Critical Discourse Analysis of Wonder Woman's Appearance in "All Star Comics No. 8": Uncovering Feminist Ideologies

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Abstract

Through critical discourse analysis, feminist ideologies found within Wonder Woman's first comic book appearance are uncovered. This is achieved by following Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis in which the text is socially positioned. The findings suggest that radical feminist ideologies prevail in Wonder Woman's first appearance. Finally, a call for a multi-modal analysis is made as it would better represent the language – text and image – found in comics.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, feminist ideologies, Wonder Woman.

1. Introduction

This study carries out a critical discourse analysis of Wonder Woman in her appearance in *All Star Comics No. 8* following Fairclough's (1995; 2001; 2003) three-dimensional model. The first level of this model is the analysis of language texts – in this case visual and textual language. This portion of the analysis takes from Halliday's (2004) systemic functional linguistics. Second, is the analysis of discourse practices in which I discuss the characterization of female and male characters, as well as Wonder Woman (Chu & Coffey, 2015). Third, is the analysis of discursive events which according to Fairclough (2003: 10) links both textual and discursive analysis and "shows where a text is located with respect to the social network of order of discourse". The overall objective is to uncover ideologies through a poststructuralist feminist lens by carrying out a critical discourse analysis of Wonder Woman's first comic book appearance.

1.1 *Comic books in America*

Without a doubt, the comic book we now know has evolved over time. Moving from a newspaper and single-panel format to a magazine and strip format in 1929 by George Delacorte known as The Funnies (Gabilliet, 2010) comics have indeed influenced many generations of readers. However, their status as a form of culture has been stigmatized (Lopes, 2006) and until

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recently this view has begun to shift as graphic novels such as Maus written by Art Spiegelman have obtained prominent awards such as the Pulitzer Prize.

- The text analysis revealed evidence of intersemiosis, in which image and text worked together in creating meaning for the reader.
- Evidence of intersemiosis, calls for a further analysis which would include features of multimodality.
- Radical feminist ideologies were uncovered in which femininity and masculinity were portrayed as opposite binary entities.

1.2 *Wonder Woman*

Wonder Woman first appeared in the pages of *All Star Comics No. 8*, published in 1942 in her own original story as the protagonist. She was created by William Moulton Marston also known as Charles Moulton, a psychologist and proclaimed feminist with advice from his two co-wives, Elizabeth Holloway and Olive Byrne (Matsuuchi, 2012). From that point, Wonder Woman gained popularity and appeared in her own comic book and since then, she has been seen as a symbol of femininity and a reference for the feminist movement.

1.3 *Poststructuralist feminist theory*

Contrasting with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in which Marxist theories are predominant, poststructuralist feminism does not reduce everything to class or capital-labor relationships (Weedon, 1997). Instead, subjectivity plays a major role in the relationship between language, social institutions, and individual consciousness. To support such argument, comic books if seen from Foucauldian theories, are a type of discursive field which "consist of competing ways of giving meaning to the world and of organizing social institutions and processes [offering] the individual a range of modes of subjectivity" (*Ibid.*: 34).

In addition, through such lens, language is not a fixed entity, therefore, notions of femininity in Wonder Woman's first appearance shall be contested. Adhering to such theory, discourses are not extreme dichotomies of the powerful and powerless, they are "tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations" (Foucault as cited in Weedon, 1997: 107) (e.g. class, race, gender, religion, and age). In addition to the view described above, Weedon (*Ibid.*) identifies different views of feminism.

Perspectives on feminism portray varied ideologies whose impact on society vary. These are: liberal feminism, radical feminism, social feminism, and she differentiates these from poststructural feminism. Liberal feminism "aims to achieve full equity of opportunity in all spheres of life without radically transforming the present social and political systems" (Weedon, 1997: 4). Radical feminism "envisages a new social order in which women will not be subordinated to men, and femininity and femaleness will not be debased and devalued" (*Ibid.*: 4). Such ideology hopes to achieve complete separate from all which is male. Social feminism or socialist feminism adheres more to Marxist theories in that "patriarchy is […] tied in with class and racial oppressions and can only be abolished through a full transformation of the social system" (*Ibid.*: 4). These ideologies are the foci of this project and an attempt to identify them is made.

2. Discussion of data

The next section follows Fairclough's (1995; 2001; 2003) framework for critical discourse analysis. The goal of critical discourse analysis is to denaturalize everydayness through critique which is "essentially making visible the interconnectedness of things" (Fairclough, 1995:

36). This is achieved through the analysis of: (1) texts, (2) discursive practices, and (3) social practices.

First, I begin with the analysis of the text, following Halliday's systemic function linguistics. Second, I analyze the discursive practices. Finally, I bring the last two layers of analysis together with the analysis of social practices.

2.1 *Text*

The analysis of text involves three areas. First, an analysis of the ideational meaning and its processes is given. Second, interpersonal meaning which includes mood, modality, and writer attitudes is described. Third, textual meaning and the elements which comprise it are laid out.

2.2 *Ideational meaning*

The ideational meta-function refers to the "process and things of the real world" (Halliday, 2003: 97). Relating it to the speaker/writer, it is where she "embodies in language [her] experience of the phenomena of the real world; and this includes [her] experience of the internal world of his own consciousness: [her] reaction, cognition, and perceptions, and also [her] linguistic acts of speaking and understanding" (Halliday as cited in Wang, 2010: 255). Such function is represented by the transitivity process. Transitivity is a "basic semantic system, which construes the world of experiences into a manageable set of process types" (*Ibid*.: 257). Transitivity consists of six processes (e.g. material process, mental process, relational process, behavioral process, verbal process, and existential process).

Table 1. The processes found in the Wonder Woman comic,
in the pages of *All Star Comics No. 8.*

Text		Total number	Material processes	Mental processes	Relational processes	Behavioral processes	Verbal processes	Existential processes
Wonder Woman	No.	220	111	31	68	2	5	3
	%	100%	50.5%	14.1%	31%	1%	2%	1.4%

From Table 1, it is evident that the processes relied on the most by the writer are the material process and the relational process. In the following two sub-section I discuss these dominating processes in detail.

2.3 *Material process*

Material process refers to "intentional or spontaneous performance of an animate or inanimate, externalized and concrete embody an action verb of doing or happening" (Haratyan, 2011: 261). The components of the material process are actor (e.g. subject), process (e.g. verb), and goal (e.g. object). Table 2. presents examples taken from Wonder Woman.

Table 2. Material process

Actor	Process	Goal
1. Danger	threatens	the entire world.
2. Those rats	have	their plans hidden here.
3. That night, Steve Trevor	drives	to a hidden airfield not far from an Army Air base…
4. Women	ruled	and all was well.
5. Two beautiful figures	race	toward the wrecked plane…

The examples above are taken from three different cohesive devises found in comics which rely on text: speech bubbles, caption or text box, and a full-page text panel. As seen in the examples, the material process is utilized as a way of narrating and explaining what is happening or has happened in the images. To reinforce this argument, take Image 1[2]. and relate it to the examples above. We can most likely conclude that the only possible choice is example 3. "That night, Steve Trevor drives to a hidden airfield not far from an Army Air base…" (Moulton, 1942: 5). For the reader, it is quite easy to relate "drives" with the vehicle behind Steve Trevor. Here we see an example of intersemiosis (Ravelli, 2000) in which the textbox and the image found within the panel co-op in explaining the process of doing.

Image 1. Material process. Copyright © 1938, 2016 DC Comics.

2.4 R*elational process*

The relational process can be described as the process of "being" (Wang, 2010: 258). These can be classified into attributive and identifying. Table 3 provides examples for each.

Table 3. Relational process

Attributive	Identifying
1. You will be indeed be a "Wonder Woman"	2. From all parts of Paradise Island come the Amazon contestants!
3. It is lovely!	4. He is that captain Trevor who has been giving us so much trouble.
5. She is in love!	
6. I was afraid of that!	
7. Sensational feats are outstanding.	

The relational process in Wonder Woman, helps the writer explain complex, abstract ideas, such as, love (see example 5 from Table 3). Although this line was said in a panel in which Wonder Woman is not present, the idea that she is in love with Steve Trevor is reinforced in other panels portraying her actions toward him. So, here the action sequences which are also related to material process outlined above, reinforce the abstraction provided by the relational process. Therefore, in comic books, the relational meaning helps the reader make a relationship between the character's actions and abstractions.

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[2] All images come from a private collection. Text in speech bubbles and text boxes is in Spanish, however the English version was used for the analysis.

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2.5 *Interpersonal meaning*

The system of person analyzes who is speaking, to whom, and how these are referred to by extracting the pronouns in a text. From the use of pronouns, we can identify issues such as social distance, however, following in a post-structuralist feminist lens, we can look at the role of gender. In Table 4, we can identify which pronouns were used the most by the writer.

Table 4. Pronouns for ideational meaning

Personal Pronoun			Count	Percentage
First Person	I (me)		78	24%
	We (us)		39	12%
Second Person	You (you)		29	9
Third Person	He (him)		49	15%
	She (her)		14	4
	It (it)		29	9
	They (them)		9	3
Possessive Pronoun	My (mine)		8	2.5
	Our (ours)		17	5
	Your (yours)		12	4
	His (his)		12	4
	Her (hers)		11	3
	Its (its)		3	1
	Their (theirs)		4	1
Indefinite Pronouns	None		1	.3
	Nowhere		1	.3
	Nobody		1	.3
	Anybody		1	.3
	Someone		1	.3
	Ourselves		1	.3
	Anyone		1	.3
	One		1	.3
		Total	322	100%

From Table 4, we can say that the first person was utilized the most by Moulton, in total 36% of all pronouns. However, from those 78 first person I's, only seven come from Wonder Woman within two panels of a total of 47 panels. What this tells us is that agency and attribution for actions is taken away from Wonder Woman. The characters who use the first person I are the Queen Hippolyte and Steve Trevor. These characters use it to take credit for their actions and to attribute feats for themselves. Both characters possess a great level of responsibility within their institutions; Steve Trevor is a captain within the intelligence services, and Hippolyte a queen in Paradise Island. The third most used pronoun is the first person we, in which social distance is shortened and gives a sense of inclusion. This pronoun is utilized the most by Hippolyte to close distance between the Amazons and herself, and to allude to her membership as one. The second most mentioned pronoun is the third person He, with a total of 15%. In its majority, He is used to refer to Steve Trevor. This places him as a central character as he is the source of Wonder Woman's and Hippolyte's dilemma – whether to remain on paradise island and continue to be immortal or save Steve Trevor and help America with its war.

2.6 *Mood*

Within the interpersonal function, mood system has only three options; these are, interrogative, declarative, and imperative (Thompson, 2014). The mood component follows either Subject + Finite (Declarative) or Finite + Subject (Interrogative) structures (see Eggins, 2004; Thompson, 2014). On the other hand, imperatives do not possess the mood component as they do not have either a subject or a finite.

In the comic book, there are a total of 266 clauses analyzed and as presented by Table 5, most of the clauses are declarative (78%) followed by imperative (16%). Although these are the two most recurring clause types, there is still a vast difference between both.

Table 5. Mood system

Mood	Total	%
Declarative	207	78
Imperative	42	16
Interrogative	17	6
Totals	266	100%

In declarative clauses, the subject is typically transmitting information. This means that most clauses in this comic book possess the mood component of both the Subject + Finite structure. A reason for this may be that comic books as a form of sequential art (Eisner, 1985) and in order for the writer to incorporate this element of sequence and movement he or she must make this explicit to the reader through both text and images. This is specifically achieved by the writer's use of text boxes or captions which narrate actions or events within or prior to the image in the panel. Image 2, taken from page two, panel 1, shows Wonder Woman carrying Steve Trevor into the city after his accident.

Image 2. Declarative mood. Copyright © 1938, 2016 DC Comics

Here the image is accompanied by a caption containing a declarative clause which first describes off-panel action (her going through the dense vegetation to get into the city) and the on-panel action which is her carrying the man amidst the bewildered reactions of other Amazons. The effect that this has on the reader is that she or he perceives motion and transition between one panel to another. Thus, the declarative mood is used the most by the writer to establish this relationship between the text/image and the reader characteristic of comic books.

2.7 *Modality*

Modality looks specifically at the finite, which as we saw above is only found in declaratives and interrogatives. Here we explore the level of polarity of the finite found within these clauses. Modality enables us to make claims regarding the interlocuters' level of certainty or authority. Here we shall focus on levels of authority. Table 6, depicts polarity as either positive or negative, however, there are some degrees in between which range from low to high politeness.

Table 6. Modality

	Low politeness	Median politeness	High politeness
Positive	Can, may, could, might, dare	Will, would, should, shall	Must, ought to, need, has/had to
	9	24	23
Negative	Needn't, doesn't/didn't, +need to, have to	Won't, wouldn't, shouldn't, isn't/wasn't to	Mustn't, oughtn't to, can't/couldn't, mayn't, mightn't, hasn't/hadn't to
	7	7	13

As seen in Table 6, the modality and polarity lay mostly in positive median and high politeness. What this tells us in levels of certainty is that the characters executing such illocutionary acts portray middle to high levels of certainty. This is interesting because this coincides with authority. Characters in Wonder Woman who demonstrate the most certainty are also those who possess the most authority. Image 3, for example, along with the speech bubbles portrays Hippolyte giving orders (also one of the panels with the most imperatives) through both positive high politeness and negative median and high politeness (see Table 7) to the Amazon Doctor and Wonder Woman.
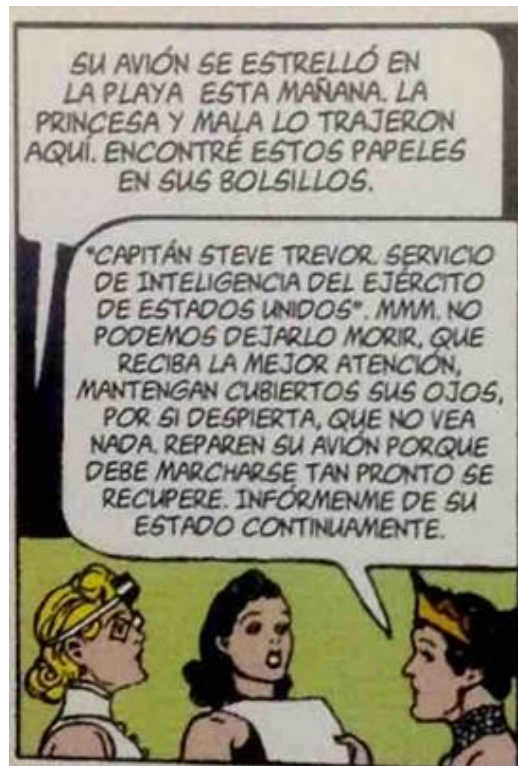

Image 3. Authority. Copyright © 1938, 2016 DC Comics.

Table 7. Authority

Speech Bubble 2/ Queen
"Capt. Steven Trevor, U.S. Army Intelligence Service." Hmm, we can't let him die. See that he gets the best of attention. Keep his eyes covered so that, if he should awake, he will see nothing! Have his plane repaired, for he must leave as soon as he is well! Keep me informed of his progress!

From the speech bubble above in panel 4 of page 2, we can observe the Queen exerting her authority over her subjects; the Doctor and Wonder Woman. This is a recurring event throughout the comic in which she exerts authority over the rest of the Amazons.

2.8 *Writer attitudes*

This section analyzes the use of nouns and adjectives in relation to femininity and masculinity as portrayed by Charles Moulton in Wonder Woman's appearance in *All Star Comics No. 8*. This analysis takes from Appraisal Theory proposed by Martin and White (2005). The appraisal framework operates within the interpersonal meta-function in that "it presents speakers/writers as revealing their feelings, tastes, and opinions" (White, 2015: 1). These feelings, tastes, and opinions are represented through attitudinal meanings which are divided into three subtypes:

(1) Positive/negative assessment presented as emotional reactions (labeled "affect"),
(2) Positive/negative assessments of human behavior and character by reference to ethics/morality and other systems of conventionalized or institutionalized norms (labeled "judgement"), and
(3) Assessments of objects, artifacts, texts, states of affairs, and processes in terms of how they are assigned value socially (labeled "appreciation") (White, 2015: 2).

Here, the focus will be on the second subtype (judgement) because of an apparent dichotomy between femininity and masculinity as presented by Moulton. This separation became clear after the analysis of both nouns and adjectives which Moulton associated with either man or woman.

Table 8. A sample of the nouns and adjectives
taken from the pages of Wonder Woman

	Femininity	Masculinity
Nouns	Princess, woman, agility, strength, Aphrodite, Athena, speed, Mercury, strength, Hercules, Wonder Woman, Hippolyte, mother, queen, Mala, daughter, doctor, Amazons, women, warrior, Magic Girdle, Goddess, Paradise Island, power, Eternal Life, peace, Goddess of Wisdom, weapons, flying , machines, knowledge, arts, sciences, languages, tournament, subjects, mother, tournament, right, daughter, contest, maiden, contestant	hatreds, wars, men, problems, feats, child's play, male athletes, injustice, wrong, man, child, Capt. Steve Trevor, pilot, Hercules, taunts, deceit, trickery, wiles, men, submission, possession, masters, Men, bracelets, captors, reminder, men, hatreds, illness, wars, Sir, information, leaders, spy ring, permission, man, Army Intelligence Department, Sir, men, job, shoulders, son, luck, rats, Von Storm, America

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Adjectives	sensational, outstanding, fast-moving, best, strongest, lovely, wise, beautiful, Quick, young, worried, safe, peace, stronger, wiser, better, advanced, modern, ancient, great, Amazon, young, best	Mere, hurt, Full grown, unconscious, Injured, alive, strongest, fiercest, angry, unbearable, vain, manmade, American, Herculeans, Ridiculous, valuable, losing, Dangerous, best

From this sample list, we can see all positive judgements are directed toward femininity and all negative judgements toward masculinity. For example, nouns related to femininity are: power, doctor, agility, strength, peace, queen, and knowledge. The adjectives related to the same are: stronger, quick, young, outstanding, sensational, wiser, and best. For masculinity we have: problems, child's play, child, deceit, wars, hatreds, injustice, and rats. The adjectives are: vain, angry, unbearable, unconscious, fiercest, and dangerous.

To reinforce this argument, we can look at the images from two different panels which compare femininity and masculinity.

Image 4. Representations of femininity and masculinity. Copyright © 1938, 2016 DC Comics

Image 5. Representations of femininity and masculinity. Copyright © 1938, 2016 DC Comics

These two images coincide with the nouns and adjectives seen in the text analysis above, in which masculinity is presented as belligerent and oppressive (see Image 5) and femininity as stronger (see Image 4). However, there are some contradiction as the Amazons carry out a contest in which one of the games is to shoot at each other with a laser gun (see Image 6).

Image 6. Amazons fighting. Copyright © 1938, 2016 DC Comics

From the above, Charles Moulton seems to project radical feminist ideologies through the pages of Wonder Woman in which masculinity and femininity must be separated for social change.

2.9 *Textual meaning*

Through the textual meta-function, we "see how speakers construct their messages in a way that makes them fit smoothly into the unfolding language event" (Thompson, 2014: 145). In essence, we look at how, in this case, the comic book is held together with both images and text. This is known as cohesion, or the "non-structural text-forming relations" (Halliday & Hasan, 1976: 7) or cohesive devises such as, referencing, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. These devises, in a comic book, can be found within panels in speech bubbles, captions or narrative boxes and through the use of images and splash pages. Here I only focus on referencing as a cohesive devise of comic books.

Referencing can be classified into homophoric, exophoric, and endophoria categories "referring to cultural shared information, immediate situation context, and textual information, referencing identifies presupposed information throughout the text" respectively (Eggins, 1994: 95). These can be further divided into other types. Here, I provide examples of referencing both in text and image.

To illustrate an anaphoric reference, a sub-category of endophoric referencing, see Images 7 and 8. Image 7 occurs on page one, panel two and depicts Steve Trevor's plane crashing on Paradise Island.

Image 7. Plane crashing. Copyright © 1938, 2016 DC Comics

Then, six pages later on panel seven of page seven, we have Hippolyte and Wonder Woman making reference to the crash, after they have seen the events prior to the crash in America through the Magic Sphere.

Image 8. Anaphoric reference. Copyright © 1938, 2016 DC Comics

Image 8, presents the Queen making reference to the plane crash. This is evident through the speech bubble and the image seen in the Magic Sphere. Here the author is using textual and visual elements to create an anaphoric reference.

2.10 *Discourse practice*

This section aims to discuss how Wonder Woman is part of the discursive practice of comic books. This is achieved by adhering to the concept of intertextuality. Intertextuality holds the argument that "texts […] are inherently intertextually, constituted by elements of other texts" (Fairclough, 1992: 102). To support my argument of textuality, I compare "Presenting: Wonder

Woman" with the other comic found within the pages of *All Star Comics No. 8*, titled "Two New Members Win Their Spurs".

Regarding the discursive intertextuality of the comic in reference to the genre of superhero comic books, Wonder Woman follows the general conventions with the only difference that the protagonist is a female super hero. This would lead to a major shift in the representation of women in superhero comic books as discussed in the next section. As a genre, super hero comic books during the "The Golden Age of Comic Books" (1930's – 1950's) (Kelly, 2009) represented the battle between good and evil, in which good always triumphed. Although evidence exist that comic books reached a wide demographic population (see Vanderbilt, 1945), comic books at this time they were primarily aimed at children, specifically male.

In superhero comics, the discursive practice is typically that of storytelling. The writer and illustrator work together to create a coherent story line. Together, they enable the process of intersemiosis in which text and image work together to tell the story to the reader. The text is written as if spoken and thus the reader perceives as if the story is being told to her or him.

From the first level analysis, we can infer that the transitivity from previous comic books is present in Wonder Woman. However, the role of a female superhero most definitely had an impact on the social practice.

2.11 *Social practice*

This section will focus on the impact of Wonder Woman within the institution of comics during and after its publication. Furthermore, the impact of interpersonal meaning specifically how femininity and masculinity are represented is discussed in terms of social transformation within the comics industry. To begin the discussion, I shall take a quote from Emad (2006: 964):

> In Marston's Wonder Woman, an independent, empowered woman (vs. a "weak girl") is constructed in the service of nationalism and "the good fight" of a nation at war. The "Rosie the Riveter" context and Marston's reformist notions of women's empowerment contextualize the character's star-spangled costume as well as forays into revisionist history that call on essentialized categories of "woman" and "American".

In Wonder Woman's first appearance the feminist ideologies of Marston become clear (as seen in the first level of analysis) and these are accompanied by the role of women during World War II. Through the first level of analysis, I concluded that Marston projected radical feminist ideologies in which all that is masculine is binary to what is feminine. In fact, there is evidence that Marston's views were deeply rooted in his relationship with his two co-wives who are often credited with the creation of Wonder Woman (Matsuuchi, 2012).

Wonder Woman entered a genre which was dominated by male superheroes, and from the beginning there was conflict with her image. Marston envisioned a character who possessed all the powers of Superman, but also feminine traits. This would soon create conflict as seen in Fredrick Wertham's 1954 *Seduction of the innocent* which later led to the censoring of comic books with the creation of the Comics Code Authority also in 1954. Wertham's claims were that Wonder Woman instilled ideologies of lesbianism in children. Despite having been in comic books for over a decade, Wonder Woman along with other superhero comics found themselves criticized due to social problems such as juvenile delinquency to which they were with by *Seduction of the innocent*. Despite these criticisms, Wonder Woman remains an iconic superhero as she has become a symbol for feminism and also for breaching the comic book industry and bringing in new readers.

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3. Conclusion

Through Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis, I have uncovered the feminist ideologies of Wonder Woman's first comic book appearance. In summary, I uncovered that through the use of language, Moulton and his co-wives were able to shed their feminist ideologies which mostly represented radical feminism. Masculinity was typically portrayed as negative and femininity as the opposite. Also, insights into the devises which hold together text and image in comic books was discussed. In addition, I touched on the element of intersemiosis in which text and image work together to create meaning. However, to delve deeper into this process of intersemiosis, I suggest that for further research a multi-modal critical discourse analysis be carried out following Kress & van Leeuwen's (2006) framework along with Fairclough's three-dimensional model. This would require the design of a grammar for comic books which, superficially, would include the relationship between text and image.

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