

Composing With

A Comic Strip Cover Story

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I created the cover for this special issue of *Composition Studies* with elements I poached and reworked from various sources. The banner bearing the words “comics, multimodality, and composition” and the small bird perched atop it are hand-drawn approximations of clipart I found online. For the head of our guest editor, I plucked a photo from Dale Jacobs’s Facebook page, altered it in Photoshop, printed the image, and traced over it with marker. I then scanned the drawing, reduced its scale, added a drop shadow, and arranged the arched lettering. It was editor Laura Micciche’s idea to feature Dale in this way. His shrunken head speaks to how the cover took shape through dialogue, the pitching and fine-tuning of ideas.

The key element I reworked was a six-panel comic strip I drew as an undergraduate college student, sometime in the late 1980s. Back then I did comics for the campus newspaper and humor magazine, but this strip never saw print. Rather than crumple it up, I stored it away in my files where it remained for a quarter of a century, until Laura asked me to make a cover for this issue on comics. My old strip came to mind because it is a comic about the process of composing comics.

Titled “The Creative Process, Illustrated,” the strip features a well-dressed gentleman sitting silently at a desk for three panels before an idea for a one-panel gag cartoon occurs to him in the fourth panel, appearing in a thought bubble over his head. The sophomoric gag, scatological in nature, does not bear repeating here. That it shows a sketchily doodled figure, naked and expressing excitement (“Hot dog!”) over his belly button’s orificial transformation, need not concern us. The strip’s fifth and sixth panels essentially match the cover’s bottom two panels: the cartoonist drawing his idea followed by the cartoonist going “back to the drawing board,” the crumpled ball of paper indicating that the opening provided by the blank page has led to a dead end.

Part of the strip’s humor lay in the contrast between the inanity of the lowbrow gag and the dapperness of the suit- and sweater-vest-wearing cartoonist (whose visage I adapted from a 1930s comic book). A similar contrast is drawn between the vulgar gag, no sooner envisioned than abandoned, and the grandeur of a romantically conceived creative process. Somewhere in the course of rendering his idea on paper—namely, in the gap between the fifth and sixth panels—the cartoonist realizes it’s crap. Unlike the excitable figure

in the gag he pictured, though, he responds with near indifference. Failure punctuated by delusive moments of inspiration is the norm.

Repurposed for the cover of this journal, the comic employs different humor and conveys different meaning. The idea shown in a thought bubble no longer concerns a one-panel gag cartoon; instead, it depicts a cover design for this special issue: the decorative banner with Dale's head beside it. In the third panel that idea dissipates, replaced by what the artist is able to put on paper. Does the crumpled paper ball in the fourth panel represent the artist's rejection of his idea upon seeing it realized, or his inability to capture what he envisioned? I imagine the latter (it's a better joke) but don't know for sure.

In composing these words I approach the vanishing point of my own creative process, poking at those places where my understanding of the comic on the cover starts to fray. Choosing and revising my language with as much care as I drew and erased and copied and pasted pixels in Photoshop, I find words for what hardly concerned me while I worked on the cover. I theorize that in repurposing my old strip I replaced the juvenile humor of the poop joke with more mature wit. But, I wonder, what exactly is witty about the comic I made for the cover?

That comic is like the cover of an old punk song cleaned up for radio play on an adult contemporary station. It's a cover version of the strip I drew as an undergraduate, with the filthy part taken out and replaced by something else. The name for that something else is irony. It's ironic that the comic shows the very cover design that the artist is unable or unwilling to show. It's ironic that the design he rejects makes it onto the cover. It's ironic that the design appears in the strip as an idea in a thought bubble and not as a drawing, when the idea in a thought bubble is itself a drawing. It's ironic that the banner the artist fails to draw to his satisfaction succeeds at presenting the title of this special issue. It's all very ironic, or at least I think it is. And in thinking about the easy way in which this humor substitutes for the gag I drew twenty-five years ago, I come to appreciate that irony is scatology for grown ups.