The Narrative Imagination across Media: Dreaming and Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*

Richard Walsh

The title for this panel is "Understanding Comics," but the thrust of my paper is more like "Using Comics to Understand Narrative, and Narrative Fictionality in Particular." The comics medium figures here as a means of inquiring into the relation between narrative and its media, which I want to pursue into the cognitive domain; having done so I want to consider, in cognitive terms, the candidacy of dreams as prototypical fictions—which is the main reason why my example is taken from that treasury of dreams, Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*.

Let me begin by considering the relation between two adjacent comics frames, where these delineate a simple event. A convenient example on the handout is the lifting of the veil, at the bottom right of the page. If you were to explain how we comprehend this sequence of images, you might say, with Umberto Eco, "obviously the reader welds these parts together in his imagination and then perceives them as a continuous flow" (24). But is this obvious? I want to argue that such a process is in no way inherent in reading such a sequence, and furthermore that in terms of narrative comprehension it would in fact be a retrograde move. This claim has large implications for our understanding of the role of media in narrative representation.

Consider the way Eco's comment represents what happens in the interpretation of a comics sequence such as our veil example. It is conceived as a two-stage process, an imaginative welding followed by perceiving, by means of which the reader works back through the transformations of the creative process and arrives at a virtual experience of

the originary stream of sense data that it is supposed to mediate. The assumed end point of the process, that perception of "a continuous flow," is the focus of my objection. An undifferentiated flux of sense impressions may indeed constitute the raw material of experience, but as undifferentiated flux it is meaningless: only the cognitive exercise of representation makes sense of it, by articulating it—among other things, demarcating it into events. The lifting of the veil is articulated as an event, an act of revelation, by these two images, the two frames of the sequence. If we were really to respond to this sequence by subsuming it within a continuous flow, we would strip it of its status and meaning as an event. Event status, and narrative tellability, is not intrinsic in the temporal world, but evaluative, and always relative to some interpretative or communicative context.

The relation between frames is also discussed by Scott McLoud, but here too the point that concerns me is, at best, obscured. McLoud explains how we bridge the gutter between frames in terms of visual closure, "observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (63), an approach that is very prone to a conflation between representations and their objects. So while he says that "in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea" (66), a formulation I would happily accept, he also says that "closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous unified reality" (67), and "closure is comics' primary means of simulating time and motion" (69). These are statements I want to resist, because they embody the basic assumption that I'm contesting: that is, the assumption that representation works simply as a reproduction, or simulation, of reality, temporality, and flux. Representation in any medium is semiotic: it always functions within some system of signs, the interpretants of which are not the real, but other signs. This pursuit of signs

is a function of cognitive processing, and it could not lead beyond that frame of reference without ceasing to signify, at which point it would also cease to have any pragmatic value. The efficacy of representation depends upon the fact that it begins and ends in the mind: its baseline is not the real but the percept, which is itself a representation, and only functional as significant within the articulated system of perception. Narrative representation has its roots here, in the articulation of change: it delimits the mutability of matter in time, producing event, cause and effect, agent and purpose.

In order to draw out the implication of my argument for our understanding of narrative media, it helps to consider Marie-Laure Ryan's distinction between transmissive and semiotic concepts of a medium, as a "channel of communication" or a "material means of expression" (16). Ryan argues that neither category alone can yield an adequate definition of medium: transmissive senses represent media as the technological conduits of essentially autonomous meanings; while semiotic senses do not provide for the conceptual separation of medium and message that is necessary if we are to understand narrative as a structure independent of any medium, and transposable between media (17). However, the view I am advancing contradicts this second argument: there is no conceptual level of narrative between the formlessness of mind-external data and the semiotic framework of representation, in which some medium is inherent, whether mental or technological. Narrative ideation is itself medium bound, in the perceptual and conceptual apparatus of mental representation. In other words, My argument implies that the semiotic sense of medium does indeed supply a necessary and sufficient definition of medium, while the transmissive sense involves a range of more or less contingent, more or less technological extensions of the concept. Narrative, on this view, cannot be

medium-independent: it is always dependent upon representation in some medium, even while it is capable of harnessing several.

The sense in which the category of narrative transcends any particular medium, then, is not to be conceived in deep structural terms, by invoking medium-independent notions such as fabula, or story grammar: it is a discursive matter—a communicative rhetoric that exploits certain representational capabilities that are common to a range of media. The only alternatives to this view are that narrative structure can be conceived in the absence of representation, or that representation can be conceived in the absence of any medium. For narrative structure to be independent of representation, story logic would have to be innate in mind-external reality: the world itself already storied. On the other hand, if story grammars are mental representations, but independent of "medial realization," which would be reserved for the process of "externalization" (Jahn 201), this commits us to an unjustifiably restricted definition of "medium." A medium, minimally, is a vehicle of semiosis, and that is present at the ground level of cognitive processing, in the articulation of sense data in the perceptual system. The necessary condition for semiosis, here, is articulation, rather than communication in any restrictive sense: semiosis is always, even within the mind, a contextually situated and dialogic process (Peirce 6: 388). The idea of representation is not intelligible without a medium: the media of narrative mental representations, then, are the mind's own perceptual and conceptual systems.

There is a basic distinction between the idea of story grammars, which derives from the linguistic foundations of structuralist narratology, and more broadly cognitive terms such as "schema" and "script" (Schank and Abelson). Scripts are not particularized

narratives, somewhat as grammars are not sentences; but unlike grammars they are not generative, in the sense that they do not define what shall and shall not be a well formed, or "grammatical" narrative. Instead, scripts are heuristic: their value lies in the extent to which they facilitate the ongoing encounter between mind and temporal existence. Grammars are medium-independent abstractions that characterize the structure of digital semiotic systems, such as language, which use discrete signifying units; but narrative is capable of articulation in both digital systems and analogical systems such as visual imagery, which are graded or scalar. Narrative, then, is not amenable to grammar: scripts and schemata are not abstractions but templates, general-purpose representations, which serve as tools of the cognitive project of the narrative faculty. The narrative faculty, on this view, is not a species of the linguistic faculty, but something quite distinct and in some sense more primitive.

In the discussion so far I have silently run together two perspectives upon narrative representation that I now want to juxtapose more explicitly. In one perspective, narrative is the *object* of interpretation; in the other, it is a *means* of interpretation. These alternatives are well captured in David Herman's introduction to *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, where he distinguishes between "making sense of stories" and "stories as sense-making" (12-14). This sense-making process is inherently anthropocentric, and indeed anthropomorphic, not because stories are about people (though they usually are), but because they are *by* people: their frame of reference is human experientiality. We are capable of recognising the partiality and distortion entailed by this horizon, and we have developed other ways of modelling the universe which have greater analytic and predictive powers in many contexts; but there is something

irreducible about the limitations of narrative sense-making, because those same limitations are integral to narrative's role in the production of human value. This elemental reciprocity between narrative process and narrative meaning is what I mean to capture in the word "articulation," which means both the creation of significant relations between parts, and the expression of such relations: in narrative, fundamentally, these two are the same. This reciprocity can also be seen as the root of a recursiveness that I think is innate in narrative understanding generally, and crucial to the fictive use of narrative. The same recursiveness is latent in Herman's distinction between making sense of stories and stories as sense-making: the correlation of these two perspectives expresses very well the point that, within the parameters of narrative, making sense of stories is making sense of sense-making. That is to say that, both across and within media, narrative representations are intelligible in terms of other narrative representations. Narrative sense-making always rides piggy back upon prior acts of narrative sense-making, and at the bottom of this pile is not the solid ground of truth, but only the pragmatic efficacy of particular stories for particular purposes in particular contexts.

The distinctive rhetoric of narrative fictionality can be understood in relation to this principle of narrative recursiveness, by way of the rather more accessible phenomenon of self-reflexivity. The sample comics page on the handout is self-reflexive in a number of ways, but I want to make a broad distinction between two kinds: the first kind, overt self-consciousness, is a circumstantial (but not unusual) feature of this example, and one of the ways fictionality often advertises itself; but the second kind, implicit self-reference, is the more fundamental feature of narrative self-reflexivity, and it is the exploitation of implicit self-reference that most strongly correlates with the rhetorical stance associated

with fictionality. One aspect of the overt self-consciousness here is characteristic of the whole *Sandman* series, which constantly indexes the literary and visual heritage of several cultural traditions: here for instance, we have the allusions to the gothic novel, *Melmoth the Wanderer* and *The Castle of Otranto* in particular; and the evocation of John Tenniel's Alice. Those are both features of Zelda's dream, at the bottom of the page. Chantal's dream, at the top, exhibits another, formal aspect of overt self-consciousness, in which Gaiman exploits the relation between the verbal and visual channels of the comics medium. Chantal dreams she is having a relationship with a sentence, and the sentence that tells us so, standing in for her lover-sentence (which we never get to read), is an embodiment of that odd elevation of language: the lettering emphasises the materiality of the text, and the words form a monumental block filling half the frame, balancing the image of Chantal herself in the other half. The verbal text of Chantal's dream plays with the conceit of the lover-sentence, but the images are complicating the story, in a way that illustrates my other category of self-reflexivity, the implicit self-reference exploited by the rhetoric of fictionality (here, I'm referring to the fictionality of *Sandman*, not of Chantal's dream narrative). This visual counter-narrative begins at the juncture of text and image, with the letter zed, or zee, which appears to be the title of the book in Chantal's dream; it is also, as Zelda's dream reveals, the pet name Zelda's mother used for her. So it is significant that in the second frame Chantal kisses the book, as opposed to the sentence, and that in this frame, her head position and her anomalously dishevelled hair closely echo the image below, of their actual sleeping position, in which Zelda occupies the position of the book. These metonymic and metaphoric displacements (sentence to book, book to Zelda) imply that understanding the sentence is understanding

Zelda. But Chantal's explicit dream narrative is pulling away from any such insight, and in the next frame begins to re-establish the idealised self-image represented by the full-face pose. The tension involved in sustaining the surface narrative finds expression in the negative turn of events from this point on, while the direct gaze of Chantal's ideal self-representation prepares us for its fracture into shards in the last frame of the dream: this confirms it as a mirror image—or perhaps, since the "Z" is not reversed, as the inaccessible self of whom the dreaming Chantal is herself only a broken reflection.

This sort of interpretation cannot be supported solely by reference to the notional object of representation, the dream itself, because it depends upon transgressions of the boundaries between media channels, narrative threads, and non-sequential frames on the page. Instead, it is sanctioned by our awareness of self-awareness, which is the substrate of fictive rhetoric. The foregrounding of implicit self-reference is characteristic of fictionality because it is intrinsic to the priority of discourse over reference in the narrative imagination: the fictive process generates narrative in response to anthropocentric imperatives (on several levels: instinctual/libidinal, emotional, ideological), which are available as values only within a discursive economy; whereas non-fictional narrative is generated under the presiding referential imperative of factual accountability. This privileging of value over fact is not a substantial distinction, but a rhetorical one: all narrative semiosis unfolds in an evolving recursive process or feedback loop within the domain of discourse. Non-fictional narrative, however, is characterised by a rhetorical "direction of fit" in which semiosis is always approaching its represented object, only to arrive at another sign; whereas fictional narrative semiosis is always approaching achieved significance, only to arrive at further representation. This reversal

of the direction of fit that prevails in the non-fictional paradigm is the rhetorical reorientation that an awareness of fictionality provides for, and that makes it possible to comprehend this distinctive use of narrative media. The fiction/non-fiction distinction is not fundamentally ontological, but pragmatic: not a distinction between referential worlds, but between communicative purposes.

There is another aspect of my example that I wish to exploit, which is its subject matter. The whole *Sandman* series is centrally preoccupied with dreams, and this page attempts a plausible, fairly literal representation of certain aspects of dreaming. I'm not proposing to do anything so tendentious as to treat these fictional representations of dreams as if they were instances of actual dreaming: What I want to do, though, is to use some of the issues raised by the attempt at representation itself as an occasion to reflect upon certain features of dreaming, and to speculate a little upon the relation between dreams and fictions.

Dreams are situated ambiguously between experience and narrative, and that is bound to be exposed by any attempt to represent a dream. The two instances on the handout respond in different ways, which are manifested in their differing strategies of narration and focalization. Chantal's dream is narrated in the third person, which might deter us from attending to her as dreaming subject, except for the strong sense of internal focalization—that is, of an alignment between the third person narration and Chantal's own perspective. This is apparent in the text of the dream, and in the form of that text, the cursive script suggestive of Chantal's own handwriting; it is also conveyed by the sense that, as I've already suggested, the frontal images of Chantal are mirror images, and hence that we are seeing through her eyes. The sense of Chantal's dream that emerges is

of a third-person self-narration, in which experience is continuously pushed to arm's length, producing the cyclical, self-eluding self-consciousness that is central to Chantal's characterization. To some extent, then, this representation of dreaming evades the ambiguity between experiencing and narrating even as it foregrounds it: the dream Chantal produces and consumes remains trapped in cycles of creation and reception, writing and reading.

Zelda's dream is different in a number of ways. Firstly, the text is first-person narration, except in the very last frame. At the same time the visual self-representation is even more dissociated than Chantal's: it is not even a childhood self, but a cultural archetype of the young girl adrift in a strange world. There is a stronger sense here of a fluid reciprocal relation between the generation of the dream narrative and the dreamer's experience of it, a reciprocity conveyed by distributing its elements between the verbal and visual channels of the representation. The verbal narrative is a breathless monologue (the text is compressed so that there are no spaces between the words), which at times becomes a kind of meta-discourse, a running commentary upon the visual articulation of the dream narrative: "That's us"; "Let it be Chantal, not my Mom"; "Thank you God". The visual channel, meanwhile, is both anticipating and responding to the verbal discourse. The iconography of mother and daughter in the second frame conflicts with the commentary identifying this as Chantal and Zelda, and leads into the anxious confusion of Chantal with Zelda's mother that follows. Conversely, the verbal narrative of Zelda's Mom saying "Oh God Zee you're sick listen Robert do you know what I saw in her room your daughter's disgusting" is then elucidated via the image of an animal skull, the ornate picture frame of which marks it as a flashback, an image of a disturbed family history

preserved on Zelda's psychological mantelpiece. The perspectival fluidity of Zelda's dream is even more apparent in the last three frames: the veil sequence is the only clear-cut example here of first-person experiential perspective, images in which the dream experience and dream narration coincide; whereas the detached third-person narration of the final frame removes us to a greater distance from the action than at any point previously. This frame can only continue to make sense as Zelda's own dream perspective at the cost of a radical dissociation from her own self-representation—that is, a close analogue of the shattered mirror effect at the end of Chantal's dream.

The problem of person and perspective in the representation of dreams is indicative of the dream's ambiguous status between experience and narrative. The ambiguity is in part a question of the distinction between the dreaming mind and its self-representation within the dream—a distinction manifest, for example, in any awareness that you are somehow not yourself, as Zelda most obviously is not—but it is also, more broadly, a question of consciousness in dreams. The difficulty in locating the self in dreaming is the reason why it turns out that the most partial self-representation here is the most direct one: the first-person experiential perspective of the veil sequence. Conversely, the most rounded perspective emerges from the most dissociated representation: the last frame, incorporating as it does the interpretative idiosyncrasy of Zelda's affective response to her own dream. Selfhood is never integral in a semiotic model of cognitive articulation, which is both by and for the self. Dreams tend to foreground this internal division, by adding to the split between sender and receiver a further split between narrator and agent.

The broader context of the ambiguity between experience and narrative, concerning consciousness in dreams, is a multi-layered issue: consciousness of self is one level of it,

somewhere mid-way between the irreducible level of consciousness on which you experience the dream, and the more occasional consciousness that you *are* dreaming, or even conscious manipulations of the course of the dream narrative. All these coexist with the unconscious level on which dreams typically form themselves, independently of any conscious choice on the dreamer's part. Conscious choice, however, is consciousness of a choice: it is not coextensive with choosing. The sequential character of dream development, which comes out especially strongly in Zelda's dream, is a result of an ongoing process of "self-interpretation" in dreaming, which can be said to straddle the border of consciousness. Bert States has aptly characterised dreaming as a "first draft of thought," in which an initially random collision of images prompts the sense-making effort of the dream-work (110). He notes a key difference between dream thought and waking processes such as free association or daydreaming, which is that "the dream can't revise. What comes to mind goes straight to the visual cortex" (112). The sequential development of dreaming can be seen as an effect of this constraint: it is a kind of revision on the fly.

My speculative thought resolves into the question, are dreams fictions? The answer would be trivial if it rested upon their referentiality: of course they are not true. But it rests more fundamentally upon the way we understand the mental apparatus of perception to be functioning as a medium in dream cognition. Percepts in general are already internal representations, certainly, but they are not innately narrative; the narrativity of dreams depends upon the assumed sources of dream material. Is the selection of dream material itself a cognitive process, drawing purposively upon episodic and semantic memory? Or is the input to dream cognition an effect of other determinants (instinctual

drives, sensory stimuli, recency effects, random brain activity), in which case the cognitive phase of the dream-work is the effort to make sense of this material, which is functionally equivalent to sensory data? The ambiguity is between fiction and illusion, or narrative and experience. It is clear, however, that whatever blend of these two aspects of dreaming applies, dreams cannot be purely illusional. At the higher levels of dream cognition, there is an overt self-consciousness informing the creative process of the dream-work. But even at the most elemental unconscious level, the dream-work is a sequential, recursive process, in which every representation is influenced by the cognitive assimilation of the preceding one. Where the dream materials originate independently of cognitive processing, they have the status of data, even if not quite the external data of waking life; but where they arise out of cognition, they are subject to whatever imperative values inform that process. To that extent, the dream conforms to the direction-of-fit rhetoric by which I have characterized fictionality, its representations generated discursively, out of prior representations, rather than referentially, in response to experiential data; and to that extent, it can be understood as a, or even as the, proto-fiction.

Works Cited

Eco, Umberto. “A Reading of Steve Canyon.” *Comic Iconoclasm*. Ed. Sheena Wagstaff. London: ICA, 1987. 20-25.

Gaiman, Neil, Mike Dringenberg, Malcolm Jones III, et al. *The Sandman, Vol. 2: The Doll’s House*. 1989. New York: Vertigo/DC Comics, 1990.

Herman, David. “Introduction.” *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*. Ed. David

Herman. Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2003. 1-30.

Jahn, Manfred. "'Awake! Open Your Eyes!' The Cognitive Logic of External and Internal Stories." *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*. Ed. David Herman. Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2003. 195-213.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. 1993. New York: Harper Collins, 1994.

Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Collected Writings*. 8 Vols. Ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss & Arthur W Burks. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-58.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. "Introduction." *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*. Ed. Marie-Laure Ryan. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. 1-40.

Schank, R. C. and R. P. Abelson. *Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1977.

States, Bert O. "Dreams: The Royal Road to Metaphor." *SubStance* 94/5, 2001. 104-118.