CHAPTER TWO

The Aardvark Hero: Dave Sim's *Cerebus*

A number of threads have emerged in my analysis of R. Crumb that I will continue to follow through my reading of Dave Sim's *Cerebus*. Both creators share a preoccupation with male identity, a desire to claim and validate the position of the outsider, and crucially, a belief that the form and conventions of the comic book are of particular value to the expression of this identity. Beyond these similarities, however, there are also significant differences in these writers' approaches to the expression of selfhood, and in the shape that their work has taken.

This chapter will be divided into two sections. I will begin by outlining the circumstances of *Cerebus'* publication, which are extraordinary in their own right, and will then proceed with a brief overview of the plot and some of its main themes, focusing in particular on the way in which the comic has come to act as a mouthpiece for Sim's unorthodox opinions. The second part of this chapter will focus on technical details in a close reading of one section of *Cerebus*. My analysis will centre primarily on those moments when Cerebus is drugged, confused, conflicted, hallucinating or otherwise unreliable. These sections are of particular importance because Sim's belief in the inauthenticity of dominant western ideology, and its roots in fallible human perceptions, are central tenets of his personal philosophy. For thirty years Sim has deliberately set himself apart from Canadian society, espousing views that even his most loyal readers often find bizarre or offensive. As I will argue, the comic book form is integral to Sim's project for several reasons, including its technical aptitude for describing unreliable perceptions, its conventions of serial publication, and its place within a fan community that shares Sim's interests in the social exclusion and identity struggles of white males.

Cerebus is a daunting comic, if only by virtue of its scale: Sim proudly describes it as "the longest sustained narrative in human history".[1] It runs to around six thousand pages, now collected in sixteen volumes. Dave Sim started work on the comic in

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1   Tasha Robinson, "Interview: Dave Sim". *The Onion A.V. Club*. March 31st, 2004. <http://www.avclub.com/content/node/22954>

December 1977 and published the final issue, #300, in April 2004.[2] From issue #65 (1985) onwards, much of the background artwork was produced by a second illustrator, Gerhard, but the plot, script and visual appearance of the whole remained very much Sim's own. Having produced little of note throughout the early part of his career, Sim worked more or less exclusively on this single title for twenty-six years, and self-published it through his own company, Aardvark-Vanaheim.[3]

Cerebus the Aardvark began as a parody of *Conan the Barbarian*, which in the 1970s was drawn by Barry Windsor-Smith and published by Marvel. Cerebus begins as a barbarian mercenary, wandering a pseudo-medieval world engaging in a series of fights and adventures. Eventually settling in the city-state of Palnu, he is placed in charge of security forces (under the official title of "Kitchen Staff Supervisor") and progresses to prime minister then pope in a 1700-page story arc which focuses on the dynamics of political power. He meets, loves and eventually loses a woman, Jaka. After the collapse of Cerebus' brutal regime, he lives through a long period in which the political power is held by extremist feminists, "Cirinists". He experiences a number of ascensions into space, where he converses with a supernatural entity, the Judge, a fellow aardvark, Suenteus Po, and his creator, Dave. He drinks heavily, works in a bar, gets lost in landscapes of his own mind, travels, starts his own religion, and dies alone in extreme old age.[4] This simplified summary belies the fact that the plot of *Cerebus* is extremely elaborate. Charting the life of its protagonist from the age of twenty-six to his death, the story is set in an imaginary medieval society, although the anachronisms are so numerous as to render the date meaningless. Fifteenth-century Estarcion is a historical no-man's land, with glass windows, orange juice, the invention of the automatic crossbow and costumes from any number of historical periods. *Cerebus* borrows characters not only from other

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2   On the assumption that future comics scholars will generally be working from the collected editions, I will generally refer to collections rather than single issues. However, much fan-authored criticism refers to individual issues. See <http://www.cerebusfangirl.com/conversion.html> for conversion tables.

3   Those who are interested in Dave Sim's pre-*Cerebus* work can find it at Jeff Tundis' site <www.artofdavesim.com>, although unfortunately not all of it is dated. It comprises an eclectic mix of fantasy, sci-fi, horror and adventure, and shows some of the technical sophistication found in *Cerebus*.

4   Numerous critics have attempted to summarise *Cerebus*' labyrinthine plot. I recommend the chapter on Dave Sim in Douglas Wolk's *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2007). Readers who require a more detailed synopsis are advised to follow the links from Margaret Liss's site, <http://www.cerebusfangirl.com/>. This excellent site is currently the best gateway to online *Cerebus* resources.

comics for the sake of parody (Red Sophia, Elrod, Artemis and so on) but also from nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and culture (Ernest Hemingway, F Scott Fitzgerald, Oscar Wilde, Groucho Marx) for less readily definable purposes. The author's opinions and purposes for his text have changed dramatically throughout the period of writing, with the result that *Cerebus* is notoriously difficult to pin down as a unified whole.

Sim's decision to self-publish his comic has had an incalculable effect on the narrative of *Cerebus*. In my discussion of Crumb's early work I stressed the importance of self-publishing as a means of liberation from the strictures of the Comics Code, but beyond this, Crumb was never particularly committed to self-publishing as an end in itself. His work appeared not only in comic book form but alongside prose and other art work in all manner of underground publications like the *East Village Other* and *Oz*. For Dave Sim, however, self-publishing has always been central to his project, and he has continued to publish in this manner even when other options have become available.[5] This may come as a surprise to readers familiar with the prose fiction market, where self-publishing is frequently seen as a mark of desperation and little better than vanity publishing. In alternative comics, however, self-publishing is widely considered to be a perfectly acceptable practice, and as I will demonstrate in my reading of Julie Doucet's work, many vibrant subcultures have grown up around self-published comics and fanzines since the 1970s.

Nevertheless, Sim does not quite fit the stereotype of the comics self-publisher. Although Sim self-published *Cerebus*, he always paid for professional printing (at Preney Print and Litho in Ontario), and he never deviated from the conventions of monthly publication and standard format established by the mainstream publishers. Unlike most producers of small press, self-published comics and fanzines, Sim ran Aardvark Vanaheim as a full time business, and at its height *Cerebus* had a circulation of 37000 copies.[6] For a short period, Aardvark Vanaheim also published works by other comics artists such as Arn Saba's *Neil the*

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5   In the late 1980s DC Comics offered Sim $100000 for *Cerebus*. See Jamie Coville, "Dave Sim Interview". *Collector Times* 10.4 (July 2005). <http://www.collectortimes.com/2005_07/Clubhouse.html>
6   For a while Sim published circulation figures inside each issue. The peak was issue #100 (1987).

Horse and William Messner Loebs' *Journey* from 1983-84.[7] The late 1970s was a time of increasing cross-fertilisation between mainstream and underground comics, and *Cerebus* was one of a number of "ground level" comics – that is, independent comics influenced by the underground but thematically and ideologically closer to the mainstream – being published in this period. 1978 saw not only the earliest issues of *Cerebus* but the beginning of Wendy and Richard Pini's *Elfquest*, a similarly long-running, self-published, high fantasy title with clear links to the underground, most notably in terms of its sexual content.[8] Sim's devotion to self-publishing is not simply a historical curiosity but central to the development of *Cerebus*, because, as Tim Blackmore points out, "The positioning of the individual against those around him is *Cerebus*'s leitmotif."[9] Indeed, *Reads (Book 9)* is, in part, a lengthy discourse on the importance of self-publishing. As the plot developed throughout the 1980s and 90s, Sim's worldview became increasingly at odds with the dominant ideology in the society around him, particularly regarding questions of gender and sexuality. Consequently, freedom from editorial constraints on his diffuse, polemical narrative became increasingly important.

Sim's most pervasive themes are power and gender. After a thousand or so pages of male-dominated fighting and politics, Sim introduces two groups of radical feminists who subsequently assume political power for much of the series. The Cirinists, led by Cirin (or Serna, as it later turns out), privilege mothers, and favour a protective nanny-state; the Kevillists, led by Astoria, represent daughters, and emphasise freedom (particularly abortion). The conflict between these two groups, and between them and their male opponents (or victims, since they meet with no serious opposition) occupies a central position in *Cerebus*, and therefore much of my analysis will focus on the way in which *Cerebus*' conception of gender affects its representation of selfhood.

Sim claims to have plotted the main storyline in 1979, when he first decided that *Cerebus* would run to three hundred issues, but given that the series charts Sim's changing ideology over twenty-six years, it is evident that much extraneous

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7   John Bell, ed. *Canuck Comics: A Guide to Comic Books Published in Canada* (Montreal: Matrix, 1986) 42-3.
8   On *Elfquest*'s adult content, see, for example, Michael Dean, "West Virginia man jailed for selling *Elfquest*". *The Comics Journal* 215. (August 1999) 11.
9   Tim Blackmore, "Cerebus: From Aardvark to Vanaheim, Reaching for Creative Heaven in Dave Sim's Hellish World." *Canadian Children's Literature* 71 (1993) 57.

detail was added as the narrative progressed. Sim's various essays, prose segments of comics, introductions, annotations and interviews describe an increasingly obscure and elaborate philosophy. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, this philosophy focused primarily on Sim's objections to feminism. Whilst Margaret Liss argues that readers who dislike Sim's opinions should simply overlook his prose commentaries, it is undoubtedly true that the more spectacularly misogynist episodes of *Cerebus* (most notably issue #186) alienated a lot of readers and conditioned subsequent responses to the comic.[10] In the late 1990s, Sim started to formulate his own religion, a fusion of Christianity, Judaism and Islam.[11] As a result, the final two books of *Cerebus* incorporate a good deal of religious language and philosophy. In *Latter Days (Book 15)* Cerebus meets three men who consider him to be the prophet of a new religion inspired by the writings of Jaka's ex-husband, Rick, and much of this volume is taken up with Cerebus' commentary on the Torah. Given that this philosophical discourse culminates in Sim's claim to have "possibly discovered the Unified Theory that eluded Einstein all of his life", it is hardly surprising that many readers find it fairly incomprehensible.[12] Full engagement with such theories is beyond the scope of this chapter, but one cannot ignore the fact that *Cerebus*' narrative of heroic masculinity is supported by an ideology that explicitly establishes the "Male Light" against a "Female Void", and claims that women are "emotion-based beings" largely incapable of rational thought. As Sim tells it, feminine, emotion-based thinking is largely unchallenged in all areas of modern western discourse, and it is responsible for a number of social ills including overpopulation, corporate culture and the inadequacies of modern politicians. In particular, his use of the term "Merged Void" for heterosexual couples describes his contempt for the influence of women on their male partners: for Sim, male solitude

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10   Margaret Liss, "A Woman of Cerebus, or, How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Aardvark" *Ninth Art*, 11th May 2001. <http://www.ninthart.com/display.php?article=10> Whilst it is impossible to gauge the long-term effects of Sim's polemics on the readership of *Cerebus*, some argued that the misogynist rant of issue #186 was a publicity stunt and that Sim actually picked up more readers, who wanted to see what all the fuss was about. See, for example, Kelly Rothenberg's article "Cerebus: An Aardvark on the Edge". *Americana* 2.1 (Spring 2003) <http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring_2003/rothenberg.htm>

11   See Dave Sim, introduction to *The Last Day (Book 16)* (2004). One can see Sim's beliefs still in the process of formation in his correspondence with Alan Moore, published in *Cerebus* 217-20 (1997) and reprinted in smoky man (ed.) *Alan Moore: Portrait of an Extraordinary Gentleman* (Leigh-on-Sea: Abiogenesis Press, 2003) 307-45.

12   Sim, introduction to *The Last Day (Book 16)* (2004).

is the only acceptable option.[13]

It is perhaps at this point that one should acknowledge the questions which have been raised about Sim's mental health. Sim was diagnosed as borderline schizophrenic when he was hospitalised in 1979. It was around this time that he conceived the entire storyline for *Cerebus*, and it was a period in which he was taking a lot of LSD. However, many critics argue that his mental instability has affected the comic more seriously as *Cerebus* has progressed. Andrew Rilstone, author of a website which has reproduced some of Sim's more off-the-wall statements in order to question the author's sanity, wrote in 2004:

> I've been very seriously considering removing the various Sim-related documents from this site… Suddenly, asking "is Dave mad?" stops feeling like an amusing rhetorical question. It starts feeling as if I am poking fun at a seriously poorly man. Having gone this far I decided to hang on for the last three issues. Please believe that it is more in sorrow than in anger.[14]

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to write off Sim's later work as schizophrenic rambling. I would argue that it is in the later books, in which Sim is at his most unhinged, that his use of the comics form is at its most exciting. Other critics have said much the same thing: Douglas Wolk compared *Cerebus* to D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* and said that "as *Cerebus* gets sludgier and meaner, Sim gets better as a cartoonist", while Joost Pollman has compared *Rick's Story (Book 12)* to "a piano concerto by Shostakovitch".[15] As I will demonstrate, these later books fuse verbal and visual, image and "sound", content and structure with an inventiveness hitherto almost unknown in comics.

I would also like to draw attention to the word "borderline" in Sim's diagnosis, because I suggest that this border, this unstable ground between sanity and insanity (however one chooses to define them) may be a fruitful space in which to examine late modern subjectivity. Several psychoanalysts have suggested that to attempt to cure schizophrenia is to impose a harmfully rigid social norm on individuals

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13   Issue 186 is collected in *Reads (Book 9)* 227-46. See also Sim's longer anti-feminist essay, "Tangents" *Cerebus* 265 (April 2001). This is not reprinted in the collected edition, *Form and Void (Book 14)*, but can be found at *The Comics Journal* website, <http://www.tcj.com/232/tangent0.html>

14   Andrew Rilstone. *Dave-watch*. <http://www.aslan.demon.co.uk/Davewatch.htm> 9th April 2004. *Internet Archive*. <http://web.archive.org/web/20040409095451/http://www.aslan.demon.co.uk/Davewatch.htm>

15   Wolk (2007) 301; Pollman, "Shaping Sounds in Comics" *International Journal of Comic Art (IJOCA)* 3.1 (2001) 20.

who enact a radical destabilisation of identity and language. Janis Hunter Jenkins argues that schizophrenic people offer valuable insights into processes shared by most humans, and claims that "people afflicted with schizophrenia are just like everyone else, only more so".[16] Her reading owes much to the mid-twentieth-century anti-psychiatry movement including writers like Thomas Szatz and R. D. Laing. Szatz famously claimed the very concept of schizophrenia to be a form of social control, whilst Laing argued that schizophrenia could be understood as an existential response to a hostile world, less a disease than a mode of being and communicating. For Laing, schizophrenia goes to the core of an individual's identity: "[t]he patient has not 'got' schizophrenia. He is schizophrenic."[17] In keeping with this view, Sim scorned his wife and mother's suggestions of medical help, choosing divorce and a solitary lifestyle over social conformity. Sim appears to revel in the fragmented and decentered nature of schizophrenic experience: he rails at feminists and "homosexualists", invents elaborate systems and theories, makes unpredictable connections and goes off on bizarre tangents. He has explicitly addressed the problem himself, questioning the existence of a verifiable "reality" from which he can be said to deviate:

> Assuming (for the sake of argument) that I'm crazy and everyone else is sane, what genuine, verifiable, objectively *real* foundation is your sanity based on? What, objectively speaking (or subjectively, if we're being honest here), lends that foundation validity? The thing which lends validity to my schizophrenia (I was diagnosed as a "borderline schizophrenic" in 1979 and I think it is reasonable to assume that the condition has "worsened" in the interim) is the fact that I can make a living from it. In a capitalistic society founded upon "choice" as an absolute, that gives me a certain "real" world impunity.[18]

The problem with creating a work of literature under such conditions is that to readers still enslaved by the old fantasies of coherent identity and enlightenment rationality, the narrative does not always make sense. Sim is well aware of this, and

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16   Janis Hunter Jenkins, "Schizophrenia as a Paradigm Case for Understanding Fundamental Human Processes", in Janis Hunter Jenkins and Robert John Barrett (eds), *Schizophrenia, Culture, and Subjectivity: The Edge of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 30.
17   Thomas Szatz, *The Manufacture of Madness: A Comparative Study of the Inquisition and the Mental Health Movement* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self: A Study of Sanity and Madness* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1960) 35. One might also gesture towards Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen Lane (London: Athlone Press, 1984), although it is worth noting that Deleuze and Guattari made a clear distinction between their "schizoanalysis" and the experiences of real schizophrenic people.
18   Dave Sim, *Reads (Book 9)*, 183.

has claimed that one of the features that make Cerebus endearing to readers is the fact that he shares their confusion about what is going on. He went on to explain:

> Nothing frustrates me more than the twentieth century adherence to the notion that you can find out what "actually happened" and that it is necessary for fiction to set out a linear, quantitative and absolute reality for the readers [sic] consumption and assurance. I think EVERYTHING is like the Kennedy assassination(s); riddled with inconsistencies, false trails, overlapping stories and considerations; distortions wrapped inside fabrications and coated with lies. The sooner we get over the idea that reality isn't like this, the sooner we'll be able to put together a world that fits our circumstances as they are; not as they never were and never will be. I'm not holding my breath.[19]

Although he despises academic institutions for their "totalitarian feminism",[20] Sim appears to have arrived at a kind of poststructuralism via his own circuitous route, and sneers contemptuously at the idea of representing a coherent reality in his work. Like a pop-cultural Ezra Pound, he fuses radical art and reactionary politics in a vast, odd, impenetrable *tour de force*.

I would like to discuss some of the models of masculinity promoted in *Cerebus*, but before I begin, it is necessary to place Sim's text within the category of fantasy fiction and to outline some of the gender stereotypes and expectations established by that genre. Whilst the extremism of Sim's views makes him the exception in comics and in fantasy literature of all forms (I have yet to find a fan-site where a critic broadly agrees with Sim's anti-feminist rants),[21] I would nevertheless argue that reaction against the changing status and value of masculinity is a recurrent theme in certain modes of fantasy fiction.

The first problem is the question of what we mean by fantasy. Writers who concentrate on Kafka, Borges, Marquez and Pynchon come to very different conclusions from those who define fantasy in terms of Tolkien, Robert Jordan,

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19   Jim O[ttaviani] et al. "Dave Sim – The Usenet Interview", 1992 <http://www-personal.engin.umich.edu/~hellpop/Sim.html> *Internet Archive* <http://web. archive.org/web/20060206053730/http://www-personal.engin.umich.edu/~hellpop/Sim.html>
20   Dave Sim, "Report to the Cerebus Newsgroup III". 23rd February 2005. <http://www. cerebusfangirl.com/archivereport3.html> *Internet Archive* <http://web.archive.org/web/20060331043052/http://www.cerebusfangirl.com/archivereport3.html>
21   Some agree with him on specific points, of course, such as abortion. At time of writing, there is a heated discussion taking place at the Cerebus Yahoo! group <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/cerebus/> which developed out of an article about an apparently extremist feminist gathering at the University of New Hampshire. Whilst no one exactly concurs with Sim, his work does tend to promote discussion of gender issues.

Richard Corben and Terry Pratchett. Some clearly distinguish between "literature of the fantastic" and "fantasy"; others do not.[22] There are dozens of sub-genres under the heading "fantasy", and *Cerebus*, of course, is difficult to categorise. *Cerebus* was originally established as a parody of various "high fantasy" and "sword and sorcery" titles. In addition to the main character's parody of Conan the Barbarian, Red Sophia is a parody of Roy Thomas and Barry Windsor-Smith's heroine Red Sonja, Elrod is a version of Michael Moorcock's Elric, and so on. Such stories are generally set in a neo-medieval world, exhibit a clear sense of good and evil, and include plenty of magic and magical creatures (elves, wizards and the like). Whilst Sim is very eclectic, and some of his clearest influences have nothing to do with high fantasy (Will Eisner, for example, or Steve Gerber's *Howard the Duck*), I would nevertheless suggest that *Cerebus* starts out in what is essentially a high fantasy world.

It is not difficult to read the early 70s *Conan* comics and other contemporary sword and sorcery titles as a dramatic staging of the battle of the sexes. Conan encounters a variety of very beautiful, very dangerous, near-naked women: Valeria (a pirate wanted for stabbing a Stygian officer), Jenna (a dancer who steals his money and betrays him), Red Sonja (a hired sword) and numerous others. As Roy Thomas notes, many of the scantily clad warrior maidens depicted in the *Conan* comics of the early 70s were either not found in the original Robert E. Howard stories, or had their roles adapted and expanded for the comic book version.[23] These women
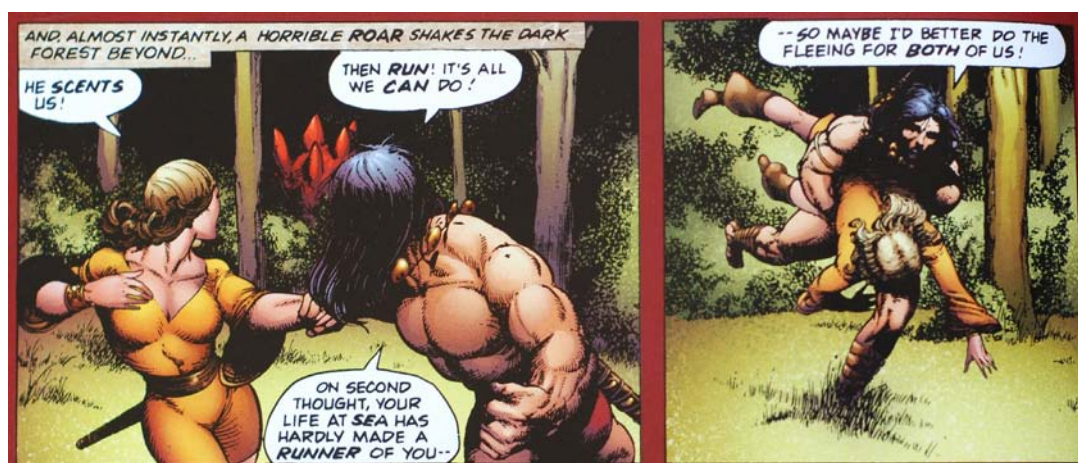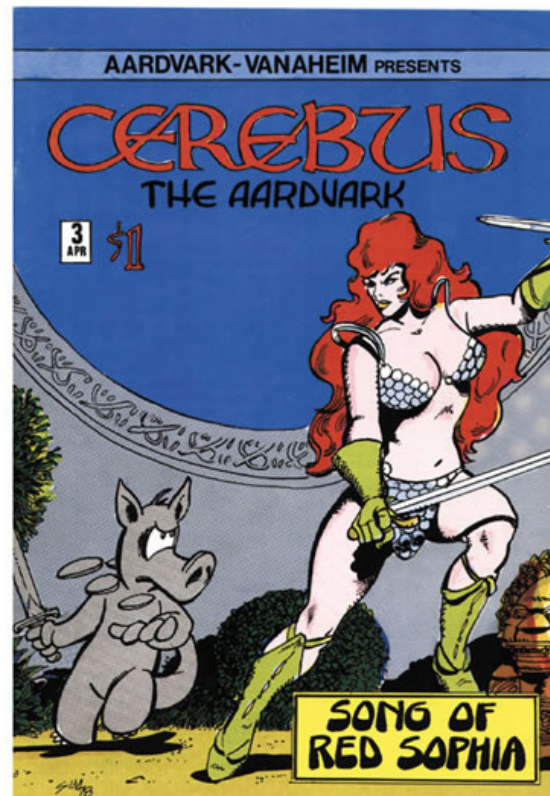

Figure 11.

22   Useful introductions include Lucie Arnitt, *Fantasy Fiction: An Introduction* (London: Continuum, 1995), Neil Barron, *Fantasy Literature: A Reader's Guide* (New York and London: Garland, 1990) and Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (New York and London: Methuen, 1984).
23   See Roy Thomas, "Afterword" in Roy Thomas, Barry Windsor Smith et al. *The Tower of the Elephant and other stories (The Chronicles of Conan Vol. 1)* and *Rogues in the House and other stories (The Chronicles of Conan Vol.2)* (Dark Horse: Milwaukie, 2003) 161-6, 146-7.

epitomised contemporary fantasies and anxieties about femininity. On the one hand, they encapsulate certain feminist ideals: they are powerful and independent, thriving unaided in a male-dominated world. On the other, they are physically objectified for the pleasure of a largely young, male readership, and Conan's manner towards them is often rather patronising. (In "Red Nails", for example, he insists on carrying Valeria, having previously asserted that women cannot run.)[24] (Figure 11.)

Barbarian that he is, Conan has none of the wholesome morality of, say, Superman; his rugged individualism is comparable to that of cowboy heroes, and he has little interest in a world beyond male-dominated fighting.

The early issues of *Cerebus* were intended to be parodies, and Sim has a number of targets: the aggressive masculinity of *Conan*, the ludicrous posturing of superheroes, the sexual self-confidence of Sonja and so on. Significantly, *Cerebus* retains much of *Conan*'s ambivalence towards powerful women. Cerebus meets Jaka fairly early on, a woman with whom he has a complex, on-off relationship throughout much of his adult life. Admittedly under the influence of a spiked drink, he is very much in love with Jaka from the beginning. At the same time, the early Cerebus often seems asexual, indifferent and even slightly revolted by Sophia's overt sexuality. When they appear together on the cover of Cerebus #3 he does not exactly appear to be enjoying her company (Figure 12). Unlike Sonja, Sophia is a figure of ridicule (when she takes off her bikini top and says, "What do you think of these?" Cerebus replies, "They'd probably heal if you stopped wearing that chain-mail bikini").[25] In these early issues of *Cerebus* Sim seems to describe the ambivalent sexuality of the adolescent male,

Figure 12.

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24   Thomas and Windsor Smith (2003) Vol. 1, 104.
25   Dave Sim, *Cerebus (Book. 1)* (1987) 214.

simultaneously intrigued and disgusted by women.

Although critics of fantasy fiction over the last thirty years have made great efforts to correct the misconception that women don't write – or read – about goblins and wizards, it is undoubtedly true that high fantasy literature tends to be populated by strong male figures.[26] As Noelle Bowles points out, demographics for science fiction and fantasy define their readership as predominantly male, single and aged between 20 and 34.[27] She goes on to argue:

> Within the Euro-centric confines of high fantasy, the hero's success and the villain's demise enact a fantasy of regeneration and restoration that the multi-cultural, multiracial reality of today's world denies the white male reader.[28]

Bowles focuses primarily on race rather than gender, but her argument that white males feel themselves to be marginalised is of relevance here. One cannot help noticing that the statistics she cites are very similar to those circulated about comics readers. A survey carried out by DC Comics in the 1990s suggested that ninety percent of their readers were male, with an average age of around 29.[29] This should not come as any great surprise: mainstream comics, like fantasy novels, are traditionally read by young males towards the bottom of the social hierarchy. (DC's figures, however inconclusive, do at least refute one tired stereotype: far from being *just* for kids, it appears that modern comics are not really read by kids at all.)

These readers have grown up in a period in which feminism has increasingly been assimilated into the social and legal structures of the US, Canada and Britain. In these societies, which have sought to offer support and help to ethnic minorities, women, gay people, those with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups, some able-bodied, straight, white males have felt bereft of markers with which to define their identity. Since the early 1970s a number of men's movements have emerged, all with different origins, arguments and agendas. Some pro-feminist men such

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26   See Susanne Fendler and Ulrike Horstmann, eds. *Images of Masculinity in Fantasy Fiction* (Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), and particularly Nicholas Ruddick's preface, "Another Key to Bluebeard's Chamber: Ideal and Fundamentalist Masculinity in the Literature of Fantasy".

27   Noelle Bowles, "'Revenge and Recovery': High Fantasy, Imperialism and the White Male Reader", in Fendler and Horstmann (2003) 207. The precise statistics are 78.6% male, 64.6% single, 63.2% aged between 20 and 34. However, as Bowles points out, surveys tend to conflate sci-fi and fantasy, making it difficult to identify reader demographics accurately.

28   Bowles, in Fendler and Horstmann (2003) 221-2.

29   Johanna Draper Carlson, "Superhero Comic Reader Stats". *Comics Worth Reading*. 10th May 2007. <http://comicsworthreading.com/2007/05/10/superhero-comic-reader-stats/>

as Victor Seidler were strongly influenced by feminism and sought to dismantle traditional constructions of masculinity which they argued were oppressive to both men and women.[30] Others blamed feminism for reinforcing a mythology of aggressive masculinity and thus perpetuating stereotypes about men. Writers like Warren Farrell argued that men are the disadvantaged sex, pointing to compulsory military service, social pressure to support a family, unequal custody laws and higher incidence of addiction, crime and certain illnesses amongst men.[31] Others, like Robert Bly, founded groups in which men were encouraged to reclaim their masculinity.[32] All were responding to a view that male identity had – for good or ill – been destabilised by feminism.

Many critics, arguing that fantasy literature is all about subversion, have focused on the ways in which it questions traditional gender roles.[33] But as far as Sim is concerned, women are the dominant power and white masculinity is under siege. It is only to be expected that anti-feminist literature may take a non-realist form in such a climate. Unlike the high fantasy outlined by Bowles, *Cerebus* is explicitly not about escapism. Sim claims that he wanted to represent "the nearest approximation of truth that I could manage",[34] and does so by imposing a fundamentalist matriarchy on a high fantasy world. As Adam Roberts writes of science fiction, such narratives represent an encoding of marginal experience: through a tale of an aardvark in a pseudo-mediaeval human society, Sim suggests that the modern world does not look favourably on white men.[35]

It is arguable that even without the comic's explicitly anti-feminist agenda, Sim's use of parody tends to keep *Cerebus* within the male dominated club of mainstream comics readers. Characters like the Roach (initially a parody of Batman, but seen in various incarnations throughout *Cerebus*) work as in-jokes, drawing

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30   Victor Seidler, *Rediscovering Masculinity: Reason, Language and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1989). For a summary of men's movements in America see Peter G. Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Gender Identities in Modern America* (1974; Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1998). On masculinity studies more generally, see John Beynon, *Masculinities and Culture* (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2002), Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank Barrett, eds. *The Masculinities Reader* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001) and Judith Kegan Gardiner, ed. *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
31   Warren Farrell, *The Myth of Male Power: Why Men are the Disposable Sex* (1993; London: Fourth Estate, 1994)
32   Robert Bly, *Iron John* (1990; Shaftesbury: Element, 1991).
33   See, for example, Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992)
34   Dave Sim, "About Last Issue". *Following Cerebus* 3 (2005) 40.
35   Adam Roberts, *Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2000) 29-30.

the circle of initiates more tightly together and reminding outsiders that they have some catching up to do. Sim talks at length about his inclusion of superhero parodies, arguing that to write a comic book that *is* a comic book ("not raw material for film, or something to court *The New York Times Book Review*") it is necessary to "deal with the language the people in that environment know".[36] That is, he considers himself to be addressing a knowing readership of individuals who are capable of both enjoying and mocking superhero narratives. He is writing for, and within, a particular community, and according to Sim, his use of superhero parody is an act of engagement with the world around him:

> I woke up and here I am. I was born in 1956 in this place called North America…
> I don't know what these superheroes are. I gotta go back and assess this. This is a
> very large presence. Once could almost say a disturbingly large presence. They've so
> dominated the medium for 50 years.[37]

However, it would be unwise to overstate the gendered slant to this point because it is evident from the letters pages (which, as Matthew Pustz points out, are particularly dominant in *Cerebus*, sometimes occupying almost half of an issue) that *Cerebus* had a relatively high proportion of female readers, at least until issue #186.[38] Furthermore, there are strong and articulate female characters in amongst the inane parodies, notably the politician Astoria. For all Sim's misogynist beliefs, only a few sections of *Cerebus* itself are unequivocally hostile to female readers.

It would be inaccurate to suppose that Cerebus is simply an alter-ego for Dave Sim, but it is fair to say that both the writer and his creation define their identities through an ideal of heroic masculinity. Cerebus rapidly develops beyond his Conan-parody origins, but he retains his tastes and values: he likes fighting, drinking and playing cards, he acquires a taste for women and sport, and he succeeds in the political arena. He is reasonably intelligent, and a skilled trickster as long as his opponent is fairly stupid, although his chess game with Suenteus Po highlights his limits as a tactician. His behaviour is often foolish and self-destructive, and he is frequently incapable of articulating his emotions. He is an old-style male

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36   Tom Spurgeon, interview with Dave Sim. *The Comics Journal*. Excerpts from issues #184 and #192 (2002) <http://www.tcj.com/2_archives/i_sim.html>
37   Spurgeon (2002).
38   Pustz (1999), 89-90. Pustz stresses the importance of letters pages, online forums, comics conventions and so on in the reception and sharing of comics amongst the community of readers.

stereotype, a deliberately flawed hero.

The position of the avowed anti-feminist at the start of the twenty-first century is one of extreme isolation, and like Sim, Cerebus is largely on his own. Beginning as a hired sword, he never really loses the solipsistic taste for violence and gold. He marries, divorces and even commits rape, but he drives away the one woman who loves him. His solitude is partly a function of political office: he proceeds from the position of natural loner to a social rank which precludes equal relationships. Whilst others subsequently discuss the extent of Cerebus' agency in his rise to power, it often appears that he is largely a pawn in other people's political manoeuvres. Astoria and Lord Julius (formerly married, now political opponents) both advance Cerebus' career whilst deceiving and manipulating him for their own ends. Even in his relationship with Jaka, Cerebus rarely breaks through his fundamental solitude for more than a brief moment. He lives, as the Judge predicts that he will die, alone.

The most obvious feature which sets Cerebus apart from everyone else is his physical form. An aardvark in a human world, Cerebus is variously described as "short gray one" (1.126) and "a child in a rabbit costume" (1.516), although of course no one raises the fundamental unreality of a talking aardvark as a particular problem. As I suggested in my discussion of Crumb's animal comics, this is largely a function of the comics form: the illustrations and other non-verbal elements can promote assumptions that the text declines to mention, establishing a tension between the verbal and visual threads of the narrative. However, Cerebus himself is visually distinct from the other characters in more than just his species. Cerebus is a distinctly stylised cartoon figure printed in a dot-matrix format, whilst everyone else, and the background, appears in comparatively realist hatched line drawings (see figures 13a-o, on pages 91-105 at the end of this chapter). Paradoxically, this enhances the reader's sense that Cerebus is by far the most rounded individual in the series, and other characters often appear somewhat flat by comparison. (Crumb has criticised *Cerebus* for this reason, claiming that "[t]here's not much going on there with the characters" whilst acknowledging that "Cerebus himself is the most complex character".)[39] Scott McCloud, supporting his "identification" theory, points out that in *Cerebus*, as in some Japanese manga and European "clear line" comics,

39   Gary Groth, interview with Robert Crumb. *Comics Journal Library Vol. 3: Robert Crumb* ed. Milo George (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2004) 54.

the protagonist is customarily less "realistic" than the background and supporting characters. He goes on to argue:

> Soon, some of them [Japanese comics artists] realized that the objectifying power of realistic arts could be put to other uses. // For example, while most characters were designed simply, to assist in reader-identification // other characters were drawn more realistically in order to objectify them, emphasising their "otherness" from the reader.[40]

Whilst this device certainly helps, it is by no means the only manifestation of otherness in *Cerebus*. One of the most significant is the constant splitting and doubling of characters. *Cerebus* is full of twins and doppelgängers. The Elf and the Judge both split into fake and real versions of themselves, although both are ultimately "imaginary" beings within Cerebus' private mental landscape. Cerebus converses with a fake Suenteus Po long before he meets the real one. Victor Reid and Viktor Davis represent two opposing models of masculine lifestyle, very similar to the two models that Sim perceives to be offered by twentieth-century western society: marriage, children and conformity versus individuality and freedom. Cirin turns out to be Serna, an impostor, the real Cirin's former friend, and the two represent moderate and extremist versions of matriarchal feminism.[41]

I hesitate to mention schizophrenia here because I am aware of the popular misconception that this condition manifests itself as a Jekyll-and-Hyde-like splitting of the personality into two distinct selves. However, this condition does, in less dramatic ways, unsettle an individual's ability to relate to other people. Delusions of grandeur and paranoia are common (Sim, for example, has claimed that tens of thousands of people are willing him to kill himself).[42] Many experience delusions of reference (where, for example, the schizophrenic believes that the television is talking directly to him or her). Hallucinations, particularly aural hallucinations in which the subject hears external voices, are often reported. I would suggest that in the work of a schizophrenic author, it is hardly surprising that we find not only a main character prone to vivid hallucinations but an array of unnerving Others

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40   McCloud (1993) 44. As I noted in my introduction, the main thrust of McCloud's theory of identification has been refuted by Barker (1989), Frahm (2000) and Walsh (2006).
41   See Nachimir, "Cerebus". Personal site. <http://home.freeuk.net/integrated/sites/comics/index.html>. I am indebted to this site for several of these observations on doubled characters in *Cerebus*.
42   See Sim, *The Last Day (Book 16)* vii.

and shadow selves. In *Cerebus*, identity is always provisional, always on the brink of change, and new developments can be both positive and frightening.

The most interesting double is Cerebus himself. In *Reads (Book 9)*, Astoria reveals that Cerebus is a hermaphrodite, and through a series of flashbacks we subsequently discover that he suffered damage to "his" female genitalia owing to a childhood knife wound (9.96).[43] When Cerebus returns to his parents' home, he is particularly troubled by memories of that incident. Given that the balance of power between male and female – which Sim sees as polar opposites – is a central theme in *Cerebus*, it can hardly be a coincidence that the figure at its heart is a damaged hermaphrodite. Freud's Oedipus story and its associated castration complex have been over-used in literary criticism, but in reference to a tale of a childhood genital knife wound, written by a man who expresses intense anxiety about the diminution of male power in western culture, it is hard to avoid. It is worth pausing a moment to consider just what is going on here.

Rosemary Jackson argues that fantasy literature is full of disintegrating bodies because these fractured selves represent the trauma of entry into the Symbolic Order. She writes:

> Many fantasies of dualism are dramatizations of precisely this conflict, their "selves" torn between an original, primary narcissism and an ideal ego, which frustrates their natural desire. Many of them fantasize a return to a state of undifferentiation, to a condition *preceding* the mirror stage and its creation of dualism.[44]

The bizarre image of Cerebus' "castration" resurfaces as he returns home because this recurring cultural nightmare is all about the subject's struggle to define himself against, and away from, his parents. In the context of the story, we know very little about Cerebus' parents, but we do see a great deal of Cerebus' struggle for identity in a society of Others. Intriguingly, Ivan Ward points out that "[l]ike its sister, blindness, the theme of light is a common one in the spectacle of castration".[45] Noting that the sun has long been regarded as a symbol of male authority, he cites cases of men burning scraps of paper, playing with flaming tennis balls

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43   In spite of Cerebus' dual gender, I am going to continue writing "he/his" etc. This is partly for convenience, but also because Cerebus clearly identifies himself as male, however problematically.
44   Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1981) 89.
45   Ivan Ward, *Castration* (Cambridge: Icon, 2003) 58.

and cowering in fear of a circle of reflected light.[46] For Sim, too, light represents masculinity, but at the moment of his death, Cerebus screams in fear as he is dragged towards the light, which he suddenly suspects may signify hell (16.232-9). Where Freud associated castration anxiety with guilt over masturbation, Sim says in *Tangents* that sexual desire impeded the quality of his thinking, and that he now lives a completely celibate life on the grounds that "[i]f you learn to leave your penis alone… your penis will learn to leave you alone".[47] In short, it seems that whilst Sim ostensibly relishes the disintegration of the self as a liberation, his comics and other writings tell a different story. Not only is Cerebus desperate for physical and psychic integrity but the author himself betrays intense anxieties about the power of the phallus over the male self.

As soon as one starts to think of Cerebus in these terms, the evidence is everywhere. Suddenly his habit of referring to himself in the third person looks less like a curious idiosyncrasy than an unconscious attempt at dissociation from his frightening, damaged body. In spite of Bear's accusation that Cerebus is "part chick" (*Guys*, 196) and Cerebus' own worry that his original hermaphrodite nature makes him a "faggot" (*Minds*, 114), he is nonetheless almost a parody of masculinity: aggressively heterosexual, bellicose, fiercely independent. Were it not for the knowledge of Dave Sim's anti-feminist views, one might conclude that Cerebus' feminine self atrophied when he lost his female reproductive abilities, and that his excessive masculinity highlights a tragic lack. Male and female are irreparably split in *Cerebus*, and on the face of it, Sim appears to argue that this is an inevitable thing, the product of a natural and irreconcilable difference. Only his protagonist enacts the trauma involved in this severing of masculine and feminine, and thereby hints at the harmfulness of a clear divide between the two. The real fear at the root of this incident is that it may be impossible to create a unity out of different facets of the psyche, or to retain the illusion of a coherent self in a dangerous and unstable world.

This consideration of the instability of subjective experience in *Cerebus* leads me to a closer analysis of Sim's verbal-visual blend. I wish to look in more detail at the way in which Sim fuses verbal and visual elements into an integral language, because I suggest that the form of Sim's comic, with its emphasis on the complexity and

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46   Ward (2003) 26-7, 57-9.
47   Sim (2001) <http://www.tcj.com/232/tangent0.html>

instability of perceptual experience, is fundamental to his representation of selfhood in the modern world.

There are numerous incidents in *Cerebus* in which the protagonist is shown to be operating on a higher plane of consciousness. Cerebus has a number of spiritual experiences, from his conversations with the fake Suenteus Po in the eighth sphere to his inexorable drift into the light at the moment of his death. I suggest, however, that many of the most interesting episodes begin as more down-to-earth representations of mental and emotional disruption. Sim's strengths lie in the narration of Cerebus' confused and unsettled perspective on the world, his dreams, fears and hallucinations. In a discussion of a six thousand page comic, it goes without saying that much will necessarily be excluded. Rather than skipping about, I wish to centre my analysis on a single sequence, taken from *Guys (Book 11)*, in which Cerebus is blind drunk, lying on the floor in a bar, drifting in and out of consciousness (Figures 13a-o, at the end of this chapter).[48] As the title suggests, this book is particularly concerned with homosocial relationships, and much of it takes place in or around a bar. As such, the drunkenness itself is a fairly common occurrence both throughout *Cerebus* as a whole and particularly in this book, but this sequence raises a number of technical and thematic issues which shed light on the text's representation of subjectivity. My analysis will be divided into four sections: first, I will examine those images, typographic marks, word balloons and other non-pictorial visuals through which Sim seeks to represent his protagonist's distorted perception. I will then discuss the panel layouts in *Cerebus*, and the way in which Sim uses the comics form to propose a non-linear conception of time. Thirdly, I will look more broadly at the layering of realities in the text. Finally, I will return briefly to Cerebus' recurring nightmare of bodily disintegration.

Cerebus has passed out, and is lying on the floor, face up. What we see, however, is not his body but a closed eye, and two brief images of Richard George, as Cerebus manages to peer upwards. George looks down at Cerebus and commentates on his physical state in an exaggerated faux-British accent. From the dialogue we gather that George and his brother Harrison Starkey (fellow drinkers, and parodies of Beatles George Harrison and Ringo Starr) try to move the semi-conscious Cerebus,

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48   Issue #203. See also Anita K. McDaniel, "Dave Sim on Guys" *IJOCA* 7.1 (2005) 473-84.

then give up – partly due to the noxious smell of Cerebus' farts – and throw him behind the bar. However, the image of a closed eye is noteworthy because it is not entirely clear whether this represents Cerebus' view from the inside or Richard George's view from above. Throughout this extract, there are bubbles at the edge of Cerebus' vision which presumably signify the instability of his current perceptions. However, these bubbles remain in the panels showing only the closed eye, suggesting that if this *is* an external view of Cerebus' body, his drunken vision is nonetheless affecting the texture of the entire narrative. In other words, spatial and psychological point of view do not necessarily coincide, and the reader's perspective is not always clearly signposted.

The bubbles are particularly significant because on several occasions (notably in figures 13f and 13h) they merge with clusters of speech balloons. Just as the speech balloon exists at the intersection of word and image in comics, the balloon/bubble analogy also places them at the intersection of the protagonist's hearing and vision. Drawing the reader into Cerebus' perceptual space, Sim teeters on the point of suggesting that Cerebus *sees words*, pushing the symbiosis of word and image towards a true synaesthesia.

Sim's use of speech balloons is, in any case, unusually inventive. As is customary in comics, their size, shape and texture mimic the tone of the utterance they encapsulate: an angry statement tends to be placed in a balloon with jagged edges, a whisper is a tiny word in a huge balloon and so on. But again, Sim takes this further. Transparent thought balloons overlap one another as Cerebus argues with himself, trying to suppress his anger at Jaka and control his sense of panic. These thought balloons are largely indistinguishable from those containing speech: like many alternative comics writers, Sim does not use cloud-like balloons for reported thought, preferring to retain a sense of slippage between real and imagined discourse. In figure 13i the author gives two balloons the appearance of three-dimensional form as two characters bump into each other, suggesting that it is possible to dispense with an image of the speaker and encapsulate a character within the visual form of his or her utterance. He draws icicles on balloons of frosty speech. In Sim's hands, established conventions for the representation of tone, expression and non-verbal meaning in speech expand and mutate, producing new, hybrid forms.

Similar devices indicate Cerebus' interpretation of these speech acts.

Throughout this extract, most balloons have no tails to indicate the location of their speaker: they are disembodied, often unidentified voices because their listener's cognitive abilities are temporarily impaired. In figures 13f-g, dozens of disconnected utterances crowd together in a large panel, some more intelligible than others. They represent not an ordered dialogue but a cacophony of overheard fragments of speech, and their typographic form is accordingly erratic: upper and lower case letters and various lettering styles reflect volume, pitch and mood. Almost inaudible remarks are heavily cross-hatched, their letters fading into shadow.

This is not the place for a detailed examination of the semiotic theories relating to comics'"grammar".[49] In my view, comics is not a language in the strictest sense any more than theatre is one, and references to "the language of comics" are primarily metaphorical. Nevertheless, one can identify some curious similarities between comics' modification of written words through non-verbal typographic features and the subtle shifts in meaning in the sign languages spoken by Deaf communities. Klima and Bellugi detail several modifications of the basic verb "to look" in American Sign Language, explaining how hand positioning and movement alter the meaning of the sign, producing variations like "stare", "watch", "look for a long time" and so on.[50] Without wishing to postulate any grand, overarching parallels between sign languages and comics, I would suggest that Sim's modification of meaning in comics' speech and sound effects proceeds along similar lines. By varying the size, texture, shape and positioning of words and non-verbal signs, Sim conveys narrative elements that could not easily be described with plain text and pictures.[51]

I have already briefly touched upon the question of typographic form, but this device deserves closer attention as a significant feature of this first double page and of the extract as a whole. The use of large, colourful capital letters to represent the crashes and explosions of conventional comics has become something of a cliché, and even articles in the mainstream press that seek to

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49   For semiotic theories of the comics form see Saraceni (2000), and Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics* trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007). Neil Cohn's website *Emaki Productions* <http://www.emaki.net/> is also helpful.
50   Edward S. Klima and Ursula Bellugi *The Signs of Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979). This research is summarised in Oliver Sacks *Seeing Voices* (London: Picador, 1991) (1989) 84-92.
51   Joost Pollman also draws parallels between comics and sign language. See Pollman, "Shaping Sounds in Comics", *IJOCA* 3.1 (Spring 2001) 14.

dismantle the stereotype of comics as kids' stuff usually cannot resist the odd "POW!" or "BANG!" here and there.[52] In practice, the typography of sound effects is rather more complex, often bordering on a kind of visual synaesthesia. The word "fart" at the bottom of figure 13a is represented as a large, soft, fuzzy cloud, while the "THADUMP" of Cerebus being thrown behind the bar is conveyed in more conventional form with broad brush strokes, stars and speed lines. This "THADUMP" is crammed into the bottom right hand corner of the printed page, mimicking Cerebus' body as it slumps into an enclosed space behind the bar.[53] Since the letters behave like a body, the word *reads* as an image, standing in for the semi-conscious Cerebus whose perspective governs our interpretation of the scene. Elsewhere in this extract, Cerebus' failed attempt at speech (signified by a heavily cross-hatched, double-bordered balloon) merges with the dull "THUMP" as he passes out again and hits the floor (Figure 13n). Sim defies the convention that speech and sound effects exist in separate realms of signification: perceptual information blends together on the page as it does in the mind of the protagonist. The shape, size, design, texture and layout of these speech acts and sound effects all contrive to produce a visual equivalent for sound, resulting in verbal-visual signs that sit somewhere in the middle of Saraceni's iconic-symbolic spectrum (see my introduction, page 21). The implication is that the information of the senses is no more easily separated out into sound, vision, touch and so on than it is separable from emotional, intellectual or spiritual experience.

Sim's representation of chronology is of particular interest. The depiction of temporality in comics includes features that are not seen in any other medium, because in graphic narrative, time is represented spatially. Unlike a film, where sequential images are placed successively in the same space, comics represent a chronological sequence through the juxtaposition of fragmented moments. It is easy to identify general trends in comics' representation of time: an exuberant, fast-paced sequence might exhibit irregular panel shapes, thin panels crammed closely together, dynamic page layouts and so on, whilst a calm, slow sequence would be

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52   See, for example, Arifa Akbar, "Wham! Pow! Egad! Classics get comic treatment" *Independent* 27th October 2007, 26; Ian Black, "Zap! Kraak! Pow! Comic culture has landed in Glasgow" *The Sunday Times* 18th April 1993.
53   Although there are no visible panel divisions, Sim does not draw beyond the set margins, so there *is* an outer boundary, albeit an invisible one. This is primarily a function of the printing process.

more likely to have regularly shaped panels and a balanced composition. However, the conventions governing this division of time in comics remain malleable and elusive, and as Scott McCloud pointed out, we have no "conversion chart" by which to quantify their progression.[54] Avant-garde comics creators are always experimenting and developing new ways in which visual literature may be read, but even relatively mainstream comics writers often show great interest in the way in which panels and gutters in comics signify the passage of time at varying speeds.[55] Marc Singer, for example, notes that in *The Invisibles*, Grant Morrison uses time travel, chronological loops, ellipses and flash-forwards in order to suggest that "linear chronologies are inaccurate representations of time".[56] Scott McCloud also argued that comics make it difficult to separate past, present and future:

> … unlike other media, in comics, the past is more than just memories for the audience and the future is more than just possibilities!// Both past and future are real and visible and *all around us!*// Wherever your eyes are focused, that's *now*. But at the same time your eyes take in the surrounding landscape of past and future![57]

Clearly, McCloud is thinking of comics as opposed to film here, and one must add that the past and future are, to a lesser extent, available in prose fiction: one can inadvertently catch sight of the last page of a novel and discover that a particular character is still on the scene. However, the immediacy of visual narrative lends itself to the view that by flicking through the fractured panels of a comic one is experiencing a scattered array of present moments.

In *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative and Postmodernism* Ursula Heise suggests that one of the functions of the inventive typography found in many postmodern novels is the disruption of linear temporality. She argues that by adopting "concrete prose" for portions of the text, using unorthodox layouts and abandoning conventional punctuation, writers "transform temporal processes into visual and spatial objects".[58] Because these changes are rarely sustained throughout an entire novel, she says that "the foregrounded spatiality of print is thereby itself subjected

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54   See McCloud (1993) 100.
55   For more experimental material, see, for example, *Oubapo America* <http://www.tomhart. net/oubapo/>. Oubapo is a comics version of the French Oulipo.
56   Marc Singer, "Invisible Order: Comics, Time and Narrative", *IJOCA* 1.2 (1999) 29-30.
57   McCloud (1993) 104.
58   Ursula K. Heise, *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1997) 63.

to the discontinuity of change" and so this typographic configuration "contributes to the fracturing of narrative time into alternative temporal universes". Comics have a natural propensity for this kind of experimental typography. The medium's fusion of iconic and symbolic signs and its inevitably spatialised representation of time invite non-linear reading practices. Pictures, even when placed in a row, cannot be "read" in a strictly linear motion: the eye must move around each panel to make sense of the narrative. As soon as unusual typographic forms and unconventional page layouts are added to the mix, any last traces of linear chronology are abandoned. Sim is particularly fond of such devices precisely because the arbitrariness of human perception – including the perception of time – is so central to his narrative.

If panels and gutters are the structures which divide and organise time in comics, the first thing to note at the beginning of this extract is that there *are* no panel divisions: six images on each page are divided only by an unstructured expanse of white space. Sim goes to great lengths to alter the shape and arrangement of his panels according to the action of the plot, often allowing his protagonists' perceptions to govern the flow of the narrative. Throughout this fifteen-page sequence, Cerebus' grasp of time is extremely hazy: in figure 13m, Richard George[59] remarks that he and the others had forgotten about Cerebus for a while, suggesting that a considerable period of time has elapsed whilst Cerebus has been drifting in and out of consciousness behind the bar. The absence of panel divisions or gutters signifies this sense of an almost timeless consciousness.

In figures 13e-f and 13i-j, the panels – again without clear edges – appear to represent two parallel threads of perceptual experience. In figure 13e, for example, word balloons cluster into one long panel whilst Cerebus' visual perception is confined to three small, roughly circular panels showing fragments of ceiling, bottles and hands. As Scott McCloud explained, speech is a major device in the measuring of time in comics: readers inevitably linger over text-heavy panels and skip through silent sequences. If, as in figure 13e, dozens of word balloons cluster into a single panel, the effect is that of time collapsing in on itself. Far from narrating events in a coherent sequence of snapshots, this page literalises the disjunction between Cerebus' visual and aural perceptions.

Perhaps the most intriguing is the device in figure 13o: three panels that

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59   Or maybe Harrison Starkey: they are difficult to tell apart unless someone addresses them by name.

fit within each other like Russian dolls. The speech, and the weighting of the outer panel towards the bottom of the page – makes it clear that we are to read from the middle outwards – Cerebus says "Please Dave// Please// Cerebus just wants to die". The final panel shows Cerebus' hands, his fingers bigger than the columns of an ancient ruin, and (upside down) the mysterious carved faces which appeared on the Black Tower in Iest. It is a bewildering, hallucinatory image for a number of reasons, but most significant is its defiance of comics conventions regarding the representation of time. Technically, it works: one time period can take place within another just as Tuesday lunchtime is encapsulated within the larger chronological frame of "Tuesday". What it suggests, however, is that the first two utterances – "Please Dave" and "Please" – are still in the present moment at the time of the third one. In short, there is a lag, a sense of inertia. This delay can be seen as analogous to that experienced in short term memory: the thought "Cerebus just wants to die" was presumably in the protagonist's mind as he started the sentence, and so the experience of pleading, and sinking into intoxicated sleep, is encapsulated within a single moment.

The temporal disruption in this extract is found not only in these local details but in links and references to other parts of the narrative. To a first-time reader, figure 13g does not make a great deal of sense. It shows Cerebus looking through the window of a cabin and seeing an empty chair in the middle of the room, and what seems to be a smashed-up floor. The final panel shows a young female companion who fails to understand Cerebus' somewhat disconnected remarks. First time around, we assume it is just a dream, with all the usual displacement and surrealism. The prophetic significance of this vision only becomes clear at the end of the following volume, *Form and Void (Book 14)*, in which Cerebus and Jaka return to his childhood home to find that his parents are dead, the village has been abandoned and the few remaining residents blame Cerebus for deserting his family.[60] This sequence is repeated as Cerebus peers through the window of his former home. In the present extract, Cerebus' parenthetical remarks point to an exaggerated sense of déjà vu: "We've been here before… We always have this conversation… It's always falling apart…" The internal dialogue on the opposite page encapsulates Cerebus' fearful, chaotic thoughts and shows his mounting anger

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60   Issue #265 (2001).

at Jaka, but it also draws him back into the present moment with the word "look", which links to a conversation in the bar on the following page. The overlapping thought balloons in figure 13h serve as a visual metaphor for Sim's conception of time in this sequence: past, present and future are not points on a line but layers in a continuous present.

I also want to draw attention to the remark "soomthen fell" in figure 13n, because this utterance is an echo that reverberates throughout *Cerebus* as a whole. The phrase first occurred when Cerebus was in the throne room of the Eastern Church, of which Sim said:

> … a single edifice in which most of the significant events of human history had taken place would be an echo chamber on a grand scale. You could never be quite certain if you heard a sound in a distant chamber if it was something that was taking place at that moment, or something that had taken place at five year intervals over the course of the last six thousand years.[61]

He went on to suggest that an individual's experiences in such a place would echo throughout his or her subsequent life. Readers have probably elevated this device to a status that it was never meant to have, although one of the more convincing explanations is that "something fell" also foreshadows Cerebus' death (he falls off a chair in extreme old age). But whatever intricate interpretations one may impose upon this device, the central idea seems to be that history does not shut up and go away, but makes its presence felt here and now. These devices, and many others, recur and mutate throughout *Cerebus*, as Sim constantly reworks the comics form to accommodate an increasingly esoteric, postmodern understanding of history.[62] If comics narration is all about the connection of fragments, and Sim is inclined to make unpredictable connections, then it is no surprise that his representation of time would develop far beyond the bounds of traditional, linear, sequential narrative.

Sim's refusal of narrative conventions regarding chronology has had a major impact on the structure of *Cerebus* as a whole. In charting his protagonist's adult life, Sim skips over major social and political events in a single page, then devotes whole

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61   Dave Sim, "About Last Issue" *Following Cerebus* 2 (December 2004) 36. See also Craig Miller and John Thorne, "Following the Trail of Something That Fell", *Following Cerebus* 1 (July 2004) 16-25.
62   See Beverley C. Southgate, *Postmodernism in History: Fear or Freedom?* (London: Routledge, 2003).

books to seemingly insignificant details. Cerebus spends three years tending sheep (*Latter Days (Book 15)*, 1-20), and more or less the whole of *Melmoth (Book 6)* sitting in a café mourning the loss of Jaka. Five issues are taken up with a single fight,[63] and long sections of *The Last Day (Book 16)* describe the elderly Cerebus struggling to go to the toilet. As Douglas Wolk puts it:

> …the weird, bumpy way Sim presents his world's history, as a series of not-entirely-trustworthy, not-entirely-compatible narratives that focus on immediate details and miss the big picture, is absolutely in line with his rejection of consensus reality. He explicitly opens up *Cerebus* to interpretation: if he makes it clear that he's not emphasizing a lot of the important parts, it's an open question which the important bits *are*.[64]

Oddly, Sim's refusal of linear chronology appears to have been exacerbated by his commitment to the serial form. It is a paradox of *Cerebus* that the routine of monthly serial publication, which demands immense practical discipline on the part of the creator, also tends to result in a rather sprawling, undisciplined narrative, prone to whims and digressions. The skeleton of a plot may have been in place since 1979, but in its details and pace *Cerebus* leaps and meanders apparently at random. If this is a graphic novel, it is very much in a modernist tradition, having shaken off most traces of novelistic structure.

It is not only Sim's representation of time that can be seen in postmodern terms; *Cerebus* is extremely self-conscious about the relationships between text, reader and author/artist. As I suggested above, Sim does not always appear fully aware of the relationship himself: his aggressive, hermaphrodite anti-hero sometimes seems closer to the author than Sim would like to believe. After Cerebus has been thrown behind the bar there appears a double page which we can only assume represents Cerebus' hallucination, but which seems to have more to do with the relationship between text and reader than anything in the protagonist's unconscious mind. The first image shows Cerebus dropping a pebble down some kind of brick-built shaft, with the perspective organised in such a way that this stone appears to be falling towards the picture plane. In the fifth panel it hits and smashes a glass surface, then bounces back, now rising towards Cerebus. In the first panel of figure 13d, the stone hits another glass surface at the top of the shaft, and some

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63   Issues #180-4 describe Cerebus' fight with Cirin. See *Reads (Book 9)*.
64   Wolk, (2007) 300.

kind of black liquid (possibly blood, but more likely ink) rains onto the page until only a few specks of white are left, signifying a starry night sky.

This sequence appears to be literalising the division between Cerebus' imaginary world and that of the reader, and emphasising the obvious point that Cerebus' world is composed entirely of ink on paper. In the later books of *Cerebus*, the protagonist becomes aware of his creator, "Dave", who appears in the book on several occasions, self-consciously manipulating the plot. Such metafiction is nothing new in comics: as early as 1905, Winsor McCay showed a panel exploding in "Sammy Sneeze".[65] Still, there is a world of difference between one clever panel and Sim's full-blown, over-the-top postmodernism. *Cerebus* has it all: genre mixing, blatant anachronism, direct addresses to the reader, conversations between author and protagonist, and a certain measure of showing off about the writer's power over the ending (10.204ff). As Sim noisily problematises the empirical reality of the "real" world, this activity inevitably extends to the fictionality of fictional worlds.

On several occasions throughout this extract, Cerebus' confused vision is shown to include concentric circles like ripples on the surface of water. It seems that one of the main functions of this device is to imply that the surface of perceived reality, and the surface of the comics page, are just surfaces, with the possibility of depth underneath. In figure 13h, when Cerebus experiences a premonition of his return home, the imagined speech balloons make ripples in the space around them, as the fracturing of temporal logic disturbs the space of the comics page. And on the final page of this extract, the surface seems to break: the ripples are viewed from below as Cerebus sinks into another realm of consciousness. By drawing attention to the artificiality of his fictional world, Sim implies that the reader's assumptions about reality are no more stable than Cerebus' whisky-soaked visions.

The final observation I wish to make about this extract relates to a vivid and distinctly disturbing sequence in which Cerebus' hands disintegrate (Figures 13k-l). To begin with Cerebus seems to be rehearsing a trick commonly shown to small children in which a thumb can be made to "disappear". By the fourth panel, however, it is clear that he can detach his fingers and move them around. His fingers fuse together, then develop teeth and attack one another, and finally the victimised one explodes. This double page has an unusually straightforward and regular layout of

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65   Winsor McCay *Early Works: Vol. 1* (West Carrolton, Ohio: Checker, 2004) 108.

nine panels on each side, and the background is blank darkness. Cerebus' attention is focused exclusively on his horrific vision, and the outside world is temporarily forgotten.

As a metaphor for internal conflict the hallucination makes perfect sense. The 18-panel sequence can be read as a nightmarish reminder of Cerebus' habitual self-destructiveness. However, as I have already discussed, anxiety about bodily disintegration becomes a particular preoccupation for Cerebus in the later books. Cerebus has experienced a similar illusion once before, having watched parts of his body disappear under the influence of an alcohol/codeine cocktail in *Church and State II (Book 4)* (682-6). My analysis of this extract has repeatedly highlighted the artificiality of Cerebus' world and therefore his physical form, and this is something of which the protagonist becomes increasingly aware. Within the context of an extract which touches both Cerebus' deepest childhood fears and his awareness of his own fictionality, this nightmare operates on a number of levels. Veering between Oedipal terrors and a vague acknowledgement that he is no more than ink on paper, Cerebus tries desperately to keep himself together.

If nothing else, my analysis of this extract offers a snapshot of the phenomenal expanse of territory that *Cerebus* covers, and in its fractured nature it is, I believe, representative of the comic as a whole. Mario Saraceni, modifying Scott McCloud's definitions of the various types of transition in comics, argues that since comics have developed as adult literature, the links between panels have become increasingly tenuous. He claims that the more obvious types of transition, such as moment-to-moment and action-to-action, have lost their prominence.[66] Whilst it is difficult to substantiate such a claim empirically, I would nonetheless conclude by pointing to the extract in hand, in which relationships between individual panels and sequences have become ever more fluid and obscure. Narrating an episode in which the protagonist has lost all control over his body and is rapidly becoming lost in a landscape of his unconscious, this extract illuminates a number of late modern anxieties about the possibility of individual authenticity and integrity.

Cerebus is a deliberately, defiantly difficult work, and one which rebels with impressive force against the stereotype of comics as easy reading. It is a comic

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66   Saraceni, (2000) 131-2.

that has increasingly challenged its readers, as moments of witty parody and breathtaking technical innovation mingle with an ideology that almost everyone finds offensive or plain mad. Cerebus himself has, by and large, remained a lively and endearing character in spite of the extraordinary contortions into which Sim has twisted his narrative. I have been arguing that the form of *Cerebus*, particularly its serial self-publication and its inventive use of comics conventions, are inseparable from its narrative of heroic, solitary masculinity in a world of unstable, shifting realities. It is important to note the complexity of the creator's relationship with his work. The man who claims to celebrate indeterminacy and fluidity never shows a glimmer of doubt about the absolute rightness of his own opinions. The Sim who now prays five times a day is not the same secular humanist Sim who started the book in 1977, yet each self, in turn, believes its own perspective to be The One.

In the last chapter, I discussed Crumb's ambivalent relationship with childhood and his critique of contemporary constructions of masculinity, and I raised the idea that these are common characteristics of alternative comics. However, the temptation to make smooth, easy links between modes of critique should be avoided. Like Crumb, Sim finds himself out of place in a world in which white masculinity is no longer the central, original model from which all others differ. And like Crumb, Sim resists assimilation into modern modes of production and communication: in spite of running his own publishing company, for example, Sim has no website or email address. Yet whilst Crumb diffidently, humorously acknowledges his racist and misogynist unconscious as a part of the fabric of American culture, Sim proclaims that his vision of the world is accurate and that masculinism should replace feminism as the dominant discourse in gender politics. Both acknowledge problems with current constructions of masculinity, but their responses and solutions could not be further apart. With such a divergence of opinion, it is impossible to discern whether these white males are defining themselves as a marginalised group or simply objecting to the fact that they are no longer indisputably at the top of the tree.
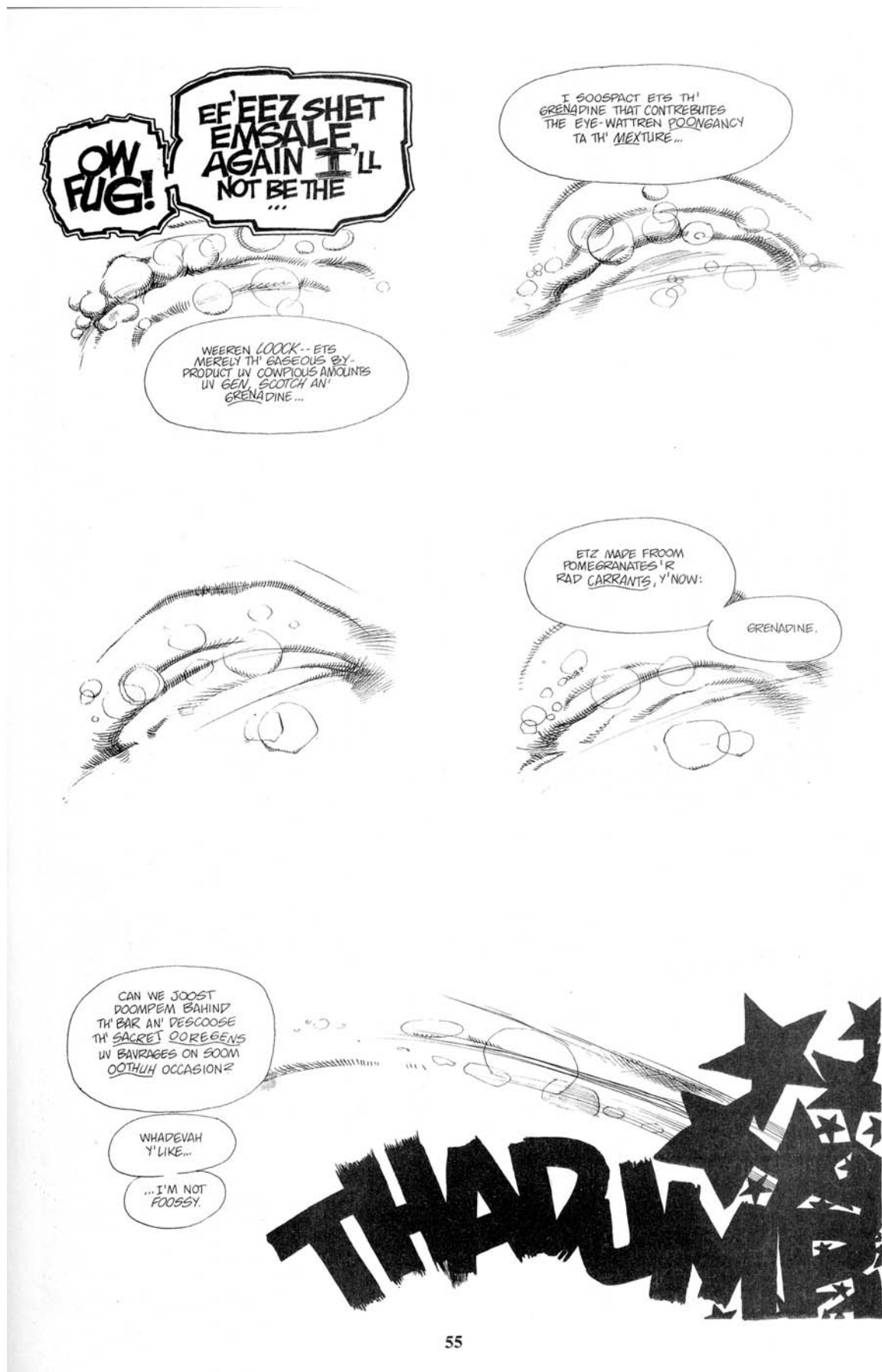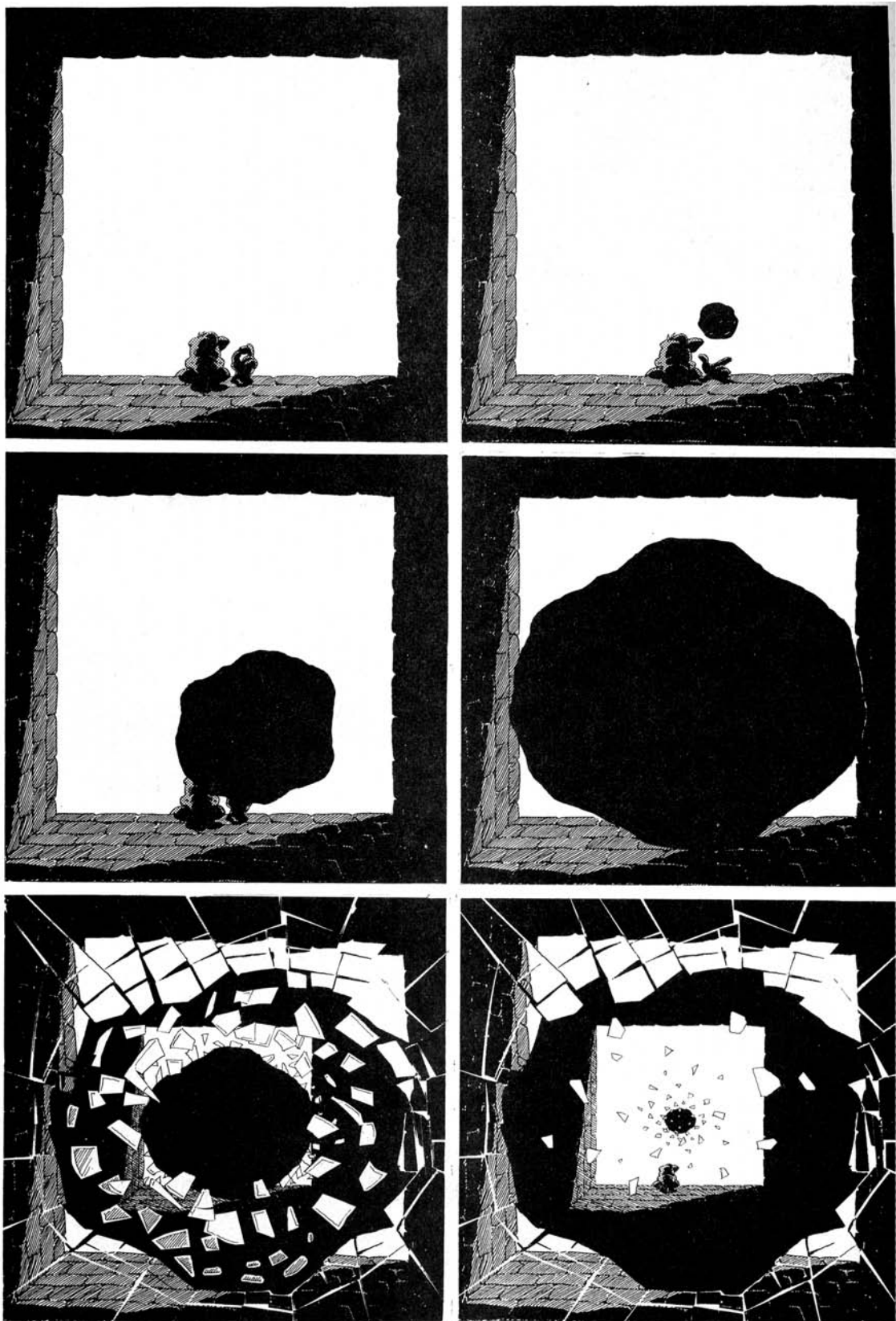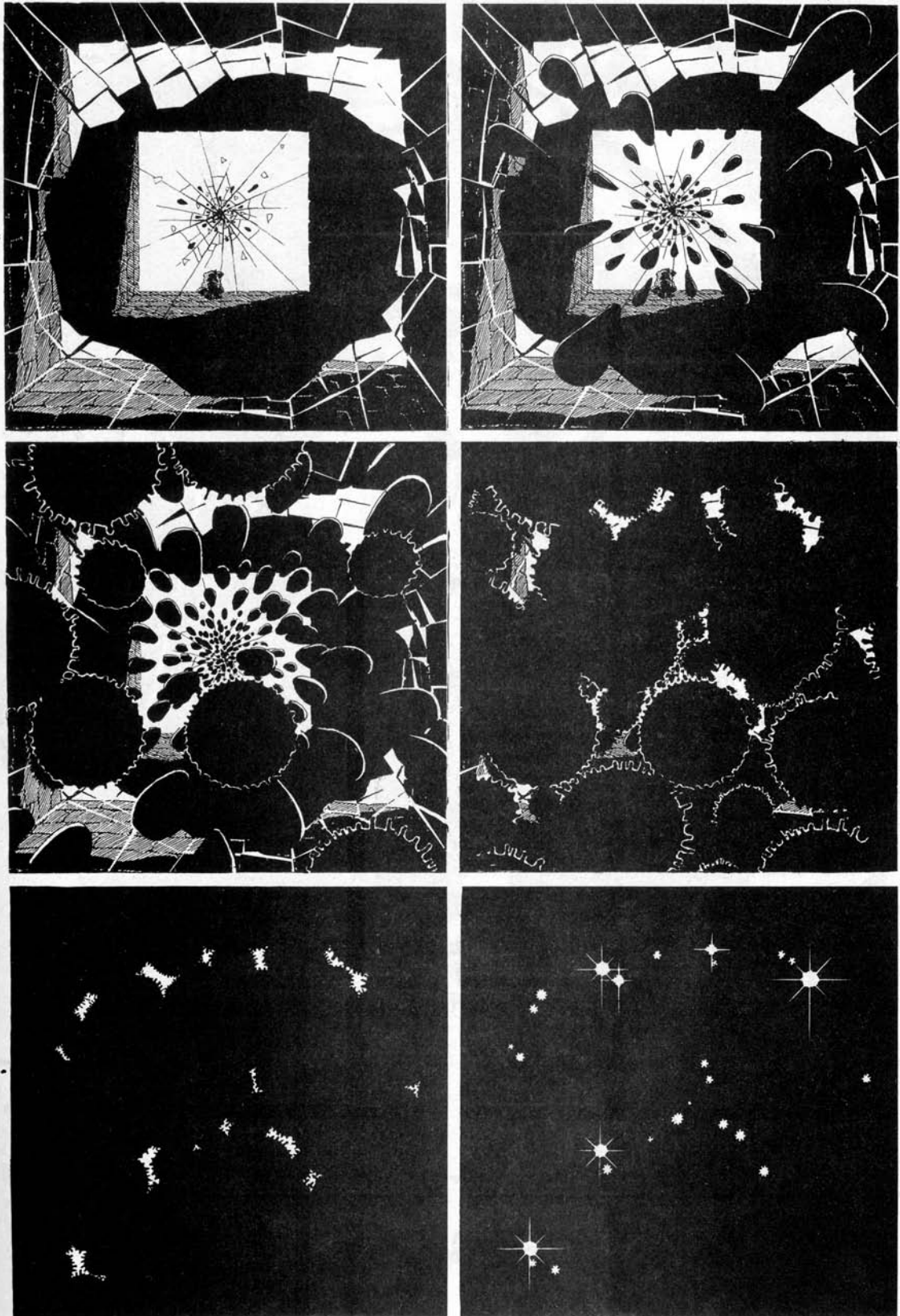
Figure 13a.

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Figure 13b.

Figure 13c.

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Figure 13d.

Figure 13e.

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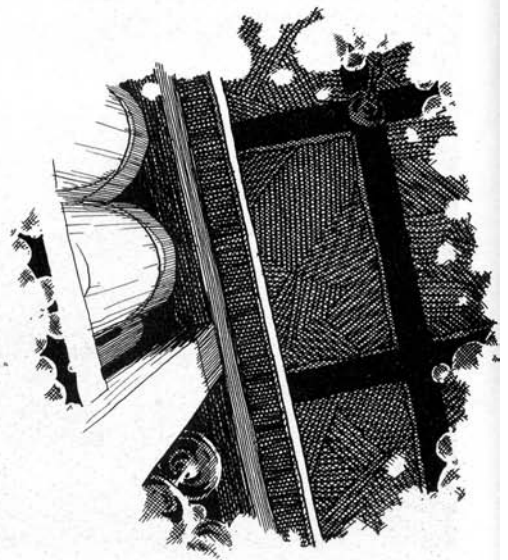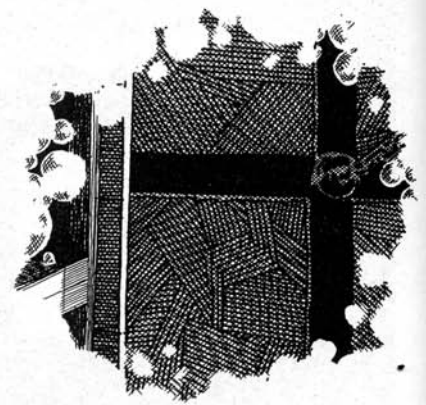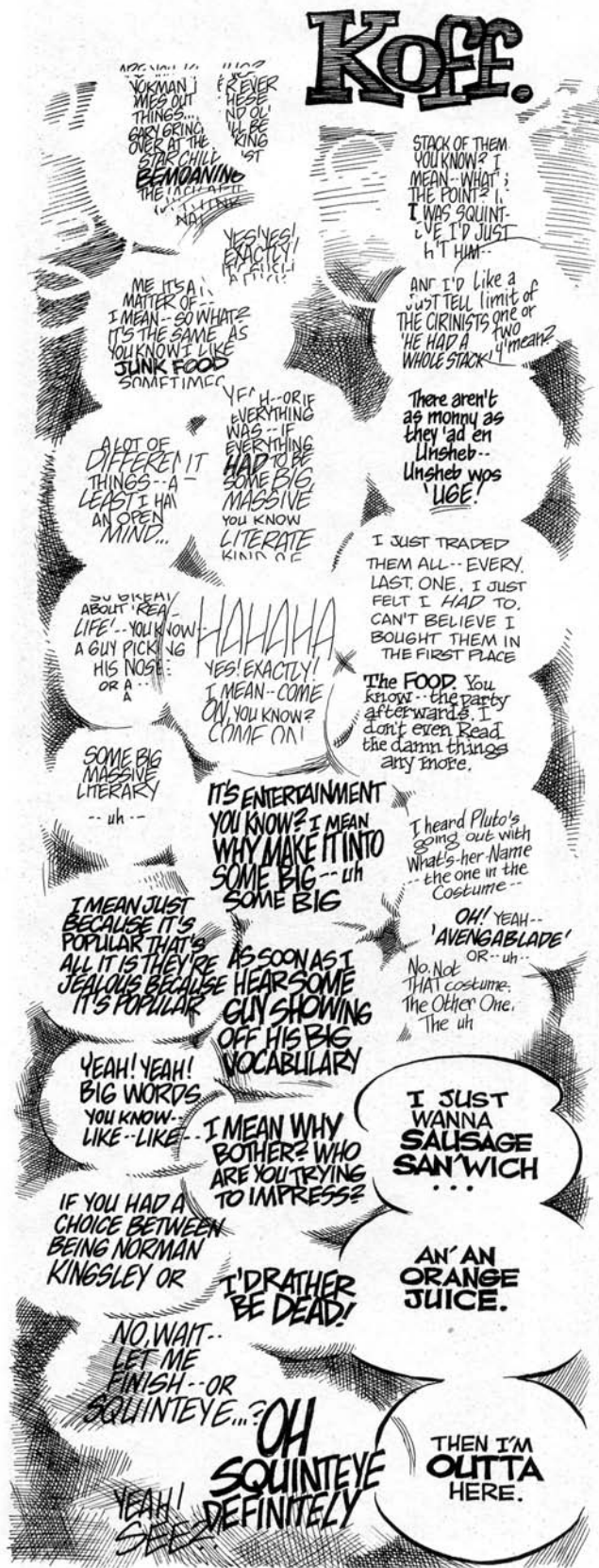
Figure 13f.

Figure 13g.

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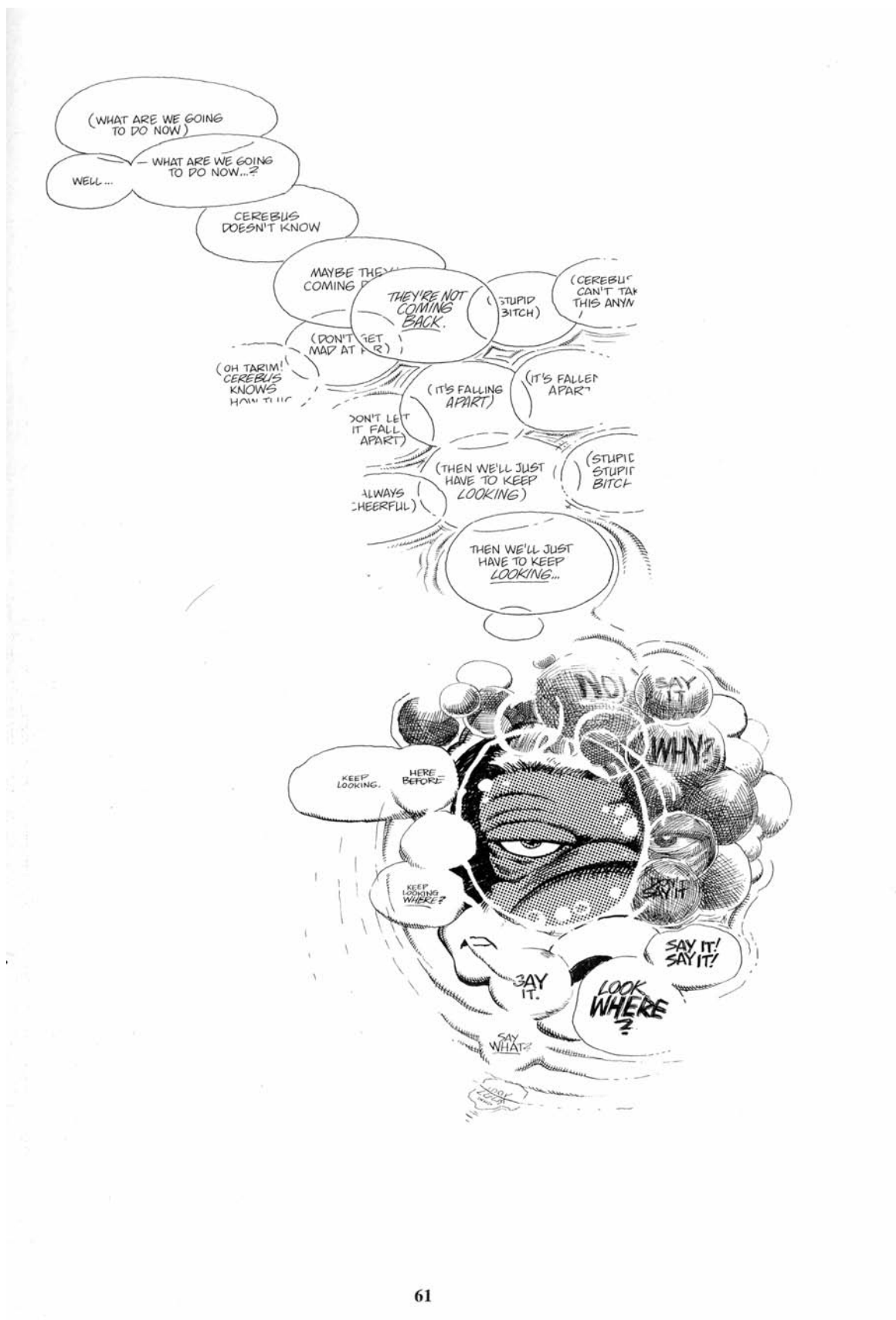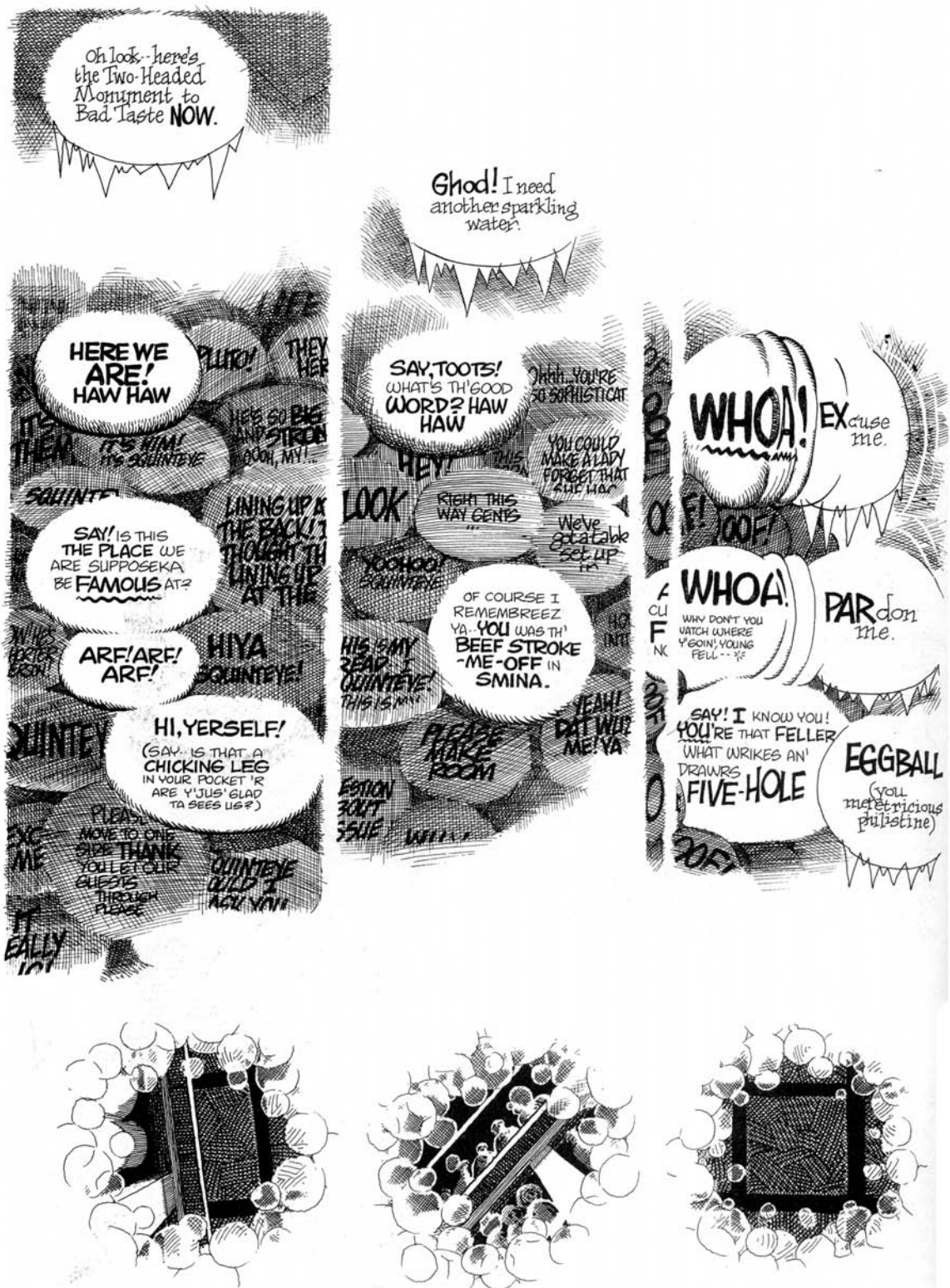
Figure 13h.

Figure 13i.
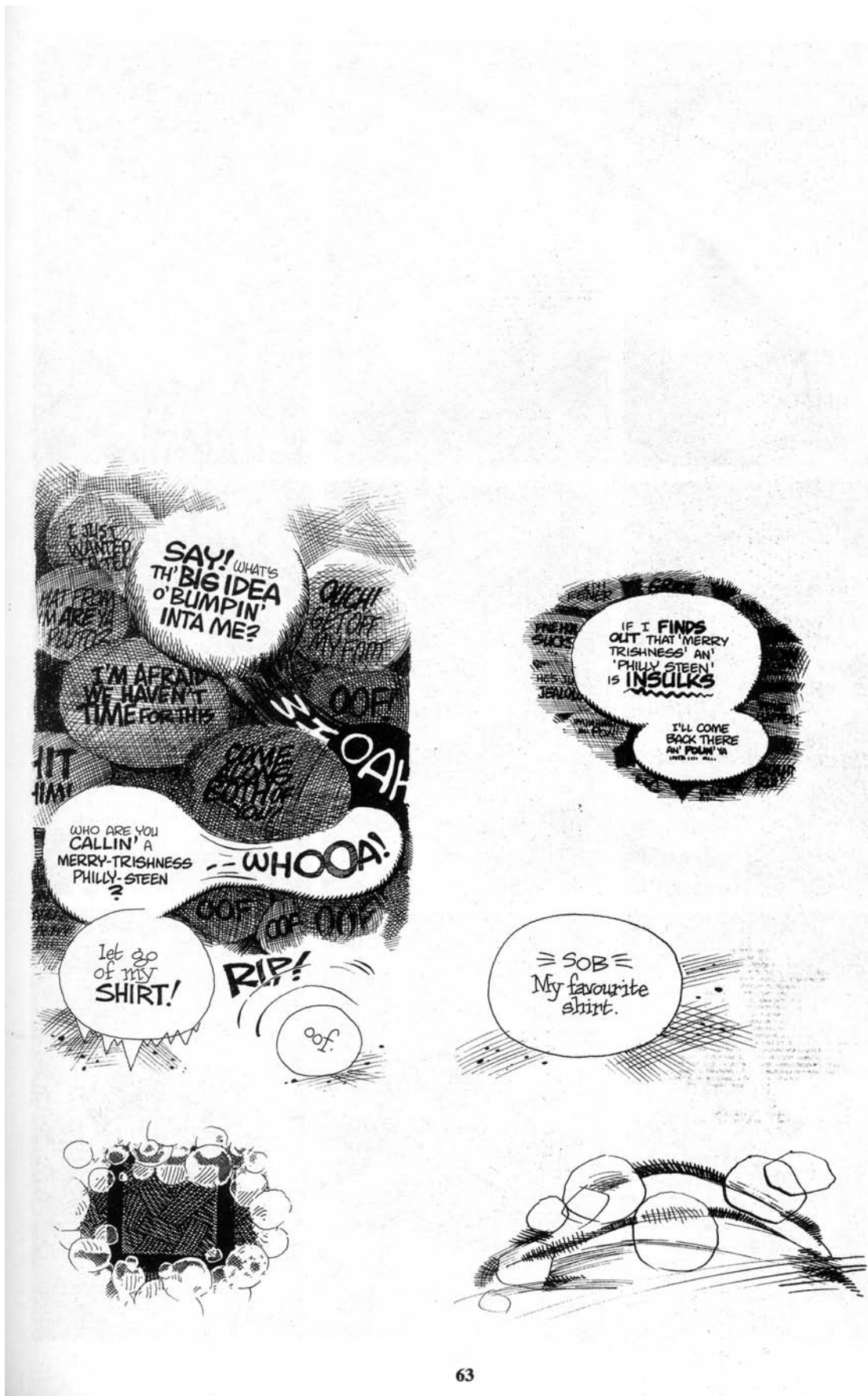
Figure 13j.
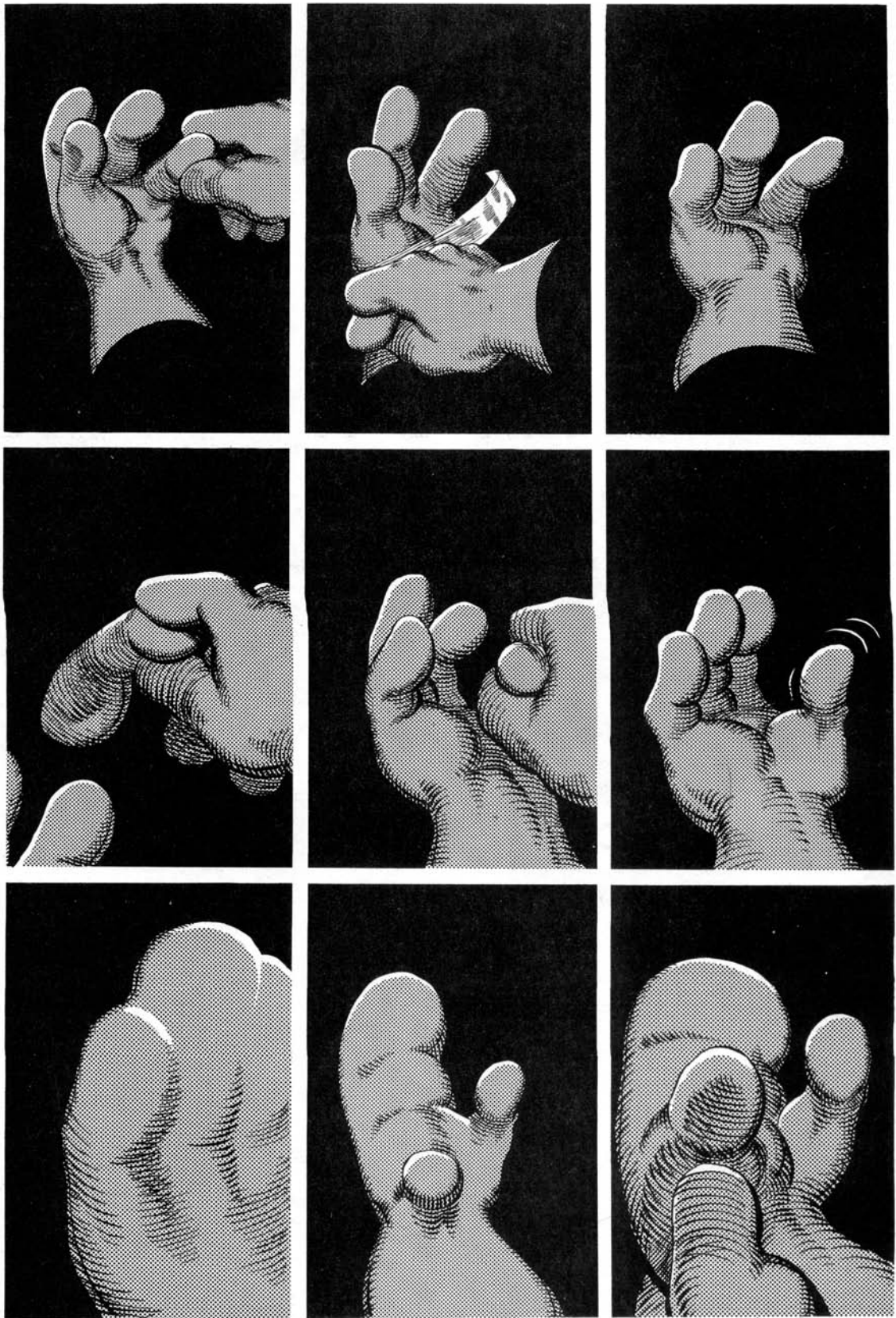
64

Figure 13k.
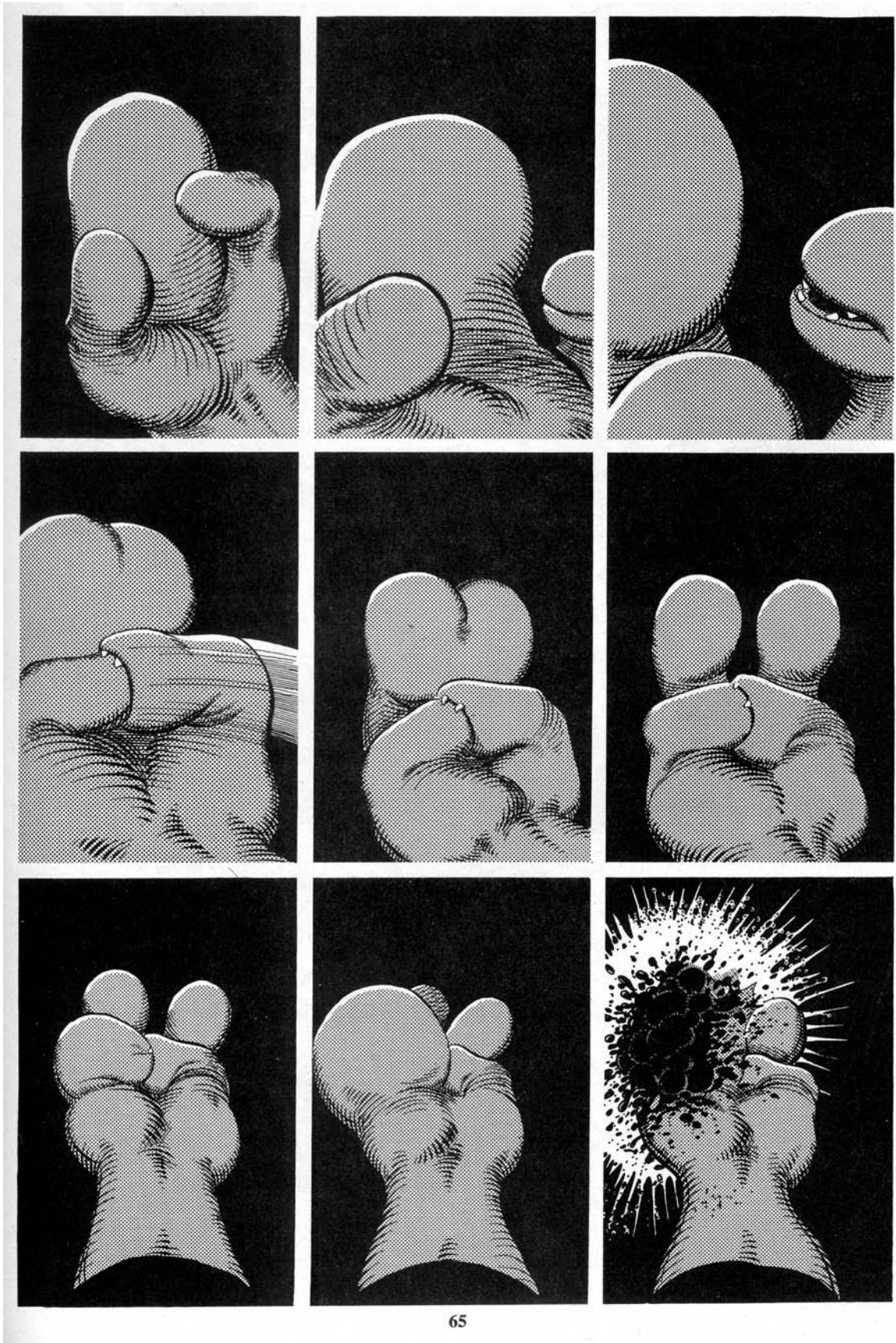
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Figure 13l.

Figure 13m.

67

Figure 13n.

Figure 13o.