Integrity of the Page: The Creative Process of Daniel Clowes

Daniel Clowes (1961-) is a highly-regarded cartoonist, graphic novelist, and screenwriter. He is best known for his *Eightball* comic book series (1989-2004) and for his graphic novels *Ghost World* (1997), *Ice Haven* (2005), *Wilson* (2010), *Mister Wonderful* (2011), and *The Death-Ray* (2011).
The Special Collections Research Center acquired Clowes' archive in 2015. The acquisition honors Clowes' personal ties to the University of Chicago – Clowes was born in Chicago and spent much of his childhood in Hyde Park where he attended the University of Chicago Laboratory School until 1979. His grandfather, James Lea Cate (1899-1981), was a history professor at the University of Chicago from 1930 to 1969, and Dr. Cate's personal papers reside in the Special Collections Research Center. Clowes' archive also anchors a growing collection of Chicago-related contemporary comics at the Library. The collection supports a burgeoning, cross-disciplinary interest in comics for research and teaching at the University.

The Clowes archive contains notes, outlines, narrative drafts, character sketches, draft layouts, and more for three of Clowes' books: *Ice Haven*, *Mister Wonderful*, and *The Death-Ray*. The exhibition pieces this material together, tracing the evolution of Clowes' art from conception to production to publication. The materials on display emphasize the exceptional tangibility of Clowes' work in an era when art can easily be made, and then unmade, on a computer. Throughout his career, the physicality of his craft has been a vital component of his artistic vision and creative process. Clowes remains dedicated to simple paper, pencil, and ink – to what he calls the "integrity of the page."

Explanatory panels throughout the exhibition are composed of excerpts from interviews with Clowes in which he articulates aspects of his style and technique. The quotations bring Clowes' voice into the gallery, mitigating curatorial conjecture about his artistic intentions and underscoring the personal and sometimes solitary nature of the creative process.

1.The Big Picture

A. Inspiration

"For me, the hard part - and the interesting part - is to start with an inspiration that you absolutely couldn't put into words; just something that hits you about a story, or a character, or an image, or some feeling that's so strong that it will stick with you for months and months. And then you try to carry that through. It's like a little candle flame that you're trying to carry through a wind tunnel, and if you can get to the end without it blowing out, that's something." (Parille 2009, 175)

B. Page Layout

"By the time I get started, I usually have everything all in my head, and it's just a matter of making the panels work out. So instead of layouts, what I'll do is just write down each panel and then divide that into pages. That's really all I do. And then when I actually draw it, I just draw it right on the paper the first time." (Groth 2015)

"I'll start by cutting the page to the exact size and drawing all the parameters, so it kind of exists as a page, and then I'll just start doodling on the page with a light pencil or a blue pencil, to try to get some idea of what's going on." (Sullivan 2003, 163)

"I draw the story fairly sequentially, but I often leave stuff blank. I know how much space to leave as a break between scenes, but I often have no idea what's going to go in that space. I'll leave three panels blank, for instance, and then I'll go back later and fill them in. Every once in a while I'll regret that I left too few panels, or too many panels, but generally I have a good internal sense of that kind of thing. That's what you get out of doing this over and over for years." (Sullivan 2003, 163-164)

C. Drawing Characters

"My stories are usually about people interacting with each other, so I'll start by drawing the characters. At the same time I'm drawing a character I'll draw the space around the character. I used to draw the character in detail and then draw the set around the character, but I found it made it look like a diorama. Now I draw the shape of the character and the shapes of things in the background and slowly fill them in all over the page at the same time...

I'm not as concerned with realism and getting everything exactly right as I am with communicating the mood or intention of the character in a way that isn't cheap or obvious." (Sullivan 2003, 164-165)

"I like the idea of turning up the intensity on a character, where you could draw them in one panel like Barnaby - a circle and two lines - and somewhere else in the same story with intense detail and facial shadows and acne, like a photograph. It's an interesting thing you can only do in comics." (Sullivan 2003, 165)

D. Perspective

"My horizon lines tend to be in the lower middle of the panel: I want the viewers to be involved in the story, and I think the best way is for them to be at eye level with the characters most of the time. I have a big drawing board so I'll draw one point way out to the right and one point way out to the left and mark them on the drawing board. I'll do that for maybe half the panels on a page. Most panels are just one-point perspective. I do a lot of iconic, flattened-out images so often that's just a flat grid in the background." (Sullivan 2003, 164)

E. Inking

"The original line art is created entirely by hand – India ink on Bristol board – at somewhere between 150% to 250% scale of the printed page. Corrections are made with white gouache and occasional paste-ons using one-ply drawing paper."

F. Depth and Backgrounds

"I often use heavy-ish blacks and dynamic contrast to bring attention to the characters in the foreground, and keep the lines more open as I go further back. Air pressure, smog, clouds, and various optical effects tend to diffuse and distort the way you see things in the deep background, especially in the urban America I tend to be drawing." (Sullivan 2003, 167)

G. Texture

"The last step of a page is adding visual interest using various textures. I have a few repeated patterns and textures that I use a lot: I use a dot pattern that indicates a certain roughness, whether on a sidewalk or somebody's sweater. I use a certain kind of stylized foliage - bushes, and grass and trees. I use a gradation in the sky with feathered inking to give the impression of a lighted city in the background." (Sullivan 2003, 169)

H. Lettering

The way you letter something really affects the way it's read; it affects the intonation that each character puts into what they're speaking." (Groth 2015)

"I've actually found over the years that when I'm using the pen and doing the comic book lettering, at that moment my brain is really freed to know what's going to sound right. I'll wind up making drastic changes while I'm lettering that have a sort of clarity to them I can't have at any other time." (Theilman 2015)

I. Editing

"I hang my pages up when I'm done and look at them for a month or two; I spend every morning and every night before I go to bed looking at all the mistakes. I have a big list on my drawing board where I write down every little thing I want to change or redraw. When I'm done with the whole issue I go back and make all those corrections, which takes a couple of weeks, but it adds so much to the finished product." (Sullivan 2003, 173)

K. Transition from comic to book

"I like the format of Cinemascope, and I thought it would be great to have these Cinemascope vistas. I was fairly aware that I'd republish it in book form. So I did it realizing that each page could be cut in half and put on facing pages and fill other pages with a bigger, wide open world. The strip as it ran originally is very cramped." (Nishi 2011)

*"I'm now putting [*Mister Wonderful*] together in book form, and I find between some characters it's really seamless, but between others there's this implied week-long wait, even though the story is taking place in one night. It doesn't bounce to the next panel; you have to put something in. So I'm devising all of these strategies and putting new pages between some of the strips to give it this little bounce, this little pause. It's been a lot of fun; it's giving a little more air to the story so it doesn't feel quite so compacted." (Parille 2009, 193)*

L. The Book

"For me, the whole process involves envisioning this book in my head as I'm working. That is what I'm trying to create. That's the work of art. That's the sculpture I'm chipping away at, and when I'm finally done, I will arrive at that perfect 3-D object." (Hart 2012)

2. The Details

A. Faces

"To me, the whole thing is the faces, in a way. That's where you really have to get across the specifics of the emotions and connect with the reader." (Parille 2009, 187)

B. Eyes

"The eyes have to show some humanity behind them — even if they're very simple circles. That's how you can tell if a character is alive or not. It's not something you can consciously do. I don't really know what the secret to that is, except you have to sort of believe that they're alive." (Salaysay 2012)

"You cannot get the emotion right without getting the eyes right. I've always drawn bags under characters' eyes. That was from living in Chicago - the people I was seeing every day looked beaten-down and gloomy." (Sullivan 2009, 145)

C. Dialogue

"I've often found that dialogue works much better if you cut off a line before it's finished: a guy starts to say something and another character cuts him off, so you don't really get the whole picture of what he's going to say. Sometimes it's much more powerful that way, so I was trying to figure out a way to make that work, trying to capture that sensation of not quite being able to make out what people are saying beyond a few little snippets. And then I took it to an extreme level in Mister Wonderful *where Marshall's brain is racing so fast that he can't possibly bear to listen for longer than three seconds to what anybody else is saying." (Parille 2009, 192)*

D. Style

"My feeling is that [varying style is] one of the very few things that comics can do that you really can't do in any other medium. I feel like the reader accepts all of these styles, and after a certain point you can flip the pages and see a character rendered very differently than you saw on an earlier page, and it's not jarring. It suggests things that you can't suggest just in the writing or in the plotting. But I also think it's something that can only be done by a single artist. I think if you had different artists approaching the material in different styles, that's very different. I think it's an interesting thing to discover, what's present in the work even when you're shifting the styles. I've just found it a much stronger way to work. It's much more liberating as an artist to feel like you can approach each page and each panel with the way that inspires you the most." (Murray 2001)

E. Transition from Comic to Book: *Ice Haven*

"I wanted [the opening of the Ice Haven book] to feel like it was happening before the story, like it was a pre-credit sequence in a movie that was filmed in a different style or something. I didn't want you to feel like you were in the moment in those panels. I wanted you to feel that you were looking back: this morning this is what happened, and when you turn the page and get into Ice Haven, the sun comes up, it's morning, there's Random Wilder, and there you are in the story...[The characters are] sort of more realistic. It also had to do with wanting it to look like a book design element." (Parille 2009, 187-188)

"I had some other ideas for Eightball #22 *as I was working on it, and I wound up cutting out a few things. I thought if I did a book version I could put some of them back in. I remember very well the day I got the comic in the mail the idea popped into my head to show David Goldberg quoting Random Wilder's poetry - just one of those ideas that's almost too perfect to be true. That's the perfect ending for the comic and I can't believe I'm now thinking of this after the whole thing is over. So that was my impetus to make sure it got done as a book, because I knew I had to put that in." (Parille 2009, 185-186)*

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