

## Multimodal comprehension in comics: How attention, frames, and mental simulation inform multimodal constructions

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The medium of comics provides an important venue for multimodal constructions. Particularly, it foregrounds questions regarding how images and text blend into coherent propositional understandings, especially through inferences based on specific visual and verbal styles, and how we as readers select and integrate form and content. Currently, comics scholars typically assume that the narratives are visually driven (see Groensteen 2009; McCloud 1993), but largely ignore how differences in modes and styles inform or impede understanding (Gardner 2011), and how these prompt inferences about characters' internal states. Recent research in the cognitive sciences can address these deficits. The focus on embodiment in both cognitive linguistics and perception studies has revealed how processes of attention, abstraction, and knowledge activation through mental simulation inform understandings of linguistic and visual representations (Barsalou 2008; Bergen 2012; Gibbs 2005). Drawing on this varied research, I focus on interactions between visual selection, frames, and mental simulation, to analyze how visual and verbal styles foster specific emergent understandings.

I analyze and compare short sequences by two Canadian comics authors, Jeff Lemire (2012) and Julie Doucet (2006). I focus on how they foster different inferences about their narratives by strategically employing connections between modal style and content, explicitly linking perception and conception through the medium. Jeff Lemire offers a narrative that moves quickly due to the focus on action and dialogue. His typically sparse, sketchy visual style, including clear figure-ground layouts, close-ups on features and faces, and sparse dialogue, eases the selection of salient features for interpretation. Lemire draws primarily on specific frames of knowledge—most importantly specific work and domestic spheres—and their associated locations, roles, and values (Fillmore 1982), to prompt simulations. At the same time, unexpected images, prompt inferences about the character's history and anxieties. Through this connection between clarity and disruption, Lemire subtly blends different frames to develop affective undertones to his domestic narrative.

On the other hand, Doucet's convoluted, layered, and darkly coloured images make them difficult to parse. For instance, the complexity and the flattening of distinctions between figure and ground purposefully slows the viewing process by partially inhibiting scanning and selection. This imagery is further complicated through many small speech balloons in each panel, mostly containing derisive comments from inanimate objects, which conflicts with frame expectations. Simulating inferences regarding the flattened figure-ground relationship within the conflicted frame prompts the emergent sense of the humorous yet claustrophobic and negative affect that pervades the character's home life.

Doucet's comic quite literally *draws out* complicated mental states through frame conflicts and perceptual synthesis, whereas Lemire gestures to them through creating connections between visually distinct frames. Through this discussion, I show the central role of mental simulation in activating and navigating each author's style, illustrating how it informs and constrains their multimodal constructions.

### References

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