that originally existed in purely digital formats. Stories are told through audio podcasts to series of subfolders shared from one computer to the next by means of a Hello Kitty flash drive. While a narrative text has an incredibly profound impact on how a story is felt, it itself is not the entire story. These delineations of medium specificity, the lines between novel, opera, comic, video game, etc, are crumbling and what remains is an unfettered freedom for stories to move and grow in new directions never thought possible before. The purity of a medium is now a myth. The experience of stories is seeping out into other worlds and our current definitions are inadequate in talking about how these worlds come together. This re-definition of genre allows us to look at novels alongside video games alongside film franchises alongside amusement parks alongside comics alongside whatever comes next. Not only that, but an experience-based consideration and analysis is one that bridges the gap between talking about what is traditionally viewed as high art and low art. When we can discuss the sensation of experiencing a painting by Rembrant using the same vocabulary we use to describe the experience of watching an animated television series, we are looking past cultural prejudices and focusing more on what the objects actually do to us as human beings.

Many preliminary readers of this paper have asked me to include a clear definition of what is and what genre isn't. They've asked for a delineation or set of attributes that sets a western apart from a horror story or a race story from a heist. Unfortunately, that is not what this paper is setting out to do. When I talk about redefining or renovating the term "genre," this doesn't mean giving new definitions for westerns, but rather overhauling our entire notion of divisions between narratives as something that is less related to iconic emblems and, instead, is more focused on our bodily experiences of that type of media and how other types of media do similar things.

Why is it so important that this new thinking of genre hinges on time and space? Time and space have been written about in a variety of contexts from philosophy to theoretical physics, and discourse about these subjects does exist in regards to the narrative. What is so alluring about these concepts, aside from the weight each individual word holds, is the universality of these experiences. If we were to discuss genre as it relates to love, there is such an immense multiplicity of understanding or conception of

what love is that would make this work impossible. Beauty falls into the same category with the added complexity of taste. Time and space, however, are characteristics of an experiential reality that construct a bridge between our world and understanding of reality. Time and space are also the very fabric of any narrative, so it's important to look at those elements when thinking about what any genre actually does.

When I talk about time and space, I mean them in regards to how they are experienced by the reader or viewer. Looking at time, there are two senses of time in our world, that which is measured and that which is experienced. Measured time relates to the seconds clicking on a clock and the specific rotation of the earth in relation to the sun. Measured time is that which can be mechanically counted or calculated with some degree of precision. Experienced time is what people actually feel. The expression "time flies when you're having fun" comes to mind when describing this. Our experience as human beings to time does not have a one to one correlation to measured time. In happy times, hours fly by in minutes. In sad times, each second can feel like an eternity. Our experience of time is not solely linked to our emotional state, but also the world around us. In her book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart mentions a study done of people playing with dollhouses of different scales.[2] The study found that the participants' experience of time passing was proportionately diminished in regards to the size of the houses. This means that people playing with smaller houses experienced time pass slower than people playing with larger houses. Space and scale have an effect on how we experience time but, like time, there's a difference between the measured scale of an object and the experiential scale of the object. When drawn into a narrative, a reader can take on the relative scale of the work he or she is engaging with. When characters in a comic experience something gargantuan, the reader experiences it as well. When a character is stretched in an animation, the viewer experiences that stretching too.

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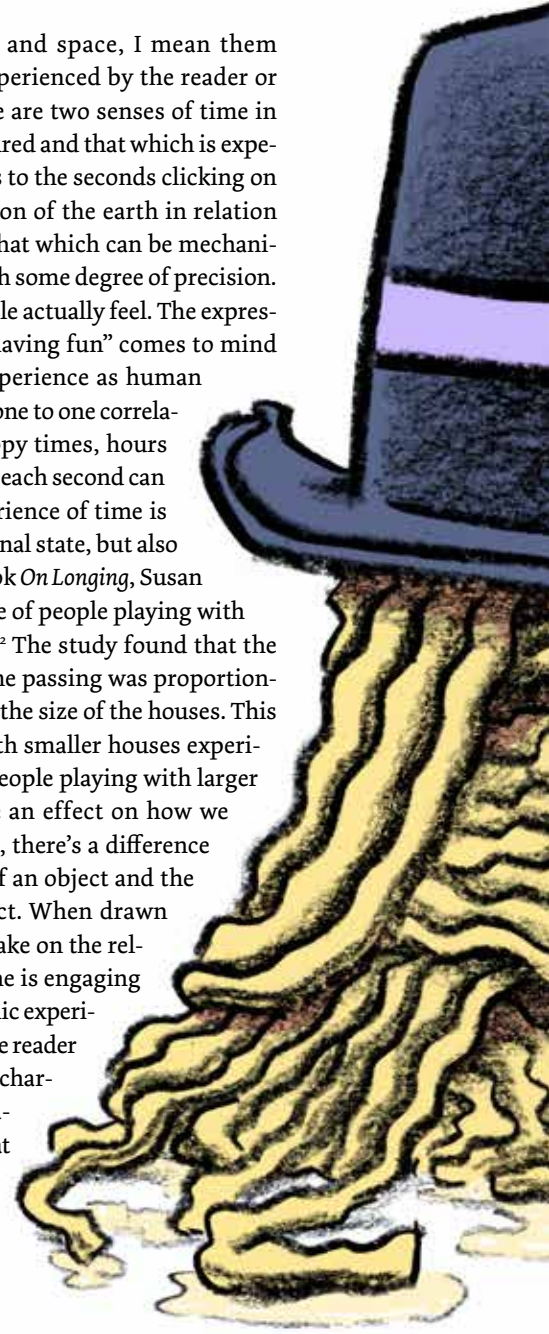
2 Stewart, Susan. *On Longing*. Duke University Press, 2012.

For creators, time and space are also useful lenses for approaching a work particularly due to how *easily* the two can be manipulated. Later in this paper, I'll discuss exactly how these elements are manipulated at a granular level but, for now, understand conceiving of genre as a series of temporal and spatial manipulations, work that bends and stretches and moves across genres becomes all the more approachable. Thinking of genre as an experience of time and space opens the doors to so many new possibilities in storytelling.

Considering that this is a print publication, comics are an optimal case study for this subject. Often when reviewers discuss films or television, there's a necessary chopping or "comicification" of that media since printing video is impossible. Comics, existing as an intermediary between reading and seeing, already embody the stillness that the printed page forces. On top of that, comics are the medium I work in and have studied most extensively. While comics are not the only way to make the points that I make, they are the most suited for this paper.

I'm also looking specifically at comics because of the history and tradition of comics as it relates to genre. Comics in America blossomed during a period of high canonization of genre as made possible by inexpensive printing practices evolving at the beginning of the 20th century. Since then, the medium has gone through a kind of reckoning, breaking free of its genre conventions and moving closer in the direction of literary fiction. It now exists in both camps, that of the more genre tied as well as that of the more experimental. It takes fewer man-hours to make a narrative in a comic than in does in a game, film or opera, which means that the comics medium has a high degree of flexibility and experimentation built in. Despite this flexibility, comics are fairly limited in what mechanics they can actually perform. I will discuss more of these later, but what they boil down to most what happens between images. All of this being said, I will still pull from several other forms of popular media to elucidate my point.
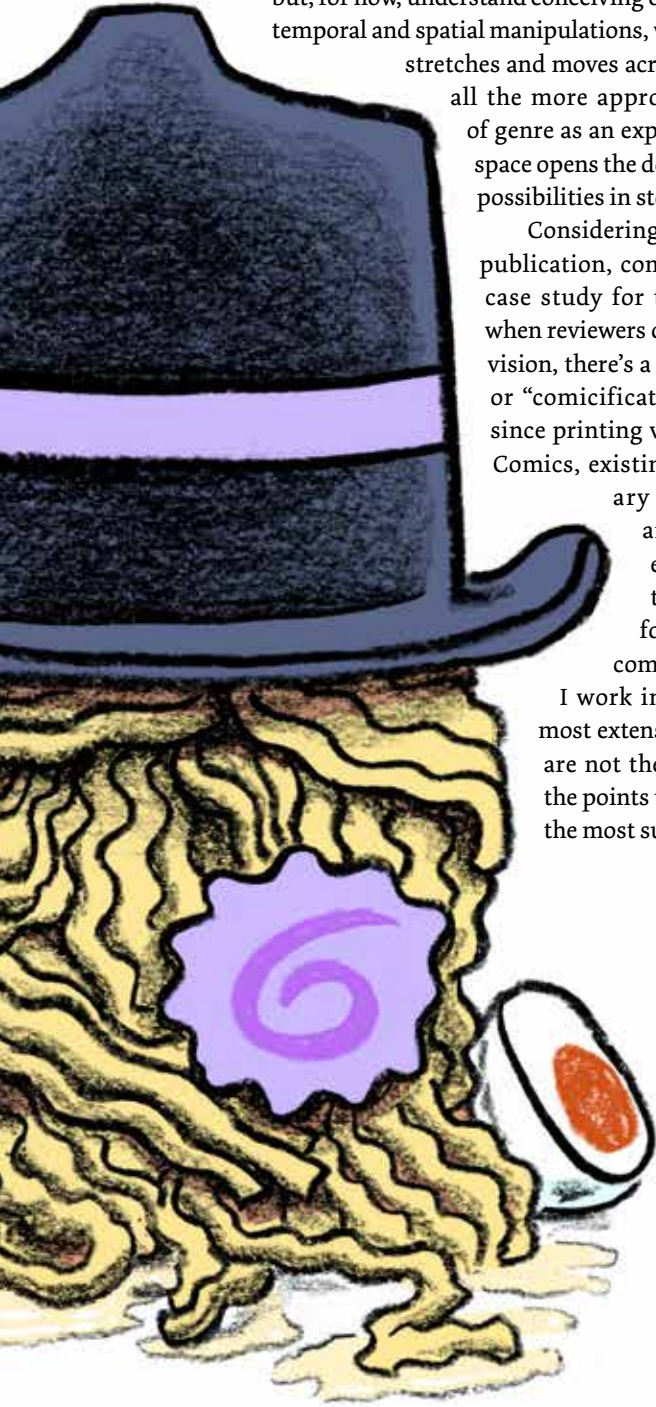
Figure 1

Figure 2

Looking at Comics

Since I'll be looking at comics for this analysis, it's important to establish a framework for how I'll be looking. While there are a number of different ways to see and understand comics as a medium, I'll be looking at them through a formal lens, focusing primarily on their mechanics. While narrative will be a consideration, my analysis will be more granular. In understanding parts, we can better understand a whole.

My guide for talking about and understanding comics is borrowed from Scott McCloud's works *Understanding Comics* and *Making Comics*. In it, McCloud pulls apart the various mechanisms at work in comics, namely transitions, page turns, panels, and gutters.[3] These are the barebones structures underneath every comic.

A reader can be made to experience time and space in many different ways in a comic. In moving between two images, the reader imposes a breath of time. There is not a set amount of time that passes between images, and oftentimes the kind of image in any given panel dictates how

much time is experienced between looking between pictures. Here is an example of this.

The intrigue and complexity of these images demand different amounts of time to be spent on them. I'll discuss these features and the effect of visual density more when discussing *Two Tigers*.

The shape and size of any given panel also affects how much time the reader experiences when reading a comic. Above is an example from one of my lectures. Even though these comic strips are identical in subject matter, words, and drawings, the cropping of the images and amount of space they take up change the reader's understanding of the amount of time that has passed. In figure 1, the pause is an instantaneous beat that lasts a single moment. In Figure 2, the pause is more contemplative and forces the reader to experience more time passing.

Scott McCloud talks about most of these in his books, but an example he leaves out is the symphonic qualities of the comic. While technically a silent medium, comics have the ability to evoke a range of symphonic experiences. In a class I recently taught on comics and time, we looked at an example across two different student's works

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3   Scott McCloud, *Making Comics Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels* (New York, NY u.a: Harper, 2008).
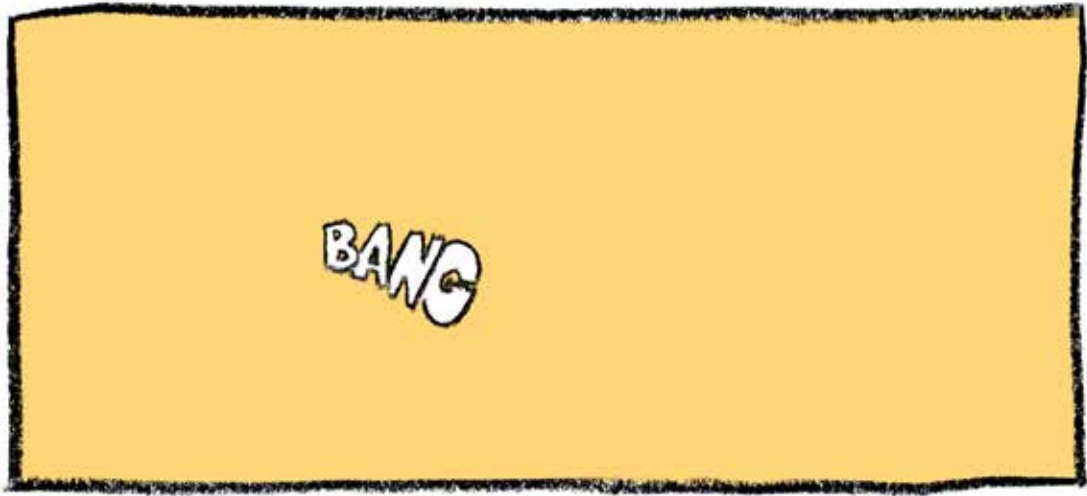
Figure 3

Figure 4

to understand how sound plays a role in understanding a space. In one student's comic, there was a small panel overflowing with a bold, graphic, "BANG!" In the other student's work, there was a large panel that took half a page and featured a small, "BANG!". I've included a redrawing of the panels above (Figure 3 and Figure 4).

When asked to rate the loudness of these two panels, everyone voted for the Figure 4. When asked to rate the length of the sound, everyone voted the Figure 3. When looking at these two images, even though so many of the elements are identical, we can see that comics have the ability to make us physically hear them in different ways. Figure 4 gave the word a brief, but incredibly intense, feeling of the sound in our ears, whereas figure 3 gave a less intense experience of sound, but of the space surrounding that sound and its echo.

From this example, we see that comic panels are extremely limited in the different kinds of intensity that they can convey in any given image. While this is not a hard and fast rule, seeing as this is not usually the case when looking at full pages and spreads, there is still a kind of mono-purpose to an individual panel. This stems from the fact that each image will only be looked at for a few seconds on reading. Because of that, any given panel must be clear on what it is trying to accomplish.

There are many more manipulations of time and space that comics have on readers that I will explore more thoroughly in subsequence sections. A core of understanding most of these as they exist in any given narrative is a fine attention paid to the contrast between elements. When images go from dense to open or small to big, readers feel a visual shift that affects our perception of time and space.

Chronotope in Genre

Time and space are fundamental aspects of any reading or viewing experience. Our experience of time and space is manipulated through the course of a narrative. This shapes the way we understand the world of the narrative. The idea of looking at the way we understand time and space in a story and linking those ideas to ideas of the core of genres is not a new idea. Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin proposes something similar in his notion of the chronotope.

In his essay *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in Genre,* Bakhtin lays out the groundwork for patterns of time and space presentation as they appear in several genres of novels throughout time. His thinking circles around the idea of the chronotope. The chronotope, as Bakhtin defines it, is "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature".[4] What Bakhtin means is that a chronotope is a kind of mechanism or device that exists within any given narrative text. In his writing, Bakhtin goes on to define chronotopes fairly broadly, ranging from overarching themes and motifs to individual words. Bakhtin uses these ideas and mechanisms to link genres together and shows how parodies play with these chronotopes and the expectations they set forth.

While previously in this essay I've talked of moving away from an understanding of genre as simply a collection of elements in a story, a perspective from Bakhtin that I do agree with is the notion that objects hold value not only as the object themselves, but as motifs and metaphors that carry temporal and spatial evocations.

Looking back to our example of *Tampopo* and how that movie evokes the sense of a western without being a western is through the objects of material culture in the movie. While there are no actual cowboys in the film, one character wears a cowboy hat. While this is a direct link to western cinema and illustration, the cowboy hat operates at a higher, metaphorical level than its surface reading would suggest. Let's look at the qualities of the cowboy hat to understand its deeper, underlying motifs.

In comparison to other hats, cowboy hats are fairly large. Some are taller, some are shorter, but the brim extends further out in all directions than most other hats. These brims were designed to protect the cowboy from the elements, or the natural world around him. The hat makes the wearer need more space. It spread along a flat plane, like a desert horizon forming gentle valleys at its edges. Because of the space it takes, a cowboy wearing a cowboy hat can't walk through narrow hallways or crevices. In every Indiana Jones movie, there's a moment when the hero's hat falls away and narrowly avoids getting crushed by a falling rock or locking door. While a specialist wouldn't technically call Indiana Jones's hat a cowboy hat, to the average viewer it appears as such. The tension builds as this object that evokes such largeness is subjected to such tiny, cramped spaces. It is because of the largeness of the hat, or more so the largeness that we attribute to that hat and the expanse that we experience when looking at the object, that those moments feel so intense in contrast with the rapid demise of space. With the motif of the cowboy hat, there's also an essence of slowness. The cowboy hat brings to mind rural spaces and a more relaxed sense of time. It brings to mind big, warm suns and hot afternoons slowly moving across lands that radiate heat. There is a romantic distillation of time that comes from looking at the cowboy hat from wild west era that really only lasted a few years.

It is in this way that objects hold a kind of temporal, spatial, and symbolic meaning for the audience or reader. Bakhtin draws these examples of objects serving as temporal or spatial markers, but he also extends this kind of chronotope to individual words. One word that he focuses on is the word "suddenly" and its effect in writing[5]. He talks about how the word has the ability to evoke a sense of serendipitous time, or one that is perfectly choreographed. He talks about how the construction of time in narratives and the effect of things happening at the same time, or seemingly at the same time. He then expands this chronotope of "suddenly" past time and into space, that, with the phrase "at the same time as" there is also an understanding that there's an element of "at the same place".

The language used in different kinds of narratives has the power to create and layer time and space. In comics, the often used "meanwhile" has a similar effect in showing how time overlaps and replays itself to the reader. Some of these chronotopes of language are more media-specific, but sometimes not. In dramatizations of classic American comics, words are lent from one medium to the next to give the sense of the same chronotopes at work.

4 Bachtin Michail Michajlovič, and Michael Holquist. " Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in Genre: Notes toward a Historical Poetics." Essay. In The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.

5 Bachtin Michail Michajlovič and Michael Holquist, " Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in Genre: Notes toward a Historical Poetics," in The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

These language-based chronotopes are also genre-specific in a number of different ways. As Bakhtin establishes, narratives that require a strong sense of time behind highly controlled, like an adventure novel or a romance, use words like *suddenly* to instill a feeling of a temporal architecture that holds the world and story together.[6] It is these types of works, in these genres, that there is a specific cadence or tempo the piece works from and to. In a story where that dance isn't as important or fundamental to the architecture holding the story together, a work that intentionally meanders and sits and waits and ages, the words aren't used.

Bakhtin goes in a number of directions with his idea of the chronotope, but there are some directions I'm hoping to venture that Bakhtin resisted. At the center of Bahktin's idea of the chronotope is the understanding that they are tied down to a narrative. When Bahktin talks of the chronotope, he talks of it being a device that exists in the narrative itself instead of outside. Where I differ is in thinking of the chronotope as a kind of mechanism that is less directly embedded in the work, and more so embedded in how the work is experienced. This seems like an incredibly minor distinction between the two and some might argue that this is simply a disagreement of semantics. I would disagree. This is important because it takes the recognition of the mechanism of the chronotope away from what is assumed to happen in the text to what the reader or viewer actually experiences. For example, let's look at boredom. In a narrative, one could evoke an understanding of boredom by showing a small child looking outside a window on a rainy day with a listless expression on his face. Bahktin would argue
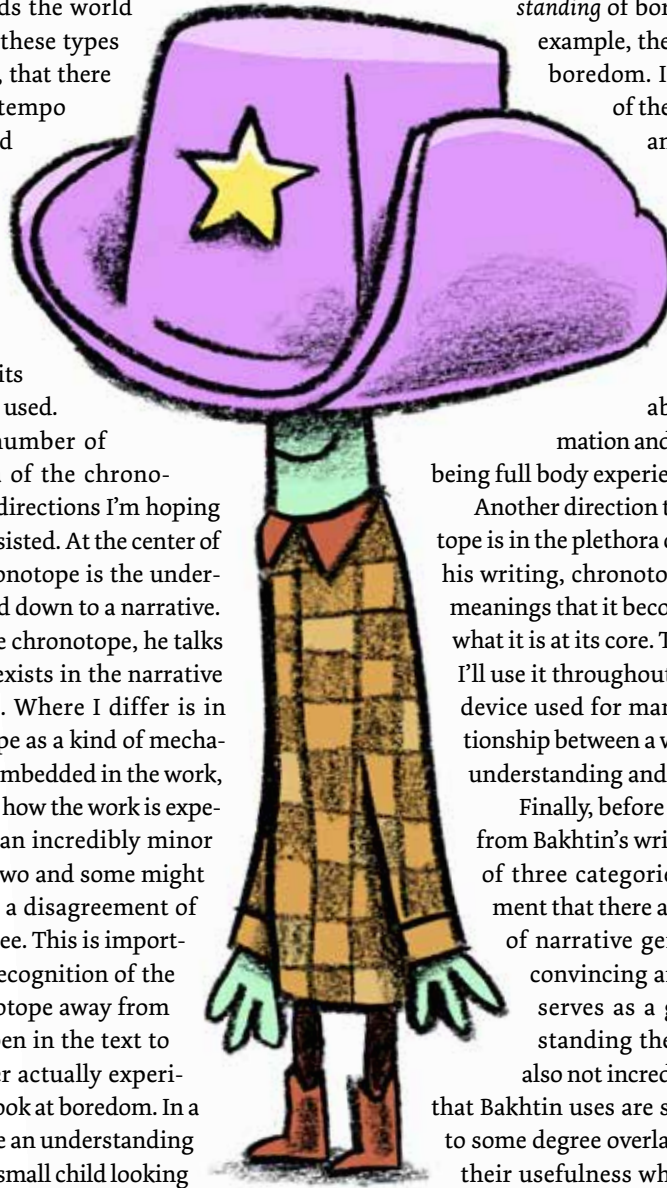
that this image generates an understanding of boredom in the narrative. Now, let's take that example and compare it to a scene in a movie that lasts 40 minutes and consists of only a few drops of water dripping from a leaky faucet. In the former example, the chronotope evokes an *understanding* of boredom whereas in the second example, the video evokes an *experience* of boredom. I'm expanding the definition of the chronotope past recognition and fully into cognition.

In expanding this idea of the chronotope, we then open the gates to a more experience focused, phenomenological understanding of stories and genre. Stories stop being about simply conveying information and impressions, and more about being full body experiences for their audiences.

Another direction that Bakhtin takes the chronotope is in the plethora of permutations it can take. In his writing, chronotope gathers so many different meanings that it becomes confusing to understand what it is at its core. The way I use it here is the way I'll use it throughout this paper; a chronotope is a device used for manipulating a time-space relationship between a work and its audience through understanding and/ or experience.

Finally, before we move on, I will also depart from Bakhtin's writings of genre as being in one of three categories. Bakhtin makes the argument that there are truly only three basic types of narrative genres. While his argument is convincing and correct in many ways and serves as a great framework for understanding the idea of the chronotope, it's also not incredibly helpful. The three genres that Bakhtin uses are so wide and overarching, and to some degree overlapping, that they seem to lose their usefulness when put into boxes. Instead, I advocate for a much looser arrangement of genre, not one that can be neatly placed into categories, but rather a series of collages that borrow elements from each other while still maintaining clear patterns.

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6 Bachtin Michail Michajlovič and Michael Holquist, " Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in Genre: Notes toward a Historical Poetics," in The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

A Circling back to Tampopo

When we come back to look at *Tampopo*, in order to understand what it is and what kinds of experience it evokes, we must understand what it actually does. Does the film function in the same time-space capacity as other westerns? What do westerns do?

Looking at the symbolic elements of the cowboy hat, we can understand part of the western. In the same way that the cowboy hat evokes a sense of space and time, the western similarly has this wide, spreading of time and a focus on the miniaturization of man in his relationship with the world around him. When we talk about the American southwest, we talk of uncharted expanses of land and the immensity of the world beyond our society. Westerns have two distinctive locations, the city and the desert. The city or saloons function as a respite from long days under a hot sun and traveling for several days through a landscape that eschews seasons and time passing on the leaves of trees. When we see a western saloon, the microscopic twitches of a bartender's eye or the flick of a drunkard's wrist call just as much attention and speculation as the cowboy's figure traversing a dune. The western basks in slowness and patience and focus on the short moments that flicker by.

Does *Tampopo* do this? The answer to that is complicated. To say that anything does this full-heartedly, even the most western of all westerns, is a difficult case to make. That being said, there are important aspects of experience of the western that carry over into *Tampopo*. While the traditional western delights in massive unoccupied lands, *Tampopo* uses the urban sprawl of Tokyo and its highways to evoke the vastness of the landscape around the story. Similarly to the western saloon, *Tampopo*'s ramen house scenes encourage a slowness and fixation on subtle interactions between people. Much in the same way that cowboys are intensified as charged figures in the desert or the city, *Tampopo* shifts that power away from the characters and instead to the food. The food takes on a character and body in most scenes. We fixate on its miniaturized movement, the way it jiggles or slides, in much the same way we would a horse's legs and the tiny plume of dust following as it traverses a wide, open plain. When the food is magnified, we look at its surface, whether it be gooey or crunchy, and experience a kind of miniaturization. We are seeing food in a way that is beyond the scope of capability of the human eye.

All that being said, *Tampopo* also works against the western genre in many ways. While it attempts to evoke the immensity of a western landscape through large shots of the city, these city shots do something fundamentally different from what the western genre typically does. The city shots of *Tampopo* are crowded and dense whereas the blue skies of the west are open and void. On top of that, there are a number of side-gag plots that completely disrupt the temporal and spatial effects of the main plot. As a whole, the film fails to hit that same sense of immensity that makes the western feel like a western most.

What we can conclude from this cursory analysis is that *Tampopo* is neither a western nor a *non*-western, but rather a complex narrative composition that incorporates elements of the western genre's time-space relationship and effect.

In the next two sections of this paper, I will look closely at two different comics, both of which similarly take the conventions of a specific chronotope. These two sections are a kind of deep reading and analysis of how these mechanisms work. I've structured them as extended examples of the kinds of analysis that can be made with this kind of thinking.

'Twas the Night of Thanksgiving and Generic Parody

A Very Close Reading

It's often said that the first line of a novel tells the reader all he or she needs to know about the rest of the story. While, of course, there are problems with this supposition, there may be a kernel of truth, especially when looking at *'Twas the Night of Thanksgiving*. Looking at the first page as a whole, the first line divided between the top and bottom shows the dual nature of the work as it seeks to call to mind and to some degree capitalize on the experience of reading a children's book. While it's difficult to consider "children's book" a specific genre considering the incredible multiplicity of directions various authors and illustrators have taken within their narratives, there's an experience to reading a children's book that is unique in how it manipulates the reader's sense of time and space.

The first line of this story immediately calls to mind the very famous poem it parodies, *A Visit from St. Nicholas* or better known as *'Twas the night before Christmas* by Clement Clarke Moore. Moore's poem exists and has existed so abundantly in the popular imagination and has manifested across so many types of media. There are books, movies, and songs that all reference the opening line and do so in the same, consistent cadence. That cadence is so ingrained that it's impossible to think of those words moving at any other speed. That slight, halted breath between *night* and *before* paired with the phantom echoes of a children's xylophone languidly ringing with the *I* in *Christmas* give such a powerful sensory quality to this simple connection of words and forces the listener or reader to slow, settle, and relax. These are words that one often looks forward to in childhood, so hearing them as an adult transports the mind to an era where time seemed to move at a glacial pace. This is not necessarily nostalgia, though that may play a factor, but a triggering of different states of being or a kind of association. These words conjure slow winter nights of stillness and contemplation.

Within just the first three words of this comic, the reader is put into a slower experience of time. The image in the first panel does the same thing. It's a simple image, a slice of cheese in front of a mouse hole. It's reminiscent of the next few words from the original poem by Moore, "not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse". The image has a bubbly, childish quality to it, not straight but wobbly, not precise, but clear and indicative, once again bringing the reader back to a slower time. There's a sparseness to the image that forces the viewer to sit and contemplate as he or she is forced to pull slowly from very little. The scale at which we see the cheese and the mousehole is incredibly close and intimate. This closeness changes the scale of the viewer to one who is much smaller and closer to the ground. Looking at the scale of the words, we move from big to small, visually shrinking ourselves once again. Our sense of time is slow and our sense of scale is very small.

The second image does the opposite of everything the first image sets up. In an instant, the viewer is pulled far away from the mousehole and is bombarded with various stimuli. This moving outwards produces a kind of whiplash, one that wakes the reader up from the established slumber of the first line and image and puts them into a space of disconnect. Whereas before there was simplicity and stillness, now there is complexity and action. The walls we once thought were bare are adorned with handprint turkeys. The space, which we expected to be empty for the night, everyone asleep in their beds, is full of people laughing, dancing, eating, and drinking. Where we were once presented with a still-life of intimacy, we are now made aware of the facade that the stillness played and are confronted with loudness and distance. The words expand once again as we hear the music get louder and louder.

The disharmony between the top and bottom of the page which represents the two channels this comic is working on. These two halves set up the reader's expectations of time and space for the rest of the story. We are brought back and forth at a disorienting rate between the slow and quiet and the fast and loud.
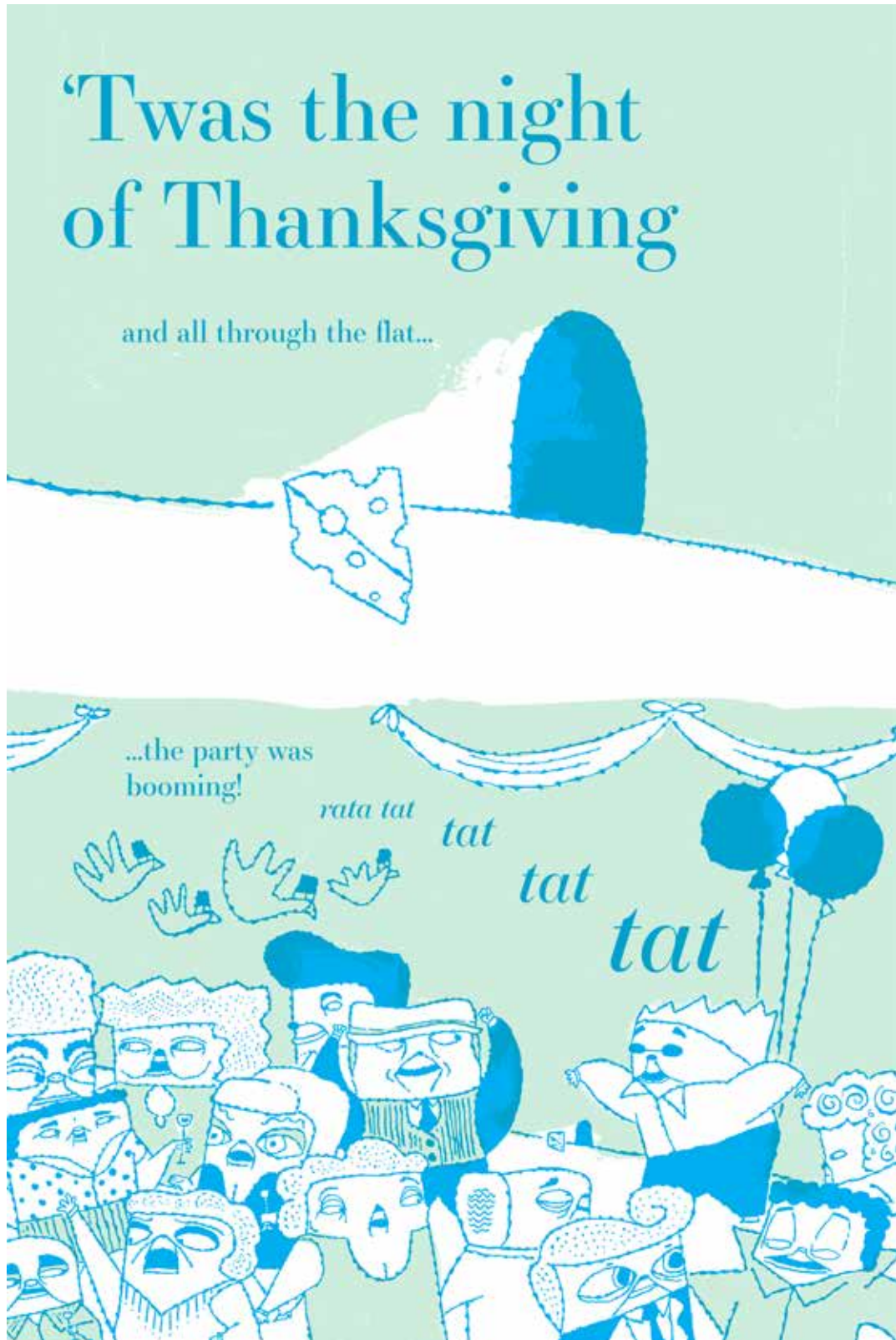
'Twas the Night of Thanksgiving
page 1 from *Lemonade Tango #1*
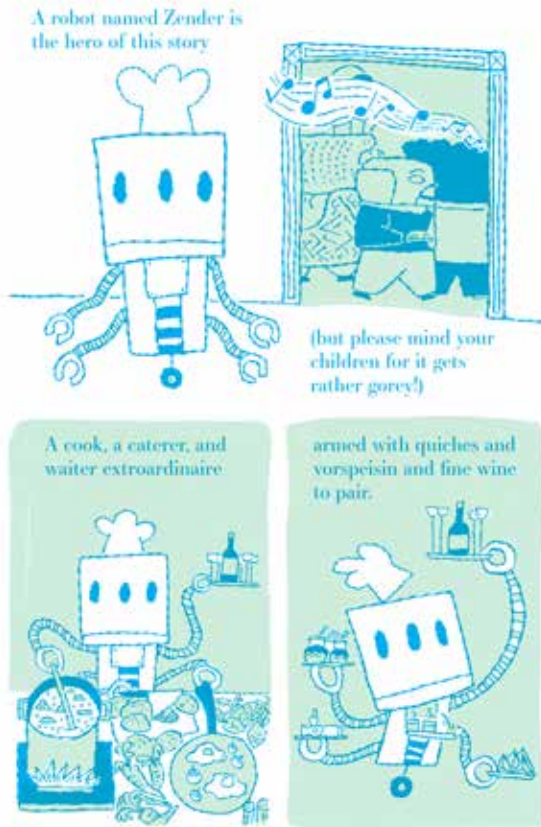
Above
'Twas the Night of Thanksgiving
page 2 from *Lemonade Tango #1*

Right
'Twas the Night of Thanksgiving
page 3 from *Lemonade Tango #1*

Pages two and three similarly play with this incongruity between experiences of time and space. To understand this better, we will look more abstractly at the pages as a collection of raw elements. Allow me to describe them in the most basic terms.

The first page has 3 panels and 37 words. The top half of the page is primarily white while the bottom is primarily green. The page is visually quite open with only the bottom left corner acting as visually dense. There's a sense of time passing through the page that happens primarily through montaging single moments through several individual panels.

The second page has 1 panel and 18 words. There is a consistent amount of green spread throughout the page. The page is quite dense with only a small path through the center. There's a conveyance of time through the page

that happens through an understanding of the implication that, since the character appears several times in the image, the image is not a stable one, but rather one that conveys a stretch of time experienced at the pace in which the reader moves from top to the bottom of the page.

These two pages are working with opposite mechanics. Starting with the effect of panels between the two, on the first page, the panels convey an abstract understanding of time passing and space existing, but do not ground the reader in either. In my essay *Speedrunning Tolstoy*, I talk about the different effects montage and time jumps or long takes have on the viewer's experience of time and space. Briefly, I make the argument that montage elicits a clear *understanding* of time passing whereas time jumps and long takes better elicit the experience of time passing. This same principle applies to comics. Consider the images on the following page.

In Figure 1, we have a clear understanding that time has passed. We could even put a tag at the top saying *one hundred years later* or the like to better show how much time has passed. In this instance, we are being told. In Figure 2, in seeing each brick placed, we experience the growth of this image over time. We slow down and experience
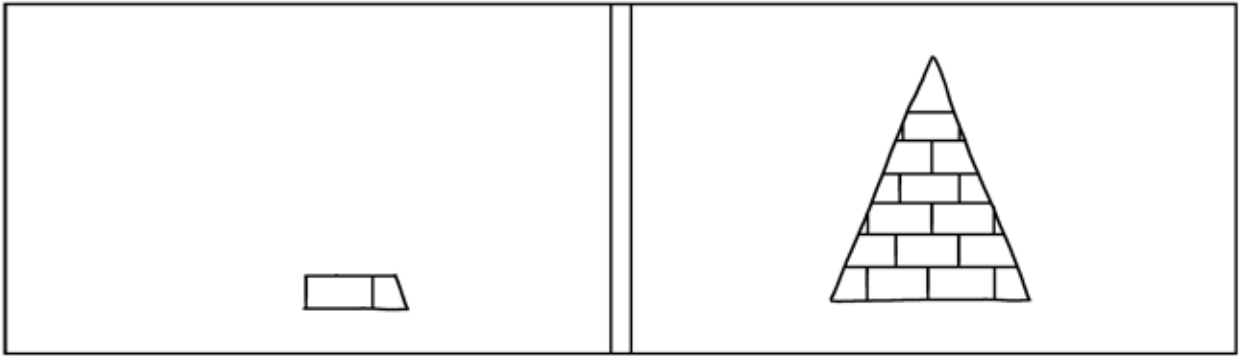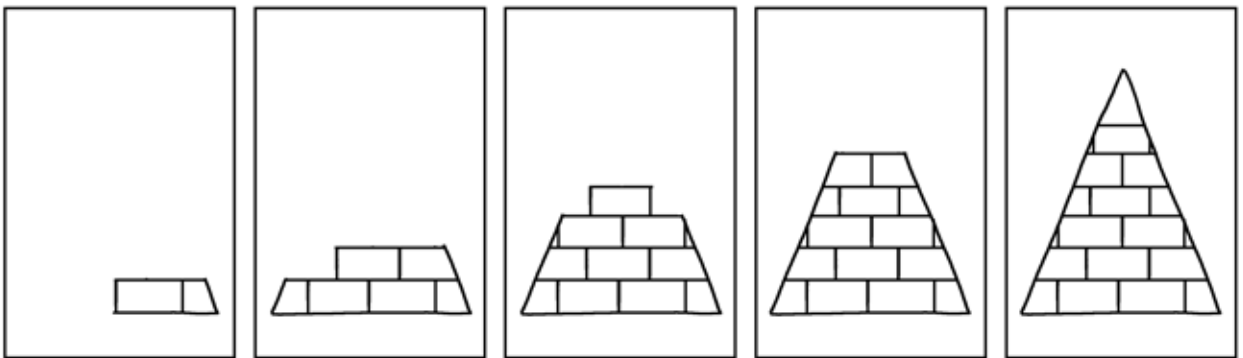
Figure 1

Figure 2

the speed at which the structure is constructed. It is like looking down at your watch and realizing that you've been asleep for an hour versus watching the hands on the clock count each second. The images from *Twas the Night of Thanksgiving* are working at these two levels. On page two, we *understand* that time passes. We have three points on a timeline. On page three, we *experience* time passing. We have the entire timeline.

Our experience of space is also manipulated by these two sets of images. On page two, despite the simplicity and frugality of line, we generally understand that Zender is in a kitchen and that the kitchen has space and depth and furniture even though we can't see any of it. Gutters in comics carry the implications of the world. On page three, we know that anything that is in the image is in the room and anything that is left out of the image does not exist. In that image, the bounds of the universe are confined to what we can see. In showing more, the world becomes less. Page one has an openness and implied space. Page two has closeness and defined space.

The pace of these images affects how we read the text. On the second page, we have significantly more text, yet the pacing of the images prompt us to read it more quickly.

On the third page we have less text, yet the pacing of the image prompts us to read it slowly. On the second page, our eye moves speedily between the boxes of text, lingering only for a moment on the images between passages. On the third page, we meander through the space confusing words for characters and characters for words. The third page encourages the viewer to spend time slowly moving around the space as Zender goes to deliver hors d'oeuvres.

Throughout the rest of this comic, we get a similar back-and-forth experience between slow and fast, big and small. Intimacy is disrupted and humor emerges from unexpected transitions.

Time as it Relates to Genre Parody

The Russian formalist Yury Tynyanov said that the goal of parody was to revitalize a genre or work[7]. In order to give another life to a genre, two parts are required. First is a degree of mimicry. The parody must take on the skin of the genre it's trying to poke fun at before it can make its jokes. The second is a subversion of expectation. The parody then must play with the existing conditions of the genre and work against them in some way. Oftentimes this means taking the visual elements of a genre, the spaceships in a space opera, and transforming them into the unexpected, for instance, adding a bumper sticker on the backside that says, "We Brake for Nobody"[8]. This tactic is highly effective, especially when it comes to gag comedy. If we take that principle, we can expand it past physical objects and into the realm of bodily experiences in the same way. This is exactly what *Twas the Night of Thanksgiving* does.

In establishing the speed and space of children's Christmas literature, the story evokes the kind of work that it is parodying. In drastically moving against that tempo and scale, the humor of parody surfaces. While there isn't a clear sight gag to point and laugh at, or may not even be laugh out loud funny, we experience this disharmony of our expectations not being met as humorous rather than distasteful. Why?

If we conceive of parody as a kind of genre, we inevitably find ourselves at a dead end. There are no qualities of parody that set it apart from other genres or group it with other parodies, other than the fact that it does what we don't expect it to do. Instead, if we conceive of parody more as a chronotope, a mechanism used to manipulate the reader's understanding of time and space, and less of a genre, its usage becomes less restricted and more useful in understanding the shape of genre narratives. Instead of being a genre itself, parody becomes a method to disrupt an established chronotope while still existing within that same chronotope.

While pinpointing the exact definition of what humor is and what makes things funny is a seemingly impossible task, when put into a simple, light hearted context like this one, the chronotopic shift is one that is taken with levity. The reader is not moved from placidity to horror, but is instead turned around and presented with an absurdity that does not take them too far outside the bounds of the narrative's relative reality.

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7 Clive Thomson, "Bakhtin's 'Theory' of Genre," *Studies in 20th Century Literature 9, no. 1* (January 9, 1984): pp. 29-31.

8 *Spaceballs* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1987).

In Conclusion

Chronotopes are not an *either/or* phenomenon, but rather a *yes and...* one. They can exist side by side, one following the other, or they can exist within one another. In *Twas the Night Before Thanksgiving*, the chronotopic framework encourages a slowness while the parody chronotope subverts that through our understanding of time.
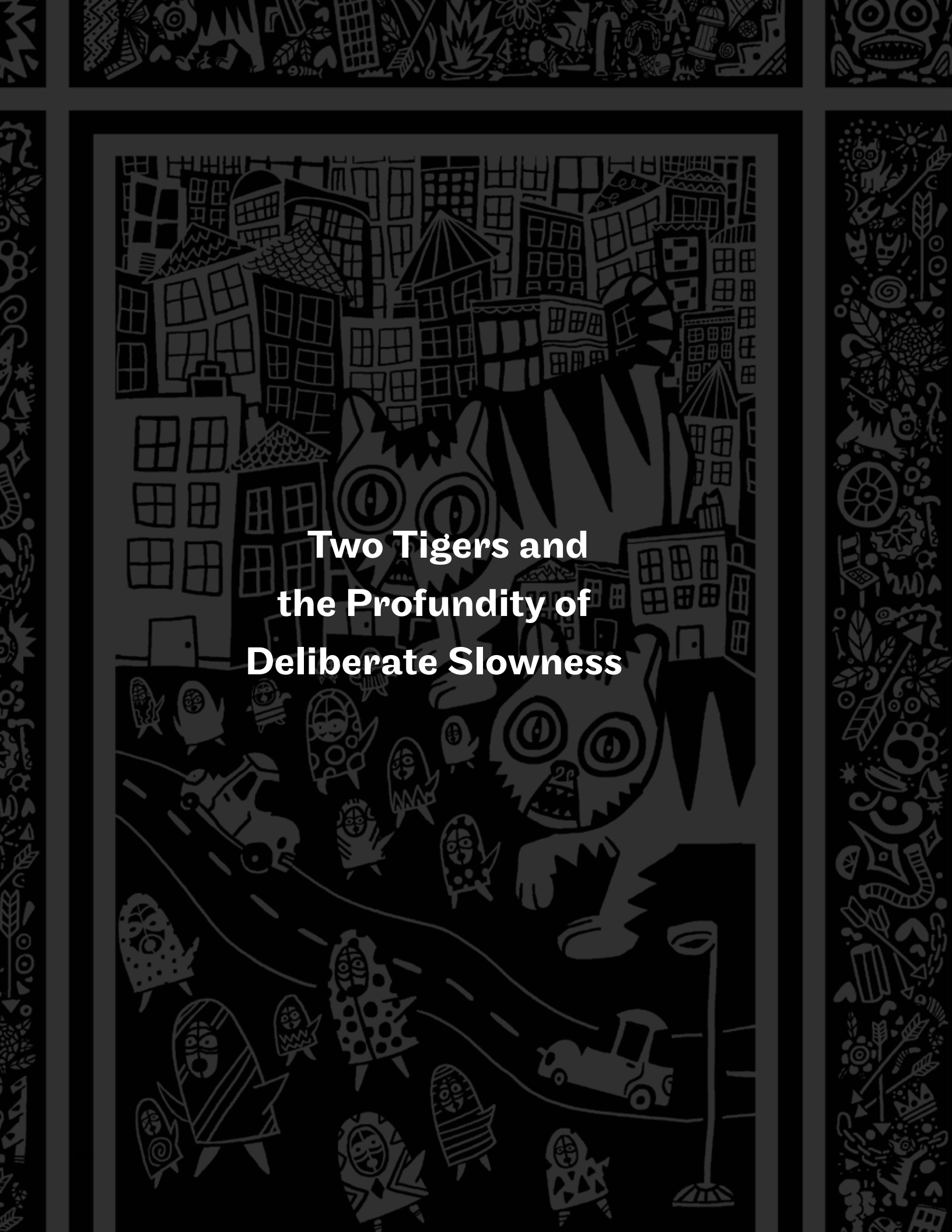
We can take the model described here and apply this to other ideas around parody as not as an external form of narrative, but as a latent ability within each story to contradict its own understanding of time and space. This is not just true in comics, but across other forms of media. Looking at a similar but completely different media, video games, we can see this same principle of parody of time and space being applied.

The experience of playing *Thirty Flights of Loving* by Blendo Games initiates the player by setting up a chronotope that evokes the high stakes, fast paced, tight movement of a heist or spy thriller. Being led through narrow corridors and seeking for small, hidden clues, the player zips through the game feeling like there's a tight precision or choreography that exists in the play that will soon pay off. The only thing is, it never does. The game sets up expectations based on its spatial and temporal indicators but then allows the player to essentially ignore those inputs. Towards the beginning of the game, the player character finds himself in the middle of a shootout and is tasked with carrying one of the wounded non-playable characters through a busy airport. There is blood dripping from the non-playable character and tension is high as the other people in the airport zip past the player character. Quick cuts evoke a disorientation and high speed aspect to this quasi-chase scene and tension builds as the character is forced to move significantly slower than before due to the increased weight from the body on his shoulders. While the entire game is moving so quickly, at any moment, the player character can just stop. There are no consequences for standing still and, even though the game is pushing for a specific speed, the player can decide to either move with that or to parody it. The gameworld controls how the player experiences time and space, a kind of overarching framework of a chronotope, but the player also has the ability to disregard that. The latent ability to circumvent the traditions of the chronotope are built into the actual mechanics of the narrative and the format.

With this thinking, we understand that chronotopes are complex creatures that can contradict one another while still existing within and beside the other. Parody arises when chronotopes meet, where we experience the idea of fast slowness or open closeness.

Using this knowledge and understanding of chronotopes, we can better see the complexity and contradictory nature that these beasts can take on. Looking at parody, we see it as a kind of genre that arises when chronotropes meet. The more these chronotope contradict, the more intense the experience is for the reader. Not only is this an interesting fact, but it also reveals something important about our nature as readers of stories in this modern era. In pushing fast slowness or open closeness together, we are exploiting fiction's magical ability to convince us for a moment that oil can combine with water.

Two Tigers and
the Profundity of
Deliberate Slowness

In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Italo Calvino lists five values of storytelling and writing that he hopes will be useful for the next millennium of writers. He makes the point to mention that, even though the values he discusses have virtue, their opposites might as well.[9] When discussing the value of lightness, he acknowledges that heaviness also has virtue. When writing about speed, he acknowledges that slowness also has a virtue. In this section, I will be looking at the virtue and profundity that is built into the experience of slowness and how that slowness can be evoked by our sense of space through a careful examination of the comic *Two Tigers* from *Lemonade Tango #2*.

Before getting into a deeper analysis of the work itself, it is important to look closely at what elements are at play in this piece and what those elements actually do. For the first section, I will simply describe the comic, paying attention to some specific peculiarities. For the second section, I'll look directly at what effect those peculiarities have on the reader. Finally, I'll conclude with a section on the grander lineage of this work.

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9 Italo Calvino and Geoffrey Brock, *Six Memos for the next Millennium* (London: Penguin Books, 2016).

The Elements

The first thing that hits the reader when looking at these pages is the immensity of black ink on the page. The pages start dark and individual objects and shapes are starkly illuminated from that darkness. The black ink takes space and defines forms. The balance of the black ink with the white shapes is consistent throughout the page to the point of looking like a uniform pattern. There are no grays in this image so when the black background hits the white shapes, everything is high contrast. There is a density that is built into every image and every page because of this contrast.

Of the defined white shapes in this sea of black, there's a simplicity to most of their forms. They boil down to rudimentary shapes, triangles, squares, and circles. They are plainly drawn with no shading or illusions of volume. There is some play with line over shape, but this is usually used as a texture or pattern rather than to define forms. These images do not inhibit the lived world, but rather one that is more symbolic. What I mean by this is that, while the tigers are identifiable as tigers, they're more symbolic representations or cartoons of tigers than actual animals that exist with weight in a space. The simplicity of these cut-out-like shapes are divorced from reality as it exists in photographs. The objects in these images push into one another and are retilily opposed to overlapping anything other than the background. This flattens out the space and further disrupts or abolishes any linear perspective.

While the shapes may be simple, there's a maximalist approach to their placement and configuration. The page is filled to the brim with several different symbols that exceed just the panels and bleed into the panel borders. There's an ornamental quality to these images, patterns that are divorced from the story, yet repeat over and over. In one section of the panel border, we see little tigers, elements that are clearly reflected in the story, but also little arrows, objects that do not appear even once. The cacophonous variety of images in the borders are smaller than the elements in the story, and can be easily overlooked. Yet, the panels themselves also have this quality of ornamentation in several places, namely backgrounds and crowds. Despite this visual fullness, the actions of each panel are clear. The ornamentation does not hinder or cover the movement in the panels.

Scale throughout this comic is highly inconsistent. The scale of the people in the neighborhood vary widely both within any given panel, as well as between panels. The relation between the characters and the spaces they inhibit is disrupted by the fact that people are as large as houses. The scale of the tigers fluctuate greatly. At the beginning, they are significantly larger in relation to the buildings they terrorize. By the end of the story, they are small enough to be put in a bag and seemingly small enough to be eaten by a fish. Nebuchadnezzar's scale in this story remains somewhat consistent, but only in that we see him as larger than others. Flowers that we'd normally see as miniscule are gargantuan. Despite this lopsided world, the characters inhabiting it don't seem to know or acknowledge its peculiarities.

While most of my analysis in this research thus far has focused on the mechanics of the medium itself, in this short piece, I will be looking at the story to some degree and will add an important layer of meaning. The story itself is incredibly simple and can be summarized in just one sentence: Two tigers rampage through a neighborhood until an old man puts them in a bag and throws the bag to the bottom of the sea. The language of the text is simple. The sentences are not complex in their construction, consisting almost solely of subject, verb, object. The sentences have an average of 7 words per sentence. The only exception is the final sentence, a compound sentence with a repeating adjective, which spreads across two panels. The comic is written in present tense. The first page of the story is about the tigers and the second page is about Nebuchadnezzar, a name taken from the biblical king who destroyed Jerusalem. The first two panels introduce the tigers. The next two panels develop the actions of the tigers and how the town feels about them. The next two panels introduce a new element. The final two panels resolve the tension set up at the beginning.

Two Tigers, page 2 from
Lemonade Tango #2

The Interpretation

The amount of black on the page has a number of different effects on the reader. Those more familiar with the church will see this piece and recollections of stained glass windows or illuminated manuscripts will immediately come to mind. The heavy black outlined objects have a religious quality to them, and the maximalist approach imbues the reader with this sense of immense labor by the illustrator. There are several heavinesses that come from looking at this work, one of which comes from the transference of the understanding of that labor from the artwork to the viewer. This sensation is similar to watching children run around or people lift weights. In observing these heavy actions, we take a fragment of them into ourselves and experience them as well. Another heaviness is the solemnity that a work like this carries visually. Because it exists in dialogue with other religious works, it carries some of that essence or energy when presenting to the viewer. While this is to some degree a cultural hangover, I also make the point that engaging with this amount of visual density carries these sensations when divorced from their context or lineage. The closest we can come to experiencing something that looks similar to this in our own lives is in imagining a world of darkness lit by candles. The basis for this comic is black and the light is pulled from that darkness in small pieces. Like the experience of being in the dark, there's a struggle that the viewer must go through, a slowness, a heaviness, in order to understand the objects and space. A work like this also reminds us of a more infinite kind of darkness, one that is all encompassing and that hides details and truths. This comic exists as a kind of dream in sleep, one where much is already forgotten even at the time of reading.

Just as the light and dark relation and density of the comic evokes this sense of slow serenity, the forms of the figures do too. The rudimentary shapes and ionic nature of the image calls to be interpreted rather than recognized. The reader must go through a translation process of taking these odd, crude shapes and lines in space and reinterpret them as something familiar and understandable. This process, when compared to the process of looking at and understanding a photograph, takes more time for us to experience. The comic teaches the viewer to exist beyond his or her reality, and that movement from the world of things that exist to the world of symbols, a world that is detached from literal meanings and depictions, disrupts our sense of time and space. It asks the viewer to consider a world where the absolute flatness of a picture plane is not an illusion, but the reality. In flattening out the world and having the reader experience that, *Two Tigers* simplifies or

confuses not only space, but time. In being unable to see shadows on figure or volume or depth, the light of the sun casts no new shadows and time stands still.

Along with the symbolic quality of these images, their simple shape language carries a specific kind of naivety that transports the reader back to his or her own childhood. Looking at the houses in the back, made of nothing but rectangles and an occasional triangle, there is an understanding of form similar to that of a child's. The forms in this comic do not exist as objects in space, but as a collection of independent objects placed next to one another. This collage of objects mimics the way we think of drawing as small children. In that mimicry, the image takes the reader back to those times and evokes a feeling of time shift. The time shift to childhood is one that brings to mind the infinity of time as time passes more slowly to a child than it does to an adult.

In being so bombarded with so many visual elements, the reader is forced to slow down when looking at this image. Whereas a more minimal approach might more easily convey specific ideas or motions, the effect on the sheer amount of time the reader spends with the work is completely stinted. In a work this ornamental, even if the viewer doesn't choose to look at every single visual element and object or border detail, by simply including them and densely packing them in together, the illustrator asks the reader to experience a miniature world that contains unlimited elements. The way I envision this is through the differences in travel. Traveling while looking out the window, like by car or by above ground train, conveys a completely different temporal and spatial experience as would travel without flashing sights, like by plane above a bed of clouds or by underground train. It is through the input and the opportunity to experience these distinct visual stimuli that the viewer is given the impression that there is more to the world. In dedicating time to the more that surround us, in attempting to focus on the trees that pass our windows instead of letting them exist as brown and green blurs, we are slowing down time for ourselves and seeing that which would normally be just background.

The bombardment of visual elements also changes the relationship we have with the actual narrative when there are this many visual stimuli in a space. Two readings of this comic, if not more, are possible. One is that the reader looks solely at the text, moving horizontally through the panels, ignoring the images completely. Another is the reader engages with both the text and image. In the later example, because the images are so maximal, it's difficult to focus on the words being written. The visual noise of the

Two Tigers, page 1 from
Lemonade Tango #2

images drown out what is actually being said. In doing so, this creates a disconnect between the text and image. In this story, however, the text and the images are doing the exact same thing. Looking at the first panel, we are told by the text that two tigers have come to the neighborhood and we see in the image two tigers entering a small town and people being afraid. The text and image are in dialogue with one another saying the same things to enforce one another's meaning, but through a series of veils. The sound of one connecting to the other is muffled and, since there is no clear path in this dense forest of drawings, we strain to move past those veils between the two. This strain is an experience of slowness.

The scale changes in this story move more experimentally rather than literally. What I mean by this is that the scale of any given object in this comic is not one that is consistent with its actual scale in the story, but by the size the

object is experienced at depending on what is happening in the story. Looking at the beginning of the story, the tigers tower over the neighborhood, bigger than buildings or people. They are a threat and the magnitude of that threat manifests in the experience of them taking more space on the page than anything else. As the threat increases, the tigers get larger to the point where, in the final panel of the first page, the tiger takes up the whole space of the panel. When a new element is introduced, Nebuchadnezzar, he instead takes up the most space on the page. In his confrontation, the viewer is forced to reckon with these two, massive forces and to comprehend their immensity in relation to one another and to the world around them. The drastic scale shifts and exaggerations not only give plausibility to the progression of events in this narrative, an old man being able to capture two wild tigers where a united city wasn't, but forces the reader to understand

the conflict on a more emotional, bodily level. The reader understands him or herself at the beginning in relation to the tigers. The reader is small. When the reader encounters Nebuchadnezzar, a body whose form takes a similar shape to those of the tiny people from the neighborhood, the reader experiences him or herself at that scale. When the two meet, there's a dissonance between the smallness that the reader originally felt in relation to the tigers at the beginning of the story with the equivalence the reader felt in relation to Nebuchadnezzar in the middle that isn't resolved until the last panel where the tigers sink away and we understand our scale again in relation to the fish.

We often experience simple narratives being read quickly. Few words are easier to read than more words. In this comic, the mechanisms at work disturb that quickness and force the reader to slow to a glacial pace. Spending more time on fewer words changes the meaning of those words and how they are understood and experienced. The words gain an air of complexity, intrigue, or even profundity. There's a contemplation of these words that can only happen when our sense of time is slowed and our sense of space is confused.

The Chronotope of Contemplation

In this section, I've thus far described *Two Tigers* and the experience of viewing the work. What I've alluded to throughout is a kind of genre that isn't often depicted in movies, a genre that capitalizes on the chronotope of contemplation: religious artwork. *Two Tigers* takes the reader, slows time, and confuses space and shapes. Looking at the royal portals of Chartres Cathedral in France has a similar effect. In Chartres, the doors are maximally decorated with a hoard of oddly proportioned, stretched and squashed little men. These men, most likely saints, fill the space and act as a kind of pattern. Their bodies are made of less literal, more simplified or idealized shapes and forms, and their bodies aren't understood as actual, but as metaphorical transformations of holy men. From Chartres Cathedral, we are not meant to understand a narrative, but rather a feeling, a slowing of time that only a divine process can impart on us. Chartres cathedral attempts to mimic the acts of god, stopping the only thing that is truly immovable in our world: time. This is not a typical slowing of time, but an incredibly intense slowing of time that allows one a deeper sense of contemplation and understanding. This slowing moves the reader or viewer to a glacial pace into a mind of miniature meditation. It is this very sensation of extreme slow time that we are able to see and understand profundity in a work, in a sentence, or in a word. Deliberate slowness in a fast paced world is a respite that is often overlooked when presented with options of efficiency and speed. *Two Tigers* relishes in this slowness.
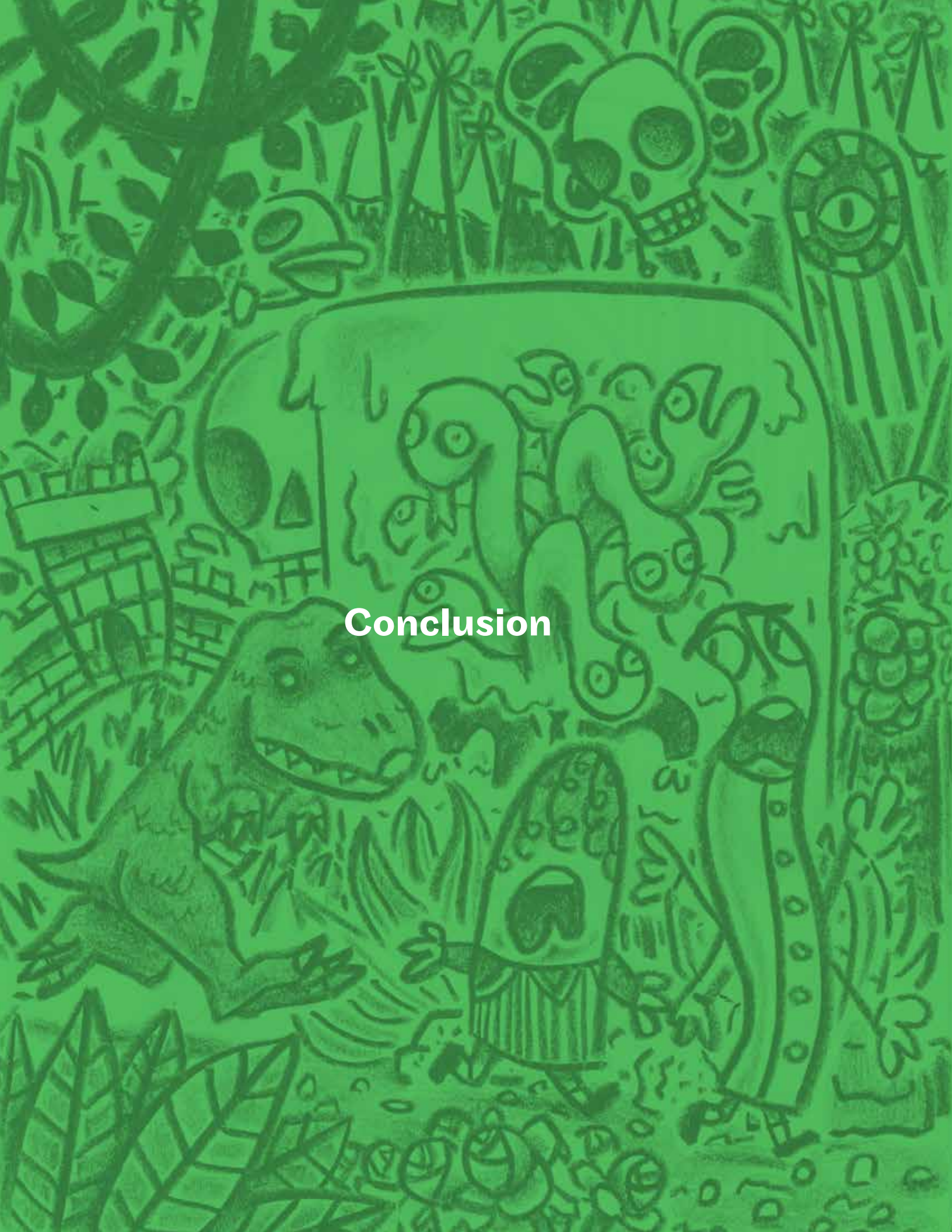
Conclusion

A question that I keep having to reckon with is this: How did a movie like *Tampopo* come to be made? I'm not asking a question of production history or the cultural dissemination of western films across the planet. I'm not asking about cameras, lights, or actors. Instead, I'm asking how is it that we've gotten to this point in our timeline of narratives that a story that remixes such disparate modes of understanding the world, the visceral pleasure of consumption with the sparseness of a western film, into a single dvd have become almost commonplace.

I won't attempt to draw out a timeline. Perhaps this thinking comes from the surrealists, drawing from dreams and the futile attempt to try and understand the incongruent relationships between a gumball and astronauts. Perhaps it has more to do with the tendency of parody to fold opposites together. Maybe it's a kind of rebellion against computer generated algorithms that attempt to nicely and neatly conglomerate stories with quick tags. My question isn't one that I have an answer to at the moment, but by asking it, we acknowledge the uniqueness of this moment and this chapter in the development of narratives.

The conclusion that I'm trying to come to with all of this is a new way of looking at, understanding, and talking about stories and how they work. In my work as a cartoonist and educator, I found myself dissatisfied with the unsubstantial vocabulary we have to use to talk about narratives.

A cursory internet search on the subject yields outdated results of formulaic manipulations of tropes like "the hero's journey" or "the three act structure". While these formulas are useful for some, they do not even remotely embody what it means to tell a story. They are one piece of a puzzle that relies completely on plot superseding all other elements. None of this is to say that plot isn't important. Plot is like a skeleton of a narrative but, without muscles, skin, blood, or voice, a narrative can't convince us it is real.

What I propose is taking this framework of looking at narratives into a classroom and using it as a way for students to gain a better understanding of the effects of stories. This framework gives students a vocabulary and way of thinking about stories at a more foundational, primal level that anyone can approach. In having this vocabulary, students can then provide better, confident feedback for their peers that will push forward stories past just plots.

In reading poetry, we must be finely attuned to what effect the words have on us, the readers. We must take in their sounds and double meanings and consider them slowly. While poetry has the luxury of demanding time from its readers, if we afford that same time intuneness towards prose, if we read comics in the same way we read Dickinson, we'll come away with a better understanding of how narratives work.

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