Busy, Busy, Busy: The Social Uses of Frantic Pacing and Crowded Panels in Contemporary Children's Comics

Thierry Groensteen's groundbreaking *The System of Comics* (1999) puts forward the provocative claim that "those who recognize in the verbal an equal status, in the economy of comics, to the image, begin from the principle that writing is the vehicle of storytelling in general. Yet the multiplicity of narrative forms [of visual media] has rendered this postulate obsolete" (x). In comics, as in film, Groensteen goes on to argue, the image "occupies a more important space than that which is reserved for writing. Its predominance within the system attaches to what is essential to the production of the meaning" (x). Comics grammar is predicated, therefore, on the idea that images drive the narrative, and a further supposition has been the belief that *child* readers require extra assistance in decoding the sequential relationship among panels in a comic. This assistance has come in a number of forms designed to help a child keep track of characters (think of Charlie Brown's iconic yellow shirt with the jagged brown stripe) or follow the action from panel to panel (via arrows or the careful placement of a cascade of panels). The entire premise behind Francoise Mouly's publishing imprint Toon Books is the idea that young readers need to be eased into their engagement with the comics medium.

Recently, however, comics creators such as Steven T. Seagle and Jason A. Katzenstein (*Camp Midnight*, 2015), Lorena Alvarez (*Nightlights*, 2016), and Luke Pearson (*Hilda and the Stone Forest*, 2016) are foregoing these guides and are creating texts that are incredibly chaotic and challenging to decode. This paper goes beyond describing the busy/chaotic phenomenon in children's comics by focusing on radical cultural ideas that are often buried beneath the chaos and rendered accessible only to those young readers who are able and willing to spend significant time decoding page after page of frantically paced imagery.