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UTILIZING VISUAL RHETORIC: A NEW APPROACH TO COMICS, SUPERHEROES, AND RED SUNS

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UTILIZING VISUAL RHETORIC: A NEW APPROACH TO COMICS, SUPERHEROES, AND RED SUNS

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition:
Composition & Literature

by
Tabitha Rose Ann Zarate
June 2019
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Approved by:
Alexandra Cavallaro, Committee Chair, English
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ABSTRACT

Comics and graphic texts require complex engagement from readers, engagement that relies on a developed understanding of text and image, and how they interact to create meaning. There are several theories about how readers engage with comics, many from comic creators themselves, and some from scholars in literature and composition. This project introduces an approach to comics utilizing visual rhetoric, which reconsiders the stricter text/image dynamics often conceptualized in Comics Studies, includes the reader as creator, and explores comics as collaboratively created texts. This approach is applied to Superman: Red Son, a popular text that focuses in on Superman, and Cold War politics, producing a critical conversation about American and Russian relations and their influences in a global context. This project has several goals: to legitimize the superhero comic as a place of important cultural power, to show the collaborative nature of comics, placing writers and artists in equal standing to the work they produce, and to introduce the reader as creator.
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to:

My mother, Lisa Ann Lehouillier, whose love and support raised a daughter as strong, empathetic, dedicated, and compassionate as she is. Thanks, mom. I love you.

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Utilizing Visual Rhetoric: A New Approach to Comics, Superheroes, and Red Suns

Comics and graphic novels require complex engagement from readers, engagement that relies on a developed understanding of text and image and how they interact to create meaning. Numerous approaches to comics provide personalized and rich insights about the meaningful messages that comics convey as masterfully crafted texts. While there is no wrong way to approach comics, there are approaches that work to understand how text and image collaborate, typically stressing the tight connection between the two, and the more concrete meanings they create; this leaves the reader to passively receive the meanings of the text, and can neglect considering the collaborative process through which comics are created. An approach built through visual rhetorical theory reconsiders the relationship between text and image, includes the reader as a co-creator of meaning in the text, and explores texts as collaboratively created. The approach developed in this article does significant work in locating meaning in all comics, but particularly well suited is the iconic and politically relevant superhero genre. Superman: Red Son, a popular text that focuses on Cold War politics and the allegorical powerhouse that is Superman, produces a critical conversation about American and Russian relations and their global
influences. A visual rhetorical approach to Superman: Red Son legitimizes the superhero comic as a significant reflection of cultural critique and power analysis, showing the collaborative nature of comics by considering writers and artists as equal creators, and elevating the reader to a co-creator of meaning. Through providing a meta-awareness of comics as visual rhetoric, the comic as artifact, the process, and the outcomes, intentional or ideological, and the diverse and multiplicitous identities involved throughout the creation process from conception to reading and analysis, visual rhetoric creates a fuller approach to comics. This fuller approach would make comics and graphic novels irreplaceable texts in helping instructors approach semiotics, images, and multimodal texts with composition and literature students. Comics, approached this way, provide a foundation for approaching the visual and the textual—and the visual as the textual—and ask us to consider how they create meaning in a world that requires students to engage with a multitude of different types of texts.

Comics and Academia

The history of comics and academia is a long one, sometimes contentious and sometimes blissful. Continually thought of as a lower art form with poor story telling capacity, there have been several efforts to elevate comics as a literary genre, as worthy for academic study, and as pedagogical tools. Comic creator and scholar Will Eisner was a pioneer in elevating comics. Eisner began as a
comic creator, transitioned to teaching future comic creators, and developed a series of textbooks in the genre of the comic book. In his acclaimed 1985 book, *Comics and Sequential Art*, Eisner exemplifies how comics should be created and approached, defining them as “sequential art.” The definition of what constitutes a comic book or graphic novel has developed over time, picking up influence from academic and commercial entities, including seminal scholar Scott McCloud. In his 1991 publication *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, McCloud altered Eisner’s definition, settling on: “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9).

Just as he provided a, for the most part, agreed upon scholarly definition of comics, McCloud also contributed to elevating the acceptance of comics as valuable literature, which helped to further develop the field of Comic Studies. McCloud argues “sure, I realized that comic books were usually crude, poorly-drawn, semiliterate, cheap disposable, kiddie-fare- BUT they don’t HAVE to be!” (McCloud 3). Elevating comics as worthwhile for literary study, while a fantastic pursuit, was, of course, only the beginning of work in comics. Comics are also multimodal texts, rhetorical experiences, and pedagogical tools. According to Comic Studies scholars Jeet Heer and Kent Worchester, editors of the anthology, *A Comics Studies Reader*, as comics’ literary and artistic legitimacy has moved forward, so too has comics’ academic presence, forwarding the genre as an area of critical study:
The rise of Comic Studies is concomitant with the increased status and awareness of comics as an expressive medium....This revaluation is testified to by the commercial and critical success of the graphic novel; the greater attention comics are receiving in museums, galleries, and libraries; and the growing interest in teaching comics. (XI)

Many recent and important Comic Studies projects continue from this assertion that comics and graphic novels are worthwhile subjects of study, as should all projects that involve approaching and utilizing comics. Sheen C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson II’s *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation* highlights the importance of Black creators in comics, showing their contributions and importance in the genre. In *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics*, Ramzi Fawaz explores queer identity and politics in the history of comics, asserting they have always been a place of political and queer expression. These works are just the tip in a deeply developed and developing iceberg of rich academic engagements with comics and graphic novels.

Engaging with comics in this nuanced way is becoming more and more essential as the world of print media, digital media, politics, and academia become more enmeshed and articulated in popular cultures, despite Comics Studies often neglecting the superhero. McCloud comically calls out this paradigm through an interaction with his artistically rendered persona and an out-of-panel disembodied voice. The voice asks “What about Batman!? Shouldn’t it
have Batman in it?” to which another disembodied voice asks “Who let HIM in?” There is an exchange of ambient dialogues which culminates in McCloud’s persona saying “Well, anyway, this should do for now” (9). In this exchange, McCloud calls attention to a hierarchy in academic work that neglects superhero texts. Recent cinematic universes have thrust superheroes and their complex ideological positions into public attention, necessitating more work with superhero texts. Beginning in the early 2000s, superhero films have taken on such subjects as war profiteering, and the military industrial complex (Iron Man), the metamorphosis of American identity and world citizenship (Captain America: The First Avenger, Captain America: Winter Soldier, and Captain America: Civil War), and race relations and colonialism in a global perspective (Black Panther, and Thor: Ragnorak) (Darowski; Franich; VanDerWerff). The films ignite conversation and engage complex subjects, while providing laughs and action along the way, echoing their source material: comics. As adaptations of comics, the films rely heavily on the pre-established work of comics and their creators, both writers and artists. In fact, the success of Black Panther was in broad strokes thanks to the brilliant work of Roxane Gay and Ta-Nehisi Coates in the graphic novel Black Panther: World of Wakanda. While the two successful and renowned writers typically do not work in comics, the heightened status of comics in the wake of the cinematic world has opened the genre to the interest of illustrious contributors, further incentivizing academic attention to comics and, specifically, to superhero comics.
Social Action and Characterization

The cinematic universes’ focus on social action comes directly from the comic tradition of allegorical social action. This social action is often carried through characters that engage various political conversations, with some characters becoming icons of justice and idealism, much like Superman has come to represent justice, idealism, and the all-American identity. Originating as America’s farthest traveling immigrant, Superman crash-landed in the middle of rural Kansas, to be raised by ma and pa Kent, the epitome of American Midwestern decency. Explosively arriving from another planet and experiencing a childhood that assimilated his flawlessly into every nuance of American culture has transformed Superman into an American ideal and a type of super patriot. His super patriotism, however, hasn’t hampered his sense of global responsibility, which mandates that he save anyone he knows to be in trouble, regardless of their citizenry. Superman’s retention of global responsibility despite his super American identity may be a result of his immigrant status, despite the Americanization of his formative years, or perhaps it is a commentary on the role of America as a global presence. The alternate readings most likely take a dominant stance depending on which is highlighted in the era of comics, although both are present after being carefully crafted through years of creator contribution. Regardless, both stances portray Superman, as an immigrant
American, a global citizen, and a symbol for good in the world. In *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics*, Fawaz approaches superhero comics using queer theory, articulating the way comics have framed, captured, and affected American ideology: “the comic book transformed the superhero from an icon of American nationalism to a champion of internationalism and universal citizenship” (Chapter 1). He identifies Superman’s role in the beginning of his book, analyzing the reactions to the superhero’s 1992 death: “Months before the story was even scripted, national print and television media hailed Superman’s death as an event of extraordinary cultural significance, propelling what initially appeared as an isolated creative decision into the realm of public debate” (Introduction). The public perception and historical inclination of Superman has always had an effect on the types of stories creators have included him in.

The foregrounding of Superman’s political identity in *Superman: Red Son* is key to interpreting its intention and message, making it a critical read within Comics Studies and an ideal text to consider through a theoretical approach informed by an understanding of collaboration and visual rhetoric. *Superman: Red Son* introduces readers to a Superman who crashes six hours after the typical canon, landing in the middle of a farming collective in communist Russia rather than the all-American Kansan Kent farm. Millar, Johnson and Plunkett, Mounts and Lopez collaborate to create a graphic novel that critiques American values and influence, seeking to understand how good intentions can lead even
the most morally upstanding leader to subjugate the freedoms of their populace by asserting that even Superman has this potential.

Understanding Comics: Text and Image

Comics Studies often approaches comics with a focus on the relationships between text and image, considering how they work together to produce meaning for readers, which is exemplified by many of the selections in *A Comics Studies Reader*. Heer and Worchester foreground their anthology with a brief, but informative, overview of the field:

> The new comics scholarship has pursued multiple lines of inquiry, from business history and poststructural theory to oral history and the rediscovery of primary texts….One feature in particular distinguishes the current wave: a fresh appreciation for the distinctive properties that set comics apart from other mediums. (XV)

This approach is foregrounded in Eisner's scholarship, as he discusses the communicative strategy of comics through image and text: “An image once drawn becomes a precise statement that brooks little or no further interpretation. When the two are mixed, the words become welded to the image and no longer serve to describe but rather to provide sound, dialogue and connective passages” (127). Eisner asserts that the image contains a majority of a comic's communicative power, and that the words function as a guide to receiving the
image’s meaning and understanding its connection to other images. The image is clear and unchallengeable in its meaning, and the textual reinforces the images authority, providing ambience and further clarification of the reader’s intended understanding. McCloud proceeds from this connection, but complicates the understanding of the how image and text interact in the genre, providing a framework with two overarching categories: “word specific combinations, where pictures illustrate but don’t significantly add to a largely complete text. Then there are picture specific combinations where words do little more than add a soundtrack to a visually told sequence” (153). Eisner focuses his theory of production on the intense accuracy of image building, and McCloud focuses his theory of understanding comics around analyzing specific dynamics between text and image to articulate meaning. This shifts the focus of studying comics from creating images, to understanding how image and text collaborate to create meaning, and how readers can best understand the intended meaning of artist and writer creators as intertwined. Quintessential to understanding the intended meaning are McCloud’s specific dynamics, in which McCloud thinks through how text and image can work together.

McCloud’s specific dynamic between text and image are categorized as: duo-specific, additive, parallel, montage, and the most common, interdependent. Duo-specific panels use the words and images that send essentially the same meaning, additive panels rely on one element to amplify the effects of the primary element, when the word and image separate from each
other, this is the parallel structure, and montage occurs when words are integral parts of the images. The most common of the dynamics is “the interdependent where words and pictures go hand in hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone” elaborating further that “the more is said with words, the more the pictures can be freed to go exploring and vice versa” (McCloud 155). The interdependent combination provides an opportunity to consider McCloud’s other dynamics, because its openness allows it to function as an overarching category for the other dynamics. Nearly all of McCloud’s dynamics can be categorized in some way as interdependent, if the reader’s interpretation is considered in determining how the elements of the comic function together.

Text, Image, and Collaboration: Togetherness and Tension

Building from the theories of Eisner and McCloud, several other Comic Studies theorists have contributed to theories of how text and image work together in comics. As Robert C. Harvey asserts in his work about single panel cartoons and comics, often printed in newspapers, “the essential characteristic of comics, the thing that distinguishes it from another kind of pictorial narrative – is the incorporation of verbal content…in the best examples of the art form – words and pictures blend to achieve meaning that neither conveys alone without the other” (25). In this addendum to McCloud’s definition, Harvey stresses that comic components work together, an important semantic difference. Hatfield elaborates
the enmeshed nature of words and images: “comics word and image approach each other: words can be visually inflected, reading as pictures, while pictures can become as abstract and symbolic as words” (133). Here, Hatfield succinctly overviews the ways text and image can interact, inflected by some of the ways McCloud thinks through the relationships of text and image, providing a more descriptive ideation of what it means for an element to be “exploring.” The idea of an element “exploring” provides an excellent metaphor for considering when image and text seem to have tensions or disconnections. Just as Hatfield, Eisner, Harvey, and McCloud affirm the interconnectedness of text and image, Hatfield also elaborates that there can be some distance between the two entities: “Comics can be a complex means of communication…always characterized by a plurality of messages… From a reader’s viewpoint, comics would seem to be radically fragmented and unstable, I submit that this is their great strength: comic art is composed of several kinds of tensions” (132).

Some of these tensions are undoubtedly the result of the numerous hands that often contribute to the creation of comics, as showcased by intense discussions of the dynamics that must exist between comic book artists and writers in order to produce work that communicates successfully and responsibly. Composition and visual rhetoric can elaborate these tensions quite well. The application of visual rhetoric to comics is not a new venture, and much of the foregrounding in Eisner’s discussion of comic art naturally overlaps with how scholars conceptualize visual rhetorical theory. As a field, Composition has
explored visual rhetoric, semiotics, and multimodality (e.g. Rhodes & Alexander; Wysocki), as an intersection of rhetorical, literary, and pedagogical work. Composition’s interdisciplinarity is an asset to approaching texts composed of word and image, and considering new approaches. As Anne Wysocki, a rhetorician who works with comics and composition, conceptualizes “word and picture are not simply conceived as neutrally different available choices for communication; they are conceived as discrete and unitary kinds of objects that articulate to highly valued categories that have been and used to define what and who we might be and do in our lives with others” (27). Wysocki defines words and images as ideological processes, and expresses the ability of words and images to portray, and thus define identities. This conceptualization of words and images places a responsibility regarding the portrayal of and the formation of identity in textual production. With great power, comes great responsibility, and visual rhetoric proves a means to fulfilling this responsibility.

This power, and subsequent responsibility, is reaffirmed by projects like Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation, an anthology edited by Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson II. The anthology contains essays and articles that discuss the importance of Black comic creators and the representation of Black identity throughout comic history. Howard and Jackson begin their anthology with a statement on the presence of Black identity in comics:
Over the last three decades there have been very little overt representations of the Black experience, though there have been several Black superheroes….Comics dealing with issues specific to African American experience, such as racial profiling, discrimination, integration, etc. have been scarce, perhaps because these realities are swept under the rug in order to avoid state responsibility for them….This is an unfortunate reality for American youth, consumers of comics and popular culture at large; especially given the political and social commentary found with comics…not including these diverse perspectives severely limits the medium and the progression of the popular culture. (5)

Paired with the demographics of creators in the largest comic publishers, Marvel and DC, the lack of attention paid to comics as a place of identity creation, and cultural responsibility, shows a trend of suppression within the genre, particularly when comics are approached without regard to their tensions, and without an understanding of the genre as visual rhetoric. Of DC Comics’ 577 creators, only 101 are women, and 77.5 percent of the 577 are white. Of Marvel Comics’ 700 creators, only 129 women, and 70.1 percent of the 700 are white (Hanley). A significant portion of these creators work contributing imagery or imagery-related material, and their contribution can sometimes be analyzed as less important than the writerly contributions. An approach to comics informed by visual rhetorical theory considers comics collaborative conversations, empowering the entire creative team, and readers with a strategy to look more critically at how
they portray identities and experiences, and how they are portrayed. As Wysocki asserts, “the point…is not to heal the split between words and images, but to see what interests and powers it serves” (29). When comics are approached without consideration for their collaborative nature, and as a text from only one perspective, the vast amount of voices, those of the artists, often comprising more marginalized identities, are silenced by the dominant articulation of the textual story. Engaging visual rhetoric allows readers to explore the gaps between the words and images, giving voice to more identities and experiences.

Visual rhetoric is a vast field, and there are several theorists who have contributed significantly, Sonya K. Foss’s work, in particular, provides a working theory that intersects within communication, literary studies, and composition, fields that have contributed to the body of Comic Studies work. Eisner suggests that artists view their work in terms of implication and composition when crafting images, including backgrounds and paneling, and asserts: “communication depends upon the meaning and emotional impact of the image” as well as commonality of experience and sight (8). Eisner’s reliance on a sense of universalism in message is worth consideration, with an ever-expanding audience of readers and creators, it’s fair to assert that images can convey different meanings to different folks. The tension, or slipperiness, of comic books is not just a product of the multiple hands in a project, but also the diversity of the readership. As Ayaka and Hague argue, “comics is an inherently multicultural form, given that the modes or representation that it has available to implicate
both cultures of images and cultures of words, along with other modes of
eexpression that are more or less culturally specific" (3). Foss’ definition of visual
rhetoric opens comics’ rhetorical capacity, widening what they can say, through
empowering the reader: “the images must be symbolic, involve human
intervention, and be presented to an audience for the purpose of communicating
with that audience” (144). A diverse readership would find the same images to
have multiple symbolic functions, receive different meanings from a comic’s
communication, depending the multiple ways they might interpret “colors, lines,
textures, and rhythms in an image [that] provide a basis for the viewer to infer the
existence of images, emotions, and ideas” (Foss 145).

Foss’ theory of visual rhetoric helps to construct a rhetorically informed
approach to comics that considers the visual and multimodal strategies that are

Figure 1. 50’s Workers’ Hero (Millar et al.)
employed in their creation, and responds to them as whole texts made up of fractured parts. Visual rhetoric intertwines the visual and the textual in ways that match the interconnected relationship of image and text in the comic genre, but allows them to also be considered separately, as they are contributed to the final project. *Superman: Red Son* contains materials from conceptualization phases that exemplify the process through which comics are created. The image shows Alex Ross’ rough sketches of character design, many scrawled with notes considering adjustment, or praising the outcome of certain visual moves and alluding to conversations about how to move forward in the designing process. The commentary echoes some of the Alexander and Rhodes’ elaboration about some of the collaboration they celebrate in their research of gaming forums as collaborative writing: “The text takes shape through much discussion, negotiation, collaboration, some amount of contention” (146). While its direct imagery isn’t obviously utilized, the way the image would characterize Superman, as a man of the working class and hero for working people, was ultimately carefully considered, transformed, and crafted into the published *Superman: Red Son* text. His later performances of good deeds and his quick assertion of heroism for the global populace display Ross’ ideas of him as a “50’s workers’ hero.” Ross’ contribution of beginning Superman’s base colors in white, and transitioning them through the Cold War period to black, was not included in the final graphic novel. However, the character’s development would definitely be represented by that transition. In this sense, the conversation displayed in these
materials show discussion, negotiation, tension, and how collaboration works in published texts. Foss’ theory of visual rhetoric relies heavily on concepts helpful in approaching comics created by multiple writers and artists, and the diverse identities and perspectives of comic readership, as well as understanding visual rhetoric as both process and a product of discussion, negotiation, collaboration, and contention: “the term visual rhetoric is used…to refer not only to the visual object….It also refers to a perspective scholars may take on a visual image… visual rhetoric constitutes a theoretical perspective that involves the analysis of symbolic or communicative aspects” (145). These Superman: Red Son materials are both pieces of visual rhetoric, as well as examples of the process of visual rhetoric because they show a process of composition, revision, and the strategies of communication employed in textual and visual creative collaboration.

The defining of comics as visual rhetoric and the implementation of visual rhetoric as a methodology for analysis allows for the consideration of what other fields of rhetorical study and rhetorical theories might intersect within the comic genre. For example, how might visual, bodily, and spatial rhetoric intersect in comics to provide analysis on drawn bodies, awareness of background, the meaning of a splash page, or the materiality or fusion of word and image into visual sound?

Superman: Red Son is a great place to start when answering some of these questions. Take for example, what the text does with Superman’s famous
iconography. McCloud juxtaposes iconic material with realistic imagery, asserting that icons have a high amount of communicative capacity because they typically have less detail. McCloud argues, “icons demand our participation to make them work” (59) and this classifies them neatly as visual rhetoric according to Foss’ theory. One of Superman’s icons is the Kryptonian S emblazoned on his chest, but the character design in Superman: Red Son replaces the famous S with a black outlined Hammer and Sickle symbol synonymous with Communism.

Particularly relevant to understanding the rhetorical power of this shift in iconography is Wysocki’s assertion “available designs of words and pictures…come with attached discourse. How one articulates words and pictures, then can play with- or against- those discourses” (26). The replacement of the S with the Hammer and Sickle provides a shift in ideology that plays against and with the discourses of the tradition S, and Superman’s American identity, creating opportunity for reader-creator consideration. This new crest removes Superman's

![Figure 2. Iconography Sample (Millar et al.)](image-url)
sense of American individualism, conveyed through his Kryptonian heritage with Americanized colors, and shows his allegiance to the collective state to which he belongs. In another reading, it removes his immigrant status and ethnicity as a Kryptonian, and replaces it with a new status as Stalinist property making him an artificially intelligent automaton. The reader-creator's interpretation of the iconography of Superman’s crest and its relationship to his character development dramatically transform Superman’s identity within the text. This singular design element elaborates complex ideas within Superman: Red Son. Despite some of its attempts to parallel America and the USSR as having similarities in policy, this visual change shows a clear attempt to articulate ideological differences between the two global powers such as collectivism versus individualism.

Movement and Reader Agency

Another way that visual rhetorical theory can enrich a reading and empower a reader is through consideration of how movement is conveyed and interpreted in comics, and how a reader's perception of movement might change their reading. McCloud’s discussion of movement in comics is displayed in his discussion of a hypothetical murder that takes place over the course of a few panels. In the first panel, a man is swinging an axe over the head of another and in the second, there is a bright white scream. The final panel contains McCloud's
articulation of what he has just produced with the reader: “I may have drawn an axe being raised in this example, but I’m not the one who let it drop or decided how hard the blow, or who screamed, or why. That, dear reader, was your special crime, each of you committing it in your own special styles” (68). McCloud situates the reader as participatory, creating detail, and actions between the panels, filling an authoritative role within the gutter. This echoes Eisner's assertion of the panel “as a stage” controlling “the viewpoint of the reader, the panels’ outline becomes the perimeter of the readers’ vision….The reader’s ‘position’ is assumed or predetermined by the artist” (91). Foss’ theory can be used here to interrupt the control the artist has over the reader’s orientation, by focusing on the reader’s human intervention and considering what the reader can do within the panels as well. While McCloud’s theory outlines the role of reader in the gutter, some of his own panel work displays how an extension using Foss’
theory produces reader agency in interpreting movement within panels and not just the gutter.

Take for example this series of three panels from McCloud’s *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Within the first panel, McCloud is standing still on the left of an expansive rectangular panel which is darkened by progressively denser crosshatch to the right. As the second and third panels zoom in on McCloud’s face, the crosshatch appears closer to McCloud, although it cannot be said if the crosshatch is making its way towards McCloud, or if McCloud is moving into the darkness. There are simply no markers of movement present. This ambiguity in the visual, and the reader’s subsequent interpretation of it, can play off the words McCloud is speaking, allowing for several

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure3.png}
\caption{McCloud and Crosshatch (McCloud).}
\end{figure}
interpretations. McCloud’s discussion elaborates the crosshatch as “the invisible” as he considers himself the “visible” yet, it is visible to the reader. Its presence isn’t an unknown, rather it’s an impending known. As Foss elaborates: “Identification of the presented elements of an image involves naming the major physical features of the image” then “suggested elements which are the concepts, ideas, themes, and allusions that a viewer is likely to infer” (146). McCloud would be the presented image in this framework, and the crosshatch is the suggested element. If McCloud is walking into the crosshatch, he is contrasting his own visibility with the darkness of the unknown, using his own vertical lines to contrast the broken lines. He is an illumination of knowledge in this reading. If the reader-creator focuses on the crosshatch as a deliberate presence, the “invisible” or “suggested” becomes a metaphorical echo of McCloud. The crosshatch works diagonally, drawing away from McCloud and traveling to the corner of the panel, and coming to a point just as he does, expressing a sentient understanding of its own function as a supporting effect. Approaching comic elements through visual rhetoric, per Foss’ definition of visual rhetoric as process, can enable greater reader agency and participation removing the reader’s contribution from just the gutter, and allowing them to participate in the panels as well. Foss’s definition of visual rhetoric also provides a flexibility that helps consider how other theories of rhetoric converge in comics in order to help create and elaborate meanings.
The Visual, Ambient, and Bodily: Rhetoric in Comics

The rhetorical theories of the visual, ambient and bodily rhetoric converge through consideration of how the visual in comics build both ambient and bodily rhetoric, and can be understood by Comics Studies’ theoretical perspectives on lines, colors, and perspectives. The backgrounds in comics and the work they do, can be analyzed by understanding how Foss’ theory of visual rhetoric, when used to read comics, allows other theories of visual rhetoric to become comics tools as well. Foss’ “suggested elements” not only represent the ideological, but the material of the image that is more suggestion, and less defined, the background of the paneling and image: ambient rhetoric.

Thomas Rickert theorizes “we are entering an age of ambience, one in which boundaries between subject and object, human and non-human, and information and matter dissolve” (1). In comics, the background serves the function of the ambience, including buildings, explosions, cities, forests and solid color fades. Visual rhetoric allows for an understanding of how the foci of image work is affected and affects the space and objects around it, and adds to the meaning of a text. Put better: “Ambience can mean the arrangement of accessories to support the primary effect of a work. But it does significantly more than that. It begins to convey more elusive qualities about a work, practice, or place. Often these are keyed to mood or some other form of affect” (Rickert 5). Rickert’s work, when synthesized with visual rhetorical theory highlights the interplay of the
background with the subject of the image, which in many cases, including the McCloud crosshatch panels and especially in superhero comics, is the human form. To understand the relationship between the body and the background, synthesizing bodily rhetorical theory and understanding how visual rhetoric works to compose bodies in comics is critical. The artists’ use of bodily positioning, and stylistic portrayal of human bodies has been a central aspect in feminist, queer, and race studies comic conversations, in part because of how bodies are utilized in comics: “deployment of postures and gestures selected out of intermediate actions. Here is an effort to give the reader much more of an insight into a character’s lifestyle—to make sociological observation” (Eisner 110). For a body’s gesturing to convey some type of sociological meaning, is to reduce the human form to stereotyping, echoing the struggles outlined in Howard and Jackson’s work. Ayaka and Hague offer an approach to considering the processes of stereotyping at the base of comic creation: “a multicultural approach to comics is necessarily a structural one (in that it addresses structures of representation)….It is not viable to speak broadly about, for example, the use of stereotype in comics…as an absolutely negative or positive approach to representation. Rather, one must consider the specific implications and functions of stereotyping…as a representational strategy” (3). Using visual rhetorical theory to approach the representation of bodies in comics provides a framework for doing the careful work Ayaka and Hague champion here, while also considering the concerns Howard and Jackson contend with in their work. In the portrayal of
the human body, and even the humanoid, the intentions of the writer, artist, inker, colorist and other creators need to be considered, including anatomical choices, positionality, location, and the whole of the body-image in conversation with the text.

Applying Visual, Ambient, and Bodily Rhetoric to Comics

Two splash pages from *Superman: Red Son* provide an opportunity to consider how the processes of visual rhetoric interact with ambience and bodily rhetoric to construct meaning, and how the text of the novel works with and against these images to produce readings that highlight the richness of comic texts. Eisner refers to splash pages as largely ornamental, however, they are an excellent opportunity to utilize visual rhetoric to reveal ideologies about the subject matter of a text. The first splash occurs as a result of one of Lex Luthor’s calculated political orchestrations. Since he wants to run for president on a platform that highlights his worth as the only person capable of protecting the American people from Superman, he has to acquaint Americans with Superman in order to accomplish this. He anonymously fires a missile at the United States, gambling that Superman will care about more than just his soviet brethren. Superman is able to fly across the world and punch the missile into three parts before it impacts the city of Metropolis. One of the three parts ricochets into the famous globe that sits atop the Daily Planet; it begins plummeting to the ground
and just as it is about to crush a small child and his mother to death, Superman makes the catch. Superman has just defied the sickle, or at least abandoned it, in a rush to save these Americans. Luthor attributes this to his inherent goodness, and Russian inability to remove it, surmising that Superman is the weaker opponent. From another perspective, we may have learned that the Russians have a developed sense of morality, since Superman has saved Americans, and he can only be a product of his society. The first, more obvious, reading produces a propaganda-like analysis, while the second presents a grayer picture of Russian/American differences.

Figure 4 Daily Planet Splash (Millar et al.)
Eisner, Ayaka and Hague, and Foss’ theoretical perspectives come together as a methodology for considering the splash in its totality. Superman’s bent-knee position, while he lifts the entire globe in one hand presents a globalized superhero, perhaps contrasting the emblem on his chest. He is handing a red balloon to a happy child, who is smiling despite his near death experience. The child’s mother is sitting on her knees on the ground, her lowered feminine form contrasting the formidable sprawling masculinity of Superman, who is hovering effortlessly and carefully above them, balancing his heavy load: humanity and the world. The mother and child have a level of detail, shading, colors, and lines that indicate an importance that won’t let them be relegated to ambience. Further down there are ambient human forms: curious and unafraid onlookers. They are well dressed like the mother and child, and mesmerized, reminding us that we should be looking at Superman. The buildings of the city behind them all look pristine and tall, reaching to the sky in bright colors, accented by a glowing sky. The smiling boy and the several onlookers convey American fearlessness, and financial security, the latter reiterated by the shining car and tall buildings. The unflappability of our small children in the face of annihilation, present a resilient American constitution. The demure and shapely
sexuality of our damsels in distress, conveyed through the green dress and shaded bottom of the mother, present our fertility.

![Superman with the Russian flag and crowd](image)

*Figure 5. Stalin Splash (Millar et al.)*

The combinations of visual, ambient, and bodily rhetoric become even more meaningful when foiled against the second splash page. Superman’s powerful father figure, The Man of Steel himself has just died. Superman’s Russia is in a state of disarray as Stalin’s followers attempt to figure out who will lead the country. Superman is begged into power by his life-long friend from the farming collective. She is waiting at one of the quintessential Russian bread lines, which is conveniently located next to the capital building, a real one-stop...
shop for Soviet images. Superman looks around at his people, who are starving and losing faith in their system, rises up above them, arm outstretched in a Nazi-like gesture, and declares: “Tell your friends they don’t have to be scared or hungry anymore, comrades. Superman is here to save them.” His verbal and bodily rhetoric mimic that of several tyrannical depictions of the day, his nation and people are in trouble, and he is the sole source of hope and success for them. Back in America, Luthor is running on a similar campaign, asserting he is the only one who stands a chance of developing the technology to protect the American people from Soviet Superman.

Whereas the Superman who appeared in Metropolis was floating gently in a gesture of protection and servitude, Superman in Russia is floating differently. He is much further above the other human forms in the image signaling superiority, and a gilded hammer and sickle separate him from the common folk below him. Superman’s body intersects with only a banded image of Stalin, who is more central to the image than the people he vows to protect. The image is a premonition that absolute power corrupts absolutely, and yet, throughout the graphic novel, everyone has discussed the actual absolute power that Superman possesses. Lex Luthor is even running on a political campaign with this central claim. There is no hint of Superman’s corruption before these images, where the visual rhetoric aligns him with Stalinism and communist ideology, and above his collective. It is not power which has corrupted Superman, but his final
acceptance of a political role in the communist structure; it is the communist ideology that is infectious here, not power itself.

The ambient rhetoric of the Russian splash is completely different from the shining American splash presented earlier. The square standardized brick buildings do not depict a colorful thriving Russian state. There is nothing but straight lines and a stark sense of uniformity here. The only color is reserved for things of real importance: banners of communist ideologues and hammers and sickles. This contrasts the bright colors worn by Americans to highlight their individualism. That this state could raise the free-willed Superman who only pages before flew across the world to save Americans is doubtful. It is hard to view the visual rhetoric of these images as neutral in Cold War politics because the images seem to highlight the failures of communism and the corruption of Russian government. Pushing Luthor, a corrupt politician himself, into America’s presidency simply isn’t enough to make America and Russia seem equal in their dispositions when the actual color has been siphoned from Russia. The focus of communism as a corrupting force in these images seems to highlight the idea of American moral superiority and glorify the strength of capitalism.

The Russian populace is propped up in ambient human forms huddled below Superman’s mighty stance. There is a sense of claustrophobia. These are not the neatly separated individuals of the American streets earlier depicted, but a collective hoard of gray clad people stuck together. There are no human forms that contain the detail and careful grace of the mother and child, because there
are no important Russians. Superman seems to be rescuing them from
themselves by assuming political power, because they don’t seem resilient,
strong, or unflappable. In fact, they are almost all elderly. Their bodies are
marked by symbols of aging, gray hair, and deep facial lines. This contrasts
starkly with the youth and freshness of the ambient American forms. While the
mother and child present American fertility and reproductive capacity, there are
no young people in Russian and no next generation. America has a limitless
future, while Russia is decaying. It is hard to consider the text with these
rhetorical approaches and maintain a reading of the text as neutral in Cold War
politics. The text is literally displaying American strength and superiority.

Following through the story line, which portrays Superman’s
transformation into a global totalitarian demagogue, in the end it is the American
Lex Luthor who contrives the circumstances through which Superman arrives to
this destination. In a textual reading, this may suggest that while Superman is
capable of such anti-freedom work, it is Lex Luthor who deserves the blame,
rebalancing the American/Russian dynamic to a reading which supports the
conception of the book as a neutral censure of humanity’s dark nature. But,
considering Superman’s lore and the title of the text forces a reevaluation of this
neutral reading. Superman is commonly depicted as receiving his vast powers
from his Kryptonian genetics. His Kryptonian biology, through a cellular process,
is able to absorb the energy from our yellow sun, which powers his strength and
invulnerability. When Superman is confronted with suns of other colors, they
have different effects on his physiology, and it is a well-known trope that red suns reduce his immense power, and in some cases even render him devoid of typical human strength. Superman’s initial takeover of the globe is a dig at Russian and American global imperialism, but the comic’s overarching structure, referring to Superman as Red Son, a pun on red sun, reminds us that this Superman is tainted by the opposition of what makes him powerful. He is Russian, and communist, not American, where the yellow sun could have powered him beyond totalitarianism. Red suns are dying, weakening in power while simultaneously creating intense astronomical phenomena, sometimes swallowing whole planets as they end their bright lives, succumbing to collapse. This characterizes Superman’s seizure of communist “red” power, and subsequently the planet, really as a weakening; it is tantamount to a swan song, reinforcing that real power is the refusal of global collectivism and the embrace of independence, and the alternative is tantamount to global death. It is the separation of the text and the image, and the focus on the visual, bodily, and ambient rhetoric and their reintroduction to each other that produces this reading by exploring the tensions created by the many hands at work in the text.

The primary reason for reading comics, besides of course, that they are awesome, is to engage in a multimodal experience. If this experience considers the presence of visual rhetoric, and what text and image construct separately and together, fuller critical readings, like the ones articulated, above can be produced. This approach provides several considerations for the reader, and provides more
agency, as it is based in rhetorical understanding, for which as Toy puts forth: “There cannot be a totalizing or ultimate method of rhetorical analysis…it is the analytical journey that matters, not the ever-deferred nature of the arrival” (111). There are still many more readings to be articulated from Superman: Red Son, and from all superhero comics and graphic novels, and visual rhetoric provides ample opportunity to discover the value they hold. Visual rhetoric produces an approach and strategy for elaborating meaning from backgrounds and centered images, and it approaches comics in a way that synthesizes more completely text and image, by giving images a better suited way to be analyzed and articulated. This approach can be used not only on splash pages, but lettering, paneling, guttering, inking and coloring, which all contain valuable opportunities for meaning making, interpretation and analysis. Allowing more space for readers, as this approach does, breeds more focus on all of the contributors to the finished product, and shines more light on the invaluable genre of the comic.

Implications: Pedagogy, Collaboration, Reader Agency, and Superheroes

This approach could shift the medium of comics from being pedagogically sound to being pedagogically irreplaceable in teaching students how to engage the textual, visual, and rhetorical world around them. Alexander and Rhodes raise many critical questions in their book, *On Multimodality: New Media in Composition Studies*, one of which is: “How might we best prepare our
students—and prepare ourselves—for rich participation in this complex public sphere? And how might we teach (with) the new media to equip students for both a rationalist and poetical understanding of the public sphere?” (67). Educating students with rhetorical approaches that allow them to engage and consider the creation and portrayal of identity, with texts that exhibit the complexities of ideology and political stance and how they can be negotiated through collaboration and creation with image and text is certainly a strong place to start. Comics do all this, and access our public sphere through their status as popular culture. Most importantly, comics resonate with, interest, and surround students, especially comics and graphic novels in the superhero genre, which provide so many opportunities to explore ideology, culture, social action, and rhetoric through text and image. When approached through the processes of visual rhetoric as the complex texts they are, comics also provide an opportunity to learn about the intertextuality and adaptation that foreground rhetorical understanding and participation, as shown by the complex analyses elaborated above. This approach also advocates student agency in reading and composing with texts, highlights student interpretation and participation, and provides an opportunity to develop a myriad of engaging projects and conversations in the classroom.
CHAPTER TWO

CONFERENCE PROPOSAL

Utilizing Visual Rhetoric: A New Approach to Comics, Superheroes, and Red Suns

Comic books and graphic novels are quickly making a larger mark on the pop culture landscape of the U.S, what was once a hobbyist subculture has exploded into cinemas. At the same time, many scholars have been taking note of graphics and comics as an area for great study in their own work and for teaching. Much of the current criticism for comics and graphics revolves around literary analysis, of which they are a generative site. This characterizes the way comics are engaged with: reading strips or panels, leaving out splash pages and other stylistic choices, and analyzing the text and pictures as whole, looking at the ways they work together as unified texts. However, there is little focus on them as an important site of visual and bodily rhetoric. Not only are these texts valuable literary works, they are an important site of rhetorical education and multimodal engagement. A new way of looking at comics and graphics could be developed to account for them beyond textual literary analysis and to embrace them as rhetorical sites.

To best develop lens for analysis of graphics and comics as sites of important visual rhetoric I will synthesize theories of visual, bodily, and textual rhetoric, to develop a more complete methodology for analyzing graphics as a
site of multimodal composition and an important point of rhetorical praxis. Using this methodology, I will show the ways in which current readings and analyses have left out key elements that expose ideological and rhetorical structures within graphics that heighten their cultural and educational value.

I will rely on rhetorical theories of Foss to analyze images, her rhetorical theory will help in establishing the foundation for building my rhetorical strategy for analyzing the images of comics and graphics. Adding onto these Thomas Rickert’s work on ambient rhetoric will be applied to backgrounds and overall composition. I will introduce rhetorical theories of the body, including Ann Wysocki, who give methodologies for studying text reflects and portrays bodies. This will allow me to work with individual characters within panels by looking not just at their bodies but by the way they interact with the other rhetorical elements of the page. My hope is this will create a more thorough methodology for working for graphic novels and comics that includes visual and textual elements in both a literary and rhetorical analysis.
I’ll be presenting today using a theoretical framework developed by combining concepts of visual, bodily, and ambient rhetoric and applying it to the graphic novel Superman: Red Son. Superman: Red Son was written by Mark Millar, drawn by David Johnson and Killian Plunkett, and published in 2003. It has become a seminal work for comic book enthusiasts because of the freshness the story presents as well as the way the work shifts the traditional paradigms of everyone’s favorite American immigrant. The graphic novel tells the story of a Superman who lands twelve hours late, not on Ma and Pa Kent’s Kansas farm, but in a farming collective in Communist Russia. I can’t stress enough that any similarity between the current political climate and the graphic novel, although hilarious, are purely coincidental, because subsequently, Lex Luthor is elected President of the United States. In the recent rerelease of the popular graphic novel, Tom DeSanto’s opening forward, “Mom, Apple Pie, Chevrolet, and Superman,” asserts “In the hands of a lesser writer the story would have fallen into cookie cutter, black and white, America good, Soviets bad, feel-good propaganda. Thank God Mark Millar is not a lesser writer” (1). DeSanto is correct about the complexity of Millar’s writing, and his compliments on David Johnson’s
artistry are also well placed, however DeSanto’s conclusions are based on allowing the textual to supersede the visual of the graphic novel, keeping them separated. There are several visual, ambient and bodily rhetorical structures that complicate the claim that the novel is not, in some ways, propagandist, an understanding crafted from implementing visual rhetorical theory. Using visual rhetorical theory to examine comics and graphic novels, and including that understanding as an approach to comics not only adds to the ways scholars can engage with them, but also extends their value as a pedagogical tool to familiarize students with multimodal and visual texts, a critical ability in today’s increasingly visual world.

These rhetorical structures can be accessed by adapting theories of visual rhetoric to consider how they build the ambient and the bodily in comics and applying them to the image work in the graphic novel. Understanding image, and how it works with text, is quintessential to understanding comics, which is the major focus of notable Comic Studies scholar Scott McCloud’s work *Understanding Comics*. In his book, McCloud defines comics as “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). Sonya Foss’ theory of visual rhetoric is well suited to the work of approached comics rhetorically, because it aligns significantly with McCloud’s theorizations. Foss asserts that visual rhetoric has three requirements: “the image must be symbolic, involve human intervention, and be presented to an audience for the purpose of
communicating with that audience” (144). Foss also asserts “Colors, lines, textures, and rhythms in an image provide a basis for the viewer to infer the existence of images, emotions, and ideas” (145), which parallels McCloud’s assertions about perspective, movement, and the emotionality inherent in line work. By amalgamating these two theoretical perspectives and using them to approach comics, the reader is provided new ways to consider how the colors, lines, textures, and rhythms also create and define the bodies of characters and movement, as well as their relationships to the background, or ambient features of the text.

The structures of visual and bodily rhetoric work to both highlight and relegate to the background different structures within the composition. Rickert’s theory of ambient rhetoric is useful here to elaborate on the role of the backdrop of comics. Rickert’s ambient rhetoric pertains to the space and objects around our bodies and work, he theorizes: “Ambience can mean the arrangement of accessories to support the primary effect of a work. But it does significantly more than that. It begins to convey more elusive qualities about a work, practice or place. Often these are keyed to mood or some other form of affect” (5). In paneling and splashes, the background, including buildings, explosions, cities, forests, and solid colors with fades, create ambience. Paying attention to the ambience can refocus readings or broaden them, as it is often a key location to clues about not only setting, but the characters’ way of inhabiting their environments, as well as myriad of other details that can often get glazed over
when the systems of visual rhetoric so clearly highlight a brightly colored hyper-being who sits squarely in the middle of panel or page. More than just environmental and relational within comics, ambience can include human bodies, these ambient bodies, when approached rhetorically, can have a transformative effect on the meaning of a text. We ask the question all the time, “who is in the background?” Every answer is problematic, but no less generative.

In order to demonstrate how the Franken-theory above might work in practice, I’d like to isolate out two specific splash pages from Superman: Red Son. They are actually the only two splash pages in the graphic novel, which is unusual given that the comic was originally released in single-issue form, and these usually have one splash page per issue. The fact that it only has two suggests that they have a heightened importance to the overall text, sort of like in cartoons when something is shaded differently, and we know it’s going to move.

The first splash page occurs when Lex Luthor, prior to his election, orchestrates an event that put the lives of Americans in Metropolis in danger from a missile. Superman, located all the way in Moscow, Russia, is able to fly across the world and punch the missile into three parts before it impacts the city. When one of the three parts ricochets into the globe sitting on top of the Daily Planet, it begins plummeting to the ground. Just as it is about the crush a small child and his mother to death, Superman makes the catch. The bright red symbol on Superman’s chest is not the familial Kryptonian symbol of his family, rather, it has been replaced with the hammer and sickle of Communist Russia. This new crest
removes Superman’s previous sense of individualism, and shows his allegiance to the collective state to which he belongs. However, he has just defied the state, abandoned it, in his rush to save these Americans. Luthor later attributes this to inherent goodness, and the Russians inability to remove it, surmising that this makes him a weaker opponent. This is perhaps the intended reading, however, this moment could also be analyzed to assert that despite the overbearing ideological control of communist Russia, many Russians have a developed sense of morality that guides them since Superman can only be a product of this society. The first reading, which is more obvious, has a much larger propaganda like reading pertaining to the relationship between morality and communism, while the second presents a more ambiguous reading.

Focusing in on the bodily rhetoric of the piece, we are presented with a bent-knee Superman. He is quite literally holding the world on his shoulders, an interesting visual choice that represents him as a global citizen in contrast to the emblem on his chest. He is handing a red balloon to a happy child, who is smiling despite his near death experience, while a woman (presumably his mother) is sprawled sitting on the ground. Although the audience never learns the names of this child or woman, they are in the foreground of the page, and the detail and shading, the lines and colors indicate they have an importance to the scene that cannot relegate them to ambience. This privileges them as holding value as a metaphorical piece of visual rhetoric. However, there is some ambience available for analysis. A shiny new car is parked curbside, luckily unscratched by any
debris. Further down, curious unafraid onlookers are well dressed and mesmerized, reminding us while we peruse the background that we are supposed to be looking at Superman. The buildings of the city behind them look pristine and tall, reaching towards the sky in multiple colors. The smiling boy and the several wealthy looking onlookers convey a sense of American fearlessness and richness, the latter reiterated by the car. The various colors of the American street and colors of clothing, alongside the richness of the buildings and the unflappability of our small children in the face of certain annihilation, presents an ideal of successful happiness in America that makes it hard to believe that they’ve recently been under attack. The demure and shapely sexuality of our damsels in distress, conveyed through the green dress and shaded bottom of the mother, present our fertility.

These structures of visual and bodily rhetoric become even more apparent when we foil this against the second splash page, where Superman’s powerful father figure—The Man of Steel himself—has died. Superman’s Russia is in a state of disarray as Stalin’s followers attempt to figure out who will lead the country. Superman is begged to assume power by his life-long friend from the farming collective, who is waiting in one of the quintessential Russian bread lines, conveniently located next to the capital building, a real one-stop shop for Soviet images. Superman looks around at his people, who are starving and losing faith in their system, and he rises up above them, arm outstretched in more of a Nazi-like gesture than we would typically associate with our Big Blue
and declares, “Tell your friends they don’t have to be scared or hungry anymore, comrades. Superman is here to save them.” In this moment his verbal and bodily rhetoric mimic that of several tyrannical depictions of the day, his nation and people are in trouble, and he is the sole source of hope and success for them.

Back in America, Lex Luthor runs on a similar campaign, asserting he is the only one who stands a chance of developing the technology to protect the American people from a Soviet Superman.

Even from a quick visual analysis, this scene portrays a very different Superman than the one from the earlier splash page. He is floating well above everything, rhetorically signifying a superiority to and a separation from nearly everything within the frame. Yet, his knee intersects with a banner depicting Stalin who is more in focus, and in closer proximity to the Superman than the humans he is swearing to protect. The message here visually is a premonition that absolute power corrupts absolutely, and yet, throughout the graphic novel, everyone has discussed the actual absolute power that Superman possesses. He is not corrupted, not changed from his essential goodness, and there is no hint of it until this moment where the visual rhetoric aligns him separate from his collective and enmeshed with Stalinism. It is not power which has corrupted Superman, but his final acceptance of a political role in the communist structure. It is the communist ideology that is flawed and infectious here, not power itself. This challenges an anti-propaganda reading.
Like Superman’s bodily rhetoric, the ambient rhetoric is completely
different from what we have previously seen in the depictions of America
because there is a stark sense of uniformity. The square, standard brick buildings
don’t depict a colorful, thriving Russian state or even one that doesn’t seem bleak
to live in. There are nothing but straight lines in these buildings—that they all lead
to brightly colored propaganda, that this state could raise a free thinking
Superman, who only pages before flew across the world to save people he didn’t
know, is doubtful. The brightest aspects of the page are symbols of that state,
rather than the bright colors of individualism earlier found in America. It is hard to
read the visual rhetoric of this space and see a neutral commentary that doesn’t
read, “America good, Soviets bad.”

This is highlighted by the bodies that Superman is now so distanced from.
When looking at the hoard of Russians below, there is sense of claustrophobia
because these are not the neatly separate individuals of the American streets
depicted earlier, but a collective hoard of people stuck together. The vibrant
colors and shading that made the mother and child important in the previous
splash simply aren’t used here because there are no important Russians—they
are all of equal, dismal value, as they stand huddled together. Superman is not
protecting them from physical harm; instead he is rescuing the Russian people
from themselves by assuming political power. All of the Soviets are elderly. Their
bodies are marked by symbols of aging like gray hair and deep facial lines. There
appears to be one perhaps adolescent in the crowd in the very back and even he
has bushy gray eyebrows. This starkly contrasts the youthfulness and freshness of the American ambient bodies—there are no young people in Russia, no next generation, perhaps signifying that while one country has a limitless future, another is decaying. Many of them look worried, concerned, or apprehensive. Only one woman is smiling, which is very different from the rhetorical effect of the American child giggling after a near death experience, and seems to say that the Russian people somehow have less resilience than the American people. Yet again it is hard to be presented with this rhetoric not see propaganda speaking to American strength, competency, and superiority.

Following through the story line, which portrays Superman’s transformation into a global totalitarian demagogue, in the end it is the American Lex Luthor who contrives the circumstances through which Superman arrives to this destination. In a textual reading, this may suggest that while Superman is capable of such anti-freedom work, it is Luthor who deserves the blame, rebalancing the American/Russian dynamic to a reading that supports the conception of the book as a neutral censure of humanity’s dark nature. However, considering Superman’s lore and the title of the text forces a reevaluation of this neutral reading. Superman is commonly depicted as receiving his vast powers from his Kryptonian genetics. His Kryptonian biology is, through a cellular process, able to absorb the energy from our yellow sun, which powers his strength and invulnerability: it is a well-known trope that red suns reduce his immense power. Superman’s initial takeover of the globe is a dig at Russian and
American global imperialism, but the comic’s overarching structure, referring to Superman as Red Son, a pun on red sun, reminds us that this Superman is tainted by the opposition of what makes him powerful. He is Russian and communist, not American, where the yellow sun and capitalism could have powered him beyond totalitarianism. It is the separation of the text and the image, and the focus on the visual, bodily, and ambient rhetoric and their reintroduction to each other that produces this reading by exploring the tensions created by the many hands at work in the text.

This is not to say that DeSanto’s reading is ill-founded or errant. In some way, his reading considers the literary text and commentary as an authority over the images, and his assertions make perfect sense. However, it is the separation of the text and the image, and the focus on the visual and bodily as rhetorical that produces this alternate reading. While there is something to be said about the mitigation of intervening text, the primary reason for reading comics, besides of course, that they are awesome, is to engage in a multimodal experience. If this experience considers both more traditional readings that encompass both the textual and the visual as well as what they accomplish separately, fuller, more critical readings can be produced. This could shift the medium from being pedagogically sound to being pedagogically irreplaceable in teaching students how to engage the textual, visual, and rhetorical world around them.
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