

Narrative self-reference in a literary comic: M.-A. Mathieu's *L'Origine*

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Abstract

*Narratives in literature and even in the comics have become self-referential. A self-referential narrative sign is one that represents itself. The sign is its own object, narrating and narrated time become conflated. Instead of narrating a story, a self-referential narrative narrates that it narrates and how or why the characters in the narrative have found their way into the narrative. M.-A. Mathieu's *L'Origine* is a self-referential comic book story of a protagonist who learns from his narrators, a team of comic book artists, that he exists only on the paper of a comic book. Two semiotic devices of self-referential verbal and pictorial narrating are distinguished and examined. Iconic self-reference is exemplified by self-repeating signs and signs that represent themselves in the form of mirror texts or self-referential pictures in the picture (*mise en abyme*). Indexical self-reference is exemplified by the devices of fragmentation and metalepsis, the participation of a narrator in the narrative events. Metalepsis leads to narrative paradoxes and is a major source of humor.*

Keywords: self-reference; narrative sign; narrative time; metalepsis; paradox; comics.

1. Comics and literature

1.1. *The comics between literature and the movies*

The comics are a hybrid media. Like novels or short stories, they tell stories, and insofar, unlike the movies, the comics are also a literary genre since they convey much of their narrative content by means of written language. The very word 'literature' testifies to the indebtedness of verbal

art in occidental culture to written language since it owes its etymology to the Latin word *littera*, 'letter.'

At the same time, comic books are unlike literary books with their regular sequence of letters in an even more regular writing space on pages divided into an equal number of lines of equal length. The comics are as much a pictorial medium as they are a medium of writing, but pictorial and written messages together are not enough to make a comic book. Unlike drawings or engravings which serve as illustrations to literary books, the pictures of the comics are moving pictures in which the same figures move on from panel to panel. In this respect, the comics are similar to the movies.

The pictures of the comics move differently from the ones of the movies, but their movement is not only more primitive since they are unable to create the illusion of real movement, it is also more creative, since they have a kinetic potential which surpasses the one of the movies. In their narrating time, the pictures of a film can only move in one direction, from the past to the future. The speed of their movement per second has a regularity determined by a machine, and their pictorial frame displayed on the screen does not change in height and breadth. Comic book pictures, by contrast, cannot only change the size of their frames and thus change the height and breadth of their pictorial space; they can also transgress or even give up their panel frames and merge and mingle with the space of writing, which is both a narrative space apart from the pictures and a narrative space included within the picture frames.

1.2. *Literary comics in the era of postmodern self-referentiality*

The comics have the notorious reputation for being a trivial medium, but, needless to say, there are comics of low and of high literary qualities, comics for the masses and for the intellectuals, just as there is trivial literature and literature acclaimed for its aesthetic value. The present paper will focus on Marc-Antoine Mathieu's (1991) *L'Origine*, a comic book of literary qualities rather popular with intellectuals. A central theme that *L'Origine* has in common with contemporary literature and media, such as film, advertising, or computer games (cf. Nöth 2005b), is self-referentiality.

Self-reference has been much discussed as a characteristic of postmodernity. In times in which everything seems to have been said, in which the 'grand narratives' seem to have lost their credibility (Lyotard 1984 [1979]: 27), and representations are said to have lost their potential to represent, literature, the visual, and the audiovisual media have become increasingly

self-referential, self-reflexive, or autotelic. Instead of representing the world as seen or experienced by a narrator mediating between the world of real or fictional events and the readers or spectators, writers, artists, film makers, and even journalists have turned to representing representations. Instead of narrating, they narrate how and why they narrate, instead of filming, they film that they are filming. Novels have become metanovels, that is, novels about writing a novel, films have become metafilms, and even the news report what has been reported in the news. The comics have not remained aloof from this trend of postmodernity. Instead of narrating the adventures of heroes and superheroes, they tell the stories of protagonists inspired by the mythical heroes of the comics, as in *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (Ware 2000), who meets repeatedly Superman, or they inquire the *condition humaine* of a comic book hero and the enigma of his existence on nothing but paper, as in the case of *Julius Corentin Acquefacques, prisonnier des rêves*, the protagonist of *L'Origine*, the comic book to be examined in the following from the aspect of its modes of self-reference.

2. The narrative sign, narrating and narrated time

A narrative is a complex triadic sign, and to understand its structure requires taking into consideration three distinct frames of reference: 1. the events the story tells about; 2. the narrating (i.e., telling the story of these events); 3. the audience, whose frame of reference may again be very different from the previous two. Narratology, the study of narratives, has not always clearly distinguished between these three frames of reference. The essence of the narrative has often been reduced either to the logic of the events related in the story or to the dyadic constellation of a story and the telling of a story.

Among those who have reduced the essence of the narrative to the logic of its events are the semiotic narratologists of the 1970s, who described the elementary structure of a narrative in terms of the logic of the events related in the story. In this framework, it was common to describe the minimal unit of narrative structure, the so-called *narreme*, as a proposition representing an action, such as 'Tarzan hugged Jane,' or as a minimal sequence of propositions in which some reversal of an initial state resulting in an opposite final state of affairs is represented, such as 'Tarzan was lonely, Tarzan met Jane, and Tarzan was happy' (cf. Nöth 2000: 404–405).

In contrast to such monist accounts of the narrative as an event structure, dualist accounts of the essence of the narrative have distinguished

between the story and the telling of the story. The speech act of telling a story is as much constitutive of a narrative as the events told in the story. The essence of a narrative can indeed not be reduced to actions or events since events can take place whether they are narrated or not. There is no narrative without a narrator *telling* about some event. Without a narrator, there may be a logic of actions or events happening in the world, but the world of actions and events is not necessarily a narrated world. Even sentences with a propositional content representing actions or events are not necessarily narratives; they may be statements, testimonies, predictions, prophecies, or they may represent the propositional content of other speech acts, such as promises, lies, or condemnations.

In view of the duality of the story as a sequence of events and the speech act of story telling, many narratologists have described the essence of the narrative as a dyadic structure. Especially with respect to its temporal structure, the narratological tradition has established a dyadic frame of reference, as reflected in the dichotomy between narrated and narrating time. *Narrated time* is the frame of reference of the time during which the events of the story occur; it is typically a time in the past, after all, it is not by chance that 'story' is derived from 'history.' *Narrating time*, by contrast, is the frame of reference of the narrator who is writing or telling the story in his or her present. The narratologist Gérard Genette (1972: 77) associates the duality of narrated and narrating time with Saussure's sign model when he interprets narrated time as the time of the signified (*signifié*) and narrating time as the time of the signifier (*signifiant*). According to this interpretation, the two temporal frames of reference of a narrative thus belong to the two semiotic planes of a dyadic *narrative sign*.

However, this duality of narrated and narrating time is questionable since the temporal frame of reference of narrating time is once more fundamentally split into two independent time spheres associated with two very distinct frames of mind, the time sphere (and the mind) of the narrator and the time spheres (and the minds) of the listeners or readers of the story. The narrator addresses the story in his or her own *present* to an audience located in a listening or reading time, which is by necessity in the *future* of the narrator's time, a time either following immediately the narrator's time, as in the case of an audience of an oral narrative, or in some undetermined future, as in the case of a written narrative. Genette (1972: 74) himself is aware that in literature this additional duality of narrating time requires the distinction between a *time of writing* and a *time of reading*, but he adopts a radical solution to maintain the Saussurean duality of the two narrative times. Narrating time, according to Genette (1972: 78), is simply the reader's time, more precisely, the average time a reader

needs to read the narrative, and the narrators or the writers are excluded from this time sphere of narrating time.

In contrast to the dyadic tradition of the narrative sign as a narrative signifier associated with a narrated signified, the present paper proposes a triadic conception of the narrative sign according to which three time spheres of narration are fundamental to the study of time in narrative literature and refer to three distinct correlates of the triadic narrative sign: first, the narrated time of the actions and events; second, the narrator's time; and third, the time sphere of the audience or readership. The background of this triadically defined narrative sign is Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics with its concept of *semiosis* as the 'action of the sign' (CP 5.473) or as a sign process involving the *sign* or *representamen*, which stands for (or represents) an *object*, and 'addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign' called *interpretant* (CP 2.228).

The three time spheres associated with the process of narrative semiosis are the present as the time of the narrative sign itself, the past as the sphere of its object, and the future as the time of its interpretant. The present is the narrating time in which the story is written or read, the time of the here and now of writing or reading, but reading pertains both to the present, insofar as the literary text is read as a sign, and to the future, insofar as it creates its effect as a literary interpretant. The past is the narrated time of the actions and events the narrative tells about, while the future (in relation to the narrative sign) is the time of the effects created in the readers' minds, as a thought, an insight, an impression, an emotion, a feeling of pleasure, or a knowledge about past events. While the narrative object relates to a *past* which precedes and causes it and the narrative sign itself refers to the *present* in which it is perceived, the narrative interpretant unfolds in the *future* in which it creates its semiotic effects.

An objection against this basic temporal framework of narrative semiosis which suggests itself is the following: can the narrated time of the actions and events not be located in the future, as in science fiction, or even in the present, as in a story told by an eye witness while the event is going on? Peirce's object of the sign can indeed be fictional, not only 'perceptible' but also merely 'imaginable or even unimaginable in one sense' (CP 2.230). As a mere fiction, the event time of the narrative can thus certainly be in the future and also in the present, but this is a fictional present or future. The 'real' object of the sign is by necessity in the past, where it exists in the writers' lived experience of the world, in their memory and imagination, in the form of a 'mental representation' (CP 5.473); this past must precede the writing of the narrative since it is its determining cause. This is also the reason why genuine simultaneity of narrated

time with narrating time is semiotically impossible. The narrative event with which the eye witness is faced must first take place and be perceived before the narrative sign can give evidence of it.

3. Self-referential narrative signs in Mathieu's *L'Origine*

If reference is the relationship between a sign and the object which it represents, self-reference involves reference from the sign to itself. The object of a self-referential sign is not elsewhere, in something else, in some other time, but in a quality, a feature, a part, or a condition of the representing sign (cf. *CP* 2.230, 2.311, 5.71).

Narrative reference is reference from a narrative sign in its own narrating present to narrative objects, that is, to actions and events in its narrated past. In contrast to a narrative sign that represents actions and events and presupposes two distinct narrative times, self-referential narrative signs, instead of narrating a narrative, reflect on the conditions of narrating, narrate that they narrate, or narrate for the sole purpose of narrating instead of narrating something else, that is, a story. Instead of establishing the usual distinction between narrating and narrated time, the temporal framework of the self-referential narrative sign conflates the two distinct temporal spheres of the narrative in one. Instead of narrating events localized in narrated time, the self-referential narrative narrates its own narrating; instead of a narrated time there is only the narrating time.

The self-referential conflation of narrated and narrating time is a central topic of Mathieu's *L'Origine*. Julius Corentin Acquefacques, the protagonist of the comic book, gradually finds out that he does not live a self-determined life of his own but exists only on paper as the creation of a team of comic book artists working for a mysterious governmental research institute. Although he knows that he exists only on paper, Acquefacques is disturbed to learn that he has only a two-dimensional existence which presupposes an unknown three-dimensional sphere of agents to create this world on paper. This paradoxical plot with motifs of an inverse Pygmalion myth means that the protagonist is deprived of his own narrated time and is condemned to live only in the narrating time of the comic book artists who narrate his story with ink and paper on their drawing boards. Without an origin and with no existence independent of the narrative, Acquefacques lives a life in which each of his movements and every single word he utters must be predetermined by the mysterious team of narrators who narrate his life in their studio.

L'Origine is a metanarrative, a narrative told twice, in two distinct narrative frameworks, one included within the other. The outer narrative framework is the one of the narrative signs enunciated by the 'real' author, Marc-Antoine Mathieu, and read by his readership after the year of publication in 1990. The inner narrative framework is the fictional one; the narrators are the mysterious comic book artists who create our protagonist on their drawing boards, and the readers are the figures of the artists' narrative creation, in particular, Acquefacques and his friends, the brothers Dalenvert. This is the framework in which the main plot of the story is self-referential, which creates the following narrative paradox: Acquefacques and the brothers Dalenvert are figures who live simultaneously in three time spheres: first, in the comic book artists' narrating time in which they have their origin; second, in their 'own' narrated time in which they discover who they are; and third, in a time of reading, in which they become readers of their own comic book narrative. The narrative paradox is based on a narrative asymmetry: Acquefacques is a twice narrated protagonist, once invented by M.-A. Mathieu, once by the mysterious studio artists, but he is in search of only one of his two narrators, the fictional comic artists.

The semiotic means by which the illusion of Acquefacques's self-referential narrative existence is created require both verbal and pictorial signs. Pictures alone have only a weak potential of expressing relations such as reflexivity, transitivity, causality, negation, anteriority or posteriority, which makes it difficult to narrate, by means of a picture, the narrating of a picture. M. C. Escher tried to come close to depicting such a scenario in his lithograph *Drawing Hands* of 1948 (cf. McHale 1987: 120), in which a left hand is drawing a right hand which is drawing a left hand, etc. (depicted, e.g., on the cover of Pier and Schaeffer 2005). This lithograph testifies to the impossibility of representing in one picture how the picture itself was composed. Escher's picture is not the impossible picture of a hand drawing itself; instead, it shows one hand drawing another hand. Nevertheless the visual effect is one of a visual paradox, since the temporal gap between the drawing and the result of the drawing, that is, between narrating and narrated time, cannot be made visible in one and the same picture.

Since only language has the full semiotic potential of representing the intricate paradoxes of a narrative plot which requires the representation of the idea of reflexivity and the conflation of two time spheres in one, Mathieu's primary semiotic means of revealing the self-referential nature of Acquefacques's existence are verbal messages. By means of letters in envelopes addressed to himself in handwriting, Acquefacques is informed about his double existence in narrating and in narrated time. All of these

letters contain comic book pages with pictures which testify to Acquefacques's double existence, but equally important are the page numbers put down on these pages in handwriting. Finally, long dialogues with Igor Ouffe, the research director and head of the studio of comic artist, are necessary before our protagonist learns the details and the circumstances of his origin.

Nevertheless, Mathieu finds an ingenious pictorial device to create the illusion of a picture representing itself. His trick of creating the impression that we are faced with a scene whose narrating time coincides with its narrated time is a variant of Escher's self-referential picture of the hand drawing a hand, the device of the picture in the picture, one being the cause of the other. Mathieu also adopts the device of the picture in the picture, but his trick of relating the two pictures is different. The pictures from which Acquefacques learns that he has only a two-dimensional comic book existence are pictures from the very comic book whose protagonist he is himself, pictures sent to him anonymously by mail with the paradoxical result that Acquefacques turns into a reader of his own story and is now the protagonist and the reader of his story at the same time.

On page 15, the protagonist receives an envelope with the address 'Mr. Acquefacques — Not to be opened before tomorrow, 3 p.m.' The next day, represented in the last panel on page 18, on the stroke of three, below a clock whose dial indicates 3 p.m. and emits self-referentially the sounds 'Dong, dong, dong,' Acquefacques, in the apartment of his two friends, opens the envelope. As the first panel of page 19 shows, the content of the envelope is a comic book page which is an exact double of the scene of page 18 in which Acquefacques opened the envelope on the stroke of three in his friends' apartment, the only difference being the handwritten addition of the reference line 'L'Origine (p. 18)' on the top of the page (see figures 1 and 2).

Since the copy of page 18, which Acquefacques holds in his hand, in the first panel of page 19 is from the envelope shown on the preceding page and in which it had remained sealed for at least a day, this page cannot be a 're-presentation' of the previous scene, nor is it possible that our protagonist and his friends 're-present' the scene from the envelope in the sense of reenacting it. Without any plausible explanation, the origin of this page must remain enigmatic, and the situation implies temporal and logical paradoxes.

The paradox is insoluble. If Acquefacques really exists only on the paper of a comic book, the copy of page 18 from the envelope which represents him opening the envelope containing the very page 18 which represents him opening the envelope must have been drawn twice by the team of comic book artists at the root of Acquefacques's existence in a



Fig. 1

Figures 1 and 2. Comic book hero Acquafacques opening the envelope on page 18 (bottom left) which contains a double of the comic book page 18 (top right, p. 19) that shows him opening this very envelope (Mathieu 1990: 18–19)



Fig. 2

narrating time preceding the narrated time. Did the narrators send one of two copies of this page to our protagonist to transmit the disturbing message of his enigmatic existence on paper? Only later will this hypothesis for a solution have to be discarded, when we learn that all the pages which Acquefacques receives by mail in envelopes apparently have their origin in one single copy of a comic book from which they were torn out, one after the other.

4. Iconic self-reference: Self-repetition and *mise en abyme*

Scenes of narrative self-reference similar to the one shown in figures 1 and 2 recur in the course of the narrative in which Acquefacques discovers more and more indices of his own comic book existence on mere paper. On page 23, still in his friends' apartment, Acquefacques, to his surprise, finds another comic book page in the same envelope as before, this time with the reference line 'L'Origine (p. 27).' Four pages later, not unexpectedly, when the events predicted by the scene shown in the torn out page 27, first shown on page 23, are really happening, our protagonist experiences a sense of *déjà vu*.

Déjà vu, the feeling that what is happening now has happened before in exactly the same way, means repetition. From a semiotic point of view, textual repetition, symmetry, and other forms of self-reflection mean iconicity since a sign that repeats or reflects another sign in the same text is an icon of the first sign (cf. Nöth 2001). At the same time, the repetition of the same at different points of a text implies textual self-reference to the degree that the referent of these repeated signs is in the text (cf. Nöth 2005a).

Self-reference involving iconicity occurs in many other forms in *L'Origine*. Acquefacques's name is iconically self-referential since it is an echo name in which the first five letters, *ACQUE*, are repeated literally, both constituents having another letter, *s* or *f*, attached to their end (*ACQUEfACQUEs*). Igor Ouffe, too, has an iconically self-referential name because of its onomatopoeic quality ('Phew!' is an approximate English equivalent), which he admits himself when he introduces himself as follows: 'Ouffe. Igor Ouffe . . . and I know that I really look like it' (p. 33). Even more striking is the iconically self-referential way in which the two brothers Dalenvert are represented. With identical haircuts, beards, faces, miens, and clothes, except for the pattern of their ties, they do not only resemble each other like Tweedledum and Tweedledee in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* but also begin to double each other by speaking in chorus with the contagious effect that Acquefacques joins in (p. 24).

The most famous literary device of iconic self-reference in pictures is the one of *mise en abyme* (Dällenbach 1989), the device of a text reflecting itself or of a picture depicting itself like a mirror that reflects itself in another mirror. The *mise en abyme* of a comic book page in another comic book page, as discussed above, is a key theme of *L'Origine*. On page 28, at an antiquarian's, Acquefacques finally discovers a copy of the comic book whose topic is the story of his life, *L'Origine*. It does not only have the same title but also the same cover design as the comic book which the readers in their outer narrative framework have in their hands when reading this page. However, the copy discovered by Acquefacques has all of its pages torn out except for page 29, which shows the protagonist reading page 29 from his one-page comic book copy. The five panels of this comic book page are mirrored in two of its panels showing Acquefacques as he reads this page 29 with the page facing the readers of the outer narrative framework. The effect is an endless mirroring of this scene. The moment when Acquefacques, with his comic book in his hand, exclaims with reference to his still unknown creator "‘He’ has foreseen ... what I am saying' is mirrored theoretically endlessly (but for reasons of graphic representability in this comic book only three times) in the fictionally unlimited series of the pictures depicting his reading of the picture depicting his reading, etc. (figure 3).

The image of the endless self-reflection of a picture that depicts itself is a recurring topic in the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce, who used the example of a map which contains a map of itself until the endlessly self-repeating maps converge in one single point as a parable of the nature of human self-consciousness (e.g., *CP* 8.122). It is perhaps no coincidence that our comic book hero in search of his identity is repeatedly faced with such situations of self-mirroring.

5. Indexical self-reference: Fragmentation and metalepsis

The scenes in which our protagonist is self-referentially confronted with mailed envelopes containing pages torn from the comic book of his life are enacted in a careful progression. The first page of this kind, on p. 11, depicts a scene of a few hours (and 7 pages) earlier (p. 4). Being a representation of a scene in the past, the shock effect is still not as dramatic as later on. The next scene of p. 18 (figures 1 and 2) and later again the one on p. 29 (figure 3), brings a climax of surprise and concern since these pages received by mail depict Acquefacques at the moment of opening the letter and reading that he is reading the page contained in the letter. With the third page torn from the book of his life, which



Figure 3. *Acquefacques in the endless self-reflection of his reading of his reading on p. 29 of L'Origine (Mathieu 1990: 29)*

Acquefacques receives on p. 23, the plot reaches an unsurpassable climax since it represents a future event, the one of p. 27.

The semiotic principle behind this repeated fragmentation of a never visible whole is the principle of indexicality. Insofar as the pages represent fragments of a whole, they are indexical signs of this whole, and insofar as both the yet unknown whole and the fragments are self-representations of our protagonist's life, these signs are indexically self-referential. The centrality of the idea of fragmentation in the plot of *L'Origine* is encapsulated in the scene at the antiquarian's in which Acquefacques finally holds the book of his life in his hand only to discover that all pages except for page 29, which represents the present moment (figure 3), are torn out, not only the preceding pages concerning his past, but also, and more disconcertingly, the twelve following pages which concern his future.

An index, according to Peirce, is a sign which refers to an object by which it is 'really affected' (CP 2.248). There is a part-whole relation between an index which indicates its object partially, as in the previous example; there is a relation of contiguity in time and space between an index whose object is locally or temporally close by; there is a relation of causality between an index caused by the object it indicates. Such features of indexicality are characteristic of the narrative device of metalepsis, as it is employed as a central device in the narrative of Mathieu's *L'Origine*.

Metalepsis challenges the assumption that the events told in a story happen independently of whether they are told or not. It is a literary device violating the narrative presupposition of the independence of the narrated world from the narrator's world, the expectation that the only bridge between the narrator's present world of narrating and the past world of the narrative events is the narrator's knowledge and remembrance of those events, the knowledge that a narrator cannot travel into the past of the narrative (Genette 1972: 243–246; McHale 1987: 119–125; Pier and Schaeffer 2005). In narrative metalepsis, the narrated characters meet their narrator, who interferes in their lives as if he or she could live both in the narrating and the narrated time. The narration is 'contaminated' by the narrator's presence (Ryan 2004: 442). At the root of metalepsis is a semiotic mistake: instead of *representing* the narrated world, the narrator begins to *act* and to *live* in it. He or she enters the scene, not to observe and write about it, but to influence it by participating in the actions and interfering with the lives of those who are the product of his or her inventions.

Metalepsis (like metonymy) is fundamentally indexical insofar as the metaleptic sign is not only a sign of the narrated world but a sign of the narrated world which *indicates the bodily presence of its narrator*. Any literary text evinces indices of its author insofar as its style is an index of its author's way of writing. Metaleptic indices, however, indicate the narra-

tor's presence in the narrated world, not in the signs of his or her writing. The narrated world becomes influenced by the narrator who participates in the events as a character in the time of the narrative. The product (the narrative) indicates its producer (narrator) like an effect that indicates its cause. The traces of the narrator's presence in the narrated world, the narrator's interference in the narrative events and the traces of the narrator's intrusion in this world are the indexical signs of narrative metalepsis.

Metalepsis is omnipresent in the inner narrative framework of *L'Origine*, whereas the outer narrative framework remains unaffected by the device until the last page. The mysterious narrators in their comic art studios do not only narrate Acquefacques's life, they interfere in it in dramatic ways. Not contented with creating Acquefacques as an autonomous living being as narrators of ordinary fiction are, they let the protagonist of their literary creation know that his existence is only two-dimensional and on paper. First indices of the fictional narrators' interference in the protagonist's life arrive with the anonymous letters and their disturbing contents. Later, Acquefacques's narrators enter the protagonist's life sphere in person, when Igor Ouffe, the head of the laboratory and studio in which Acquefacques's life on paper has its origin, enters the scene to discuss and explain the enigmas of the protagonist's origin. The representation of the fictional creators next to their narrative creation in one and the same panel translates the indexical relation of metaleptic causality between the two comic book characters into one of spatial contiguity.

6. The end in secondness

Of the two kinds of devices used to represent the intricate self-referential narrative of *L'Origine*, the iconic devices of self-repetition and mirroring and the indexical devices of fragmentation and metalepsis, only the latter promises a solution to the increasingly complicated plot. The story cannot end by its endless self-repetition. Going on with the iconic device of self-reflection and the anticipation of future events from pictures of pictures would make the story endless or circular, which it is already at many points of its development, for example, on p. 34, when Igor Ouffe addresses Acquefacques with metaleptic quasi-tautologies, such as 'Without you, the story cannot continue' or 'If you had not existed, this story would probably never have existed.'

A narrative needs an end, and this end is indexically enacted in chapter 6 with the title 'The last page' (which is an ambiguous heading for a chapter of more than one page). The device by means of which the story is brought to its end is an ultimate theatrical coup of narrative metalepsis.

On page 40, after Acquefacques has learnt from his putative supreme creator, research director Igor Ouffe, that not only he, Acquefacques, but also Ouffe himself and his whole team of comic book artists live a life reduced to two-dimensionality, a messenger arrives with a letter ‘to be read immediately.’ Surprisingly, it is addressed to both Acquefacques and Ouffe, which is a first index that its sender, unlike the senders of previous letters, must be from another world and not, as the previous letters from Ouffe’s laboratories, for why should Ouffe and his team of comic book artists address a letter to Ouffe himself?

That the envelope is from another world is confirmed on page 42 (figure 4). It shows the protagonists reading what they found in the messenger’s envelope, namely another page torn out from the book of their lives. This page shown in the large panel of p. 42 is numbered ‘p. 43,’ although Mathieu’s *L’Origine* has no p. 43, the present page being followed by a totally, black page to its right, apparently a black endpaper. The ‘p. 43’ with its six panels inserted in a *mise en abyme* way in the largest of the six panels of p. 42 shows in its largest panel a comic book artist in front of his drawing of a page numbered ‘p. 43’ (another *mise en abyme*) and, in the following panels, setting it aflame with the tautological and hence once more self-referential sentence ‘The only way of finishing this story is to end it.’

A closer look at the comic book artist shown in the process of burning his ‘page 43’ reveals that he cannot be one of the artists from Ouffe’s team, whose members are all bald and dressed alike. Instead, it is a young man from ‘our’ world who can only be meant to represent the ‘real’ author, Marc-Antoine Mathieu, or if not him, a fictional author instead of Mathieu, metaleptically interfering in the story to end it both as to its inner and its outer narrative framework.

After the reader, on page 42, has come to know that the comic book artist has burned the last page (page 43) of his work, the black and otherwise empty page following page 42 gains a new significance. Instead of belonging to the paratext as an empty endpage preceding the reverse book cover, it now seems to belong to the text as its truly last although unnumbered p. 43, representing the ashes of the p. 43 burnt in the scene shown on p. 42.

If the last page is then a representation of the ashes of our comic world on paper, it represents a dramatically indexical sign of this ultimate and irrevocable end. Indexical signs, in Peirce’s semiotics, belong to the category of secondness, the category of actuality, reality, and brute force. By contrast, the category of firstness is the category of the origin of things, of chance, creativity, and of iconicity. Despite the risk of stretching the semiotic implications too far, the parallelism between the conception of the origin of things in firstness and of an end by brute force in secondness in



Figure 4. The ending of the comic book *L'Origine* by the metaleptic interference of its writer who sets fire to the comic book world on paper (Mathieu 1990: 42)

Mathieu's *L'Origine* and in Peirce's semiotics is noteworthy and too striking to be ignored. In 1891, in the rather different context of cosmology, Peirce wrote: 'The origin of things, considered not as leading to anything, but in itself, contains the idea of First, the end of things that of Second ...' (*CP* 6.32). Origin, creativity, iconicity, and circularity leading to nothing but to itself were the topics of our self-referential comic book. It ended with a metaleptic self-destruction by brute force whose ultimate association is with the end of things in 'death, which comes second to, or after, everything' (*CP* 6.217), as Peirce wrote in 1898.

The conclusion sounds as dramatic as it sounds profound and even too profound for the semiotic reading of a comic book. Is it necessary to remind the reader concerned about the seriousness of the preceding paragraphs that its conclusions were drawn from paradoxical premises in the logical framework of paradox so closely related to humor?

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