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RESEARCH

"It's Showtime, Synergy!": Musical Sequences in *Jem and the Holograms*

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This article discusses how the musical sequences (including concerts, rehearsals, and music videos) in *Jem and the Holograms* (Thompson and Campbell, 2015) depart from the conventions of the rest of the comic. Artist Sophie Campbell uses paneling techniques including bleeds and aspect-to-aspect closure to give these sequences a disorienting quality of occurring out of the regular time scheme of the comic. She presents the music as a physical element in the scenes: her song clouds float in the foreground of the image, similar to speech balloons but belonging to the realm of art instead of text. These song clouds help guide the reader through the scenes, by both separating the images into their constituent parts, and guiding the reader as to the order those parts should be read in.

Keywords: aspect-to-aspect closure; comic panels; Jem and the Holograms; music in comics; Sophie Campbell

The comic adaptation *Jem and the Holograms* published by IDW press, based on the 1980s television show, belongs to a tradition of musical comics. Artist Sophie Campbell works for the most part within the established language of comics, using regular paneling to establish a regular timeline. When it comes to the major musical performances, however, the art changes. Campbell's panels almost totally dissolve, leaving a wash of images that are difficult to interpret and even harder to sequence. The techniques she uses are drawn from the traditional visual language of comics, but she employs them in a new way. This paper will begin by examining the paneling techniques Campbell uses to establish a regular time scheme in the comics, and then how she undermines this time scheme slightly during emotional moments and entirely in the musical sequences. It will show how Campbell's musical sequences further confuse the time scheme by using aspect-to-aspect closure. Finally, it will

demonstrate how Campbell uses the manifestation of the music as clouds in the art to guide the reader through the apparently chaotic scenes.

There are six one- or two-page concert or music video scenes in the first trade of *Jem and the Holograms*, and two half-page panels of recording sessions that get interrupted. The panels depicting the musical sequences – whether depicting the Holograms or rival band the Misfits – share a number of visual elements that make them drastically different from the rest of the comic. These elements can be roughly divided into two categories: elements depicting sound, and the layout on the page. Campbell has discussed the different look of these panels and her central role in creating it. Talking to the *Comics Journal* shortly after her second run on *Jem and the Holograms* ended, she said,

> There are certain beats that need to be hit in those scenes and I take those and then do whatever I wanted with the panel layouts. Sometimes I'd take the panels Kelly wrote and I'd combine them or get rid of panels entirely and fit them together another way … after a while and toward the end she'd be much looser with it … Kelly would write: "Page whatever–Concert. Go nuts." (Dueben and Campbell 2016).

There is already a tradition of representing music in comics, particularly in comics that are about musicians. Brown (2013), in considering musical sequences in comics that include forms of musical notation, divides the representation of music into two types. Most of the notational representations Brown considers are *actualized*, that is, a direct mimetic copy of what the music sounds like; whereas Campbell's illustrations are what Brown would call *conceptual*: just giving an idea of the sound without describing it with great specificity.

By underspecifying the musical sound, Campbell leaves room for readers to project their own ideas of what the bands sound like. Burt (2015) speculates at length about that based on visual cues alone: "The arresting tints and the alluring lucidity on any page of 'Jem' do for the eye what the synth-driven genre that the critic Glenn McDonald calls 'Metropopolis'—the genre of CHVRCHES and the Purity Ring, and maybe Grimes—does for the ear."

The main convention Campbell subverts in musical sequences is paneling. Eisner (2008: 26) identifies the panel as the fundamental structure that defines time in comics: "The act of paneling … establishes the position of the reader in relationship to the scene and indicates the duration of the event. Indeed, it effectively 'tells' time". Outside of the musical sequences, Campbell employs a very regular, waffle-iron like grid, a condition which Groensteen (2013: 138) describes as setting a regular beat upon which variations can build: "When the layout is regular so is the beat. The progression from one panel to the next is smoother out in compliance with an immutable cadence".

This cadence underlying the majority of the comic fades in the readers' consciousness, like the ticking of a clock in a silent room, until it is disrupted. Groensteen (2007: 97) articulates the possibility of such disruption as one of the key benefits of regularity, saying that a regular layout "possesses the ultimate virtue of handling the possibility of sudden and spectacular ruptures from the initially given norm. In a book in which all the other pages are regular, a page that is suddenly distinguished by a special configuration carries an extremely strong impact".

The musical sequences in Jem are just such spectacular ruptures, but one element of the breakdown does appear in other moments of outsized emotional import in the comic: bleeding panels. The musical sequences stretch to the very edge of the page – or to the edges of both pages in the case of the two-page scenes. McCloud (1994: 103) explains how panels that bleed to the edges of the page interrupt the regular temporal flow of comics they appear in: "time is no longer contained by the familiar icon of the closed panel, but instead hemorrhages and escapes into timeless space".

Campbell uses bleeds to the edge of the page in two types of panels aside from musical sequences: panels introducing holographic characters and romantic panels. Where the concert scenes break entirely from the inter-panel rhythm established in the rest of the comic, these four moments briefly interrupt it. Groensteen (2013: 137–8) compares the rhythm of a reader moving regularly from panel to panel to the rhythm of walking: in these single-panel bleeds, the effect is of the reader falling out of step, much as the characters within the panel are caught on the back foot by the revelation of a hologram or a first kiss.

While these emotional scenes show cracks in the regular paneling, the musical sequences totally obliterate the grid pattern. In addition to bleeding to the edge of the page, the gutters dramatically change shape and sometimes disappear entirely, allowing the panels to bleed into each other. Even in the absence of clear gutters, however, the musical sequences still have an element of panel-transition closure.

Figure 1 shows the first two-page musical sequence, part of a music video featuring the Misfits. The panels (reading roughly from upper left to lower right) are:

1. The entire band on stage, in silhouette
2. The faces of the Misfits together, in a different physical orientation
3. A close-up shot of Pizzazz (the lead singer)'s open mouth
4. An even closer shot of the Pizzazz's open eye
5. All members of the band in shadow, visible to different extents

Figure 1: A Misfits music video *Showtime* (Thompson and Campbell, 2015. © Hasbro 2015).

What sets the closure apart most in the musical sequences is not the lack of regular gutters but the type of transition. The closure found within these sequences is what McCloud (1994: 79) identifies as aspect-to-aspect:

> Most often used to establish a mood or a sense of place, time seems to stand still in these quiet, contemplative combinations. Even sequence, while still an issue, seems less important here than in other transitions. Rather than acting as a bridge between separate moments, the reader here must assemble a single moment using scattered fragments.

While these scenes are certainly not quiet, Campbell's use of aspect-to-aspect closure contributes to the effect of these moments happening outside of the regular time scheme of the rest of the comic.

The time schemes in comics can be quite complicated, as articulated by Bredehoft (2006: 872): "all but the simplest narratives have some fairly complicated relationship between two kinds of sequentiality: the sequence of events happening (chronology) and the sequence in which they are narrated (narrative line)". In the aspect-to-aspect closure of the musical sequences, the panels can't be happening simultaneously, but it is difficult to tease out the exact order they occur in, or how much time elapses between them. The chronological sequence here is undefined, and the narrative sequence is almost arbitrary. Campbell gives the work of assembling the fragments into a unified whole to the reader, and this extra cognitive load when reading slows down the reading process, as does figuring out what order to read the segments in. The panels on their own do not have enough information to interpret them without the other element: the music.

One musical comic convention that Campbell uses is treating music heard in the comic like a kind of speech balloon. In Sex Bo-bomb's first appearing rehearsal in the Scott Pilgrim comics, O'Malley (2004: n.p.) shows the music as a speech bubble emanating from all of the band members simultaneously, containing lyrics (when there are lyrics). Similarly, Campbell uses what looks partly like a modified speech bubble to reify music on the page. There is a degree to which this is

conventional – other sounds can be depicted textually in speech balloons – but a direct connection to O'Malley (2004) is warranted because Campbell mentions it as a comic that had inspired her in an earlier interview (Dyer and Campbell 2004).

The way Eisner (2008: 24) describes speech balloons makes it clear they would also apply to music: "The balloon is a desperation device. It attempts to capture and make visible an ethereal element: sound". The balloons in the musical sequences showing music differ quite drastically from speech balloons and other sounds in Campbell's comics. They differ both in how they look and in how they interact with the world of the comic.

The regular speech bubbles in *Jem and the Holograms* look like typical comic speech bubbles: regular rounded shapes with a tail attributing the speech to a character. Non-musical sounds are treated very differently. The "PING" of Kimber's phone receiving texts, the "CLUNK" and "SMASH" of shoes hitting a wall and the "BEEP BEEP BOOP" of a password being entered all appear outside of any sort of bubble and are lined and coloured using separate colours (Thompson and Campbell, 2015: [pp. 36, 39, 18]). Even when a cymbal is struck in a non-musical context, the "CLANGG" appears unframed, though the cymbal also emits the white spiky shape that Potsch & Williams (2012: 27) identify as an impact flash: "a visual perception of bursting energy that is associated with perceptions of bursting energy in other sensory modalities".

By contrast, the music frames are less like bubbles and more like clouds. In the musical sequences and elsewhere in the comic, the music cloud shapes are irregular. The clouds are lined in at least one colour and filled with a different colour. The main bands have consistent colouring in their music clouds. When the Holograms are playing, the music cloud is pink lined with blue; the outlines of the cloud are generally smooth with occasional star shapes (see **Figure 2**).

When the Misfits are playing, the cloud is typically purple, lined with yellow, with a jagged line; when they get a new singer, the colours reverse: the new music cloud is yellow lined with purple, but the jagged edge line remains (compare **Figures 1** and **3**). The balloon shape and colour indicate something of the quality of the music – it is clear that the Holograms and the Misfits sound quite different – but it is conceptual, rather than an actualized portrayal.

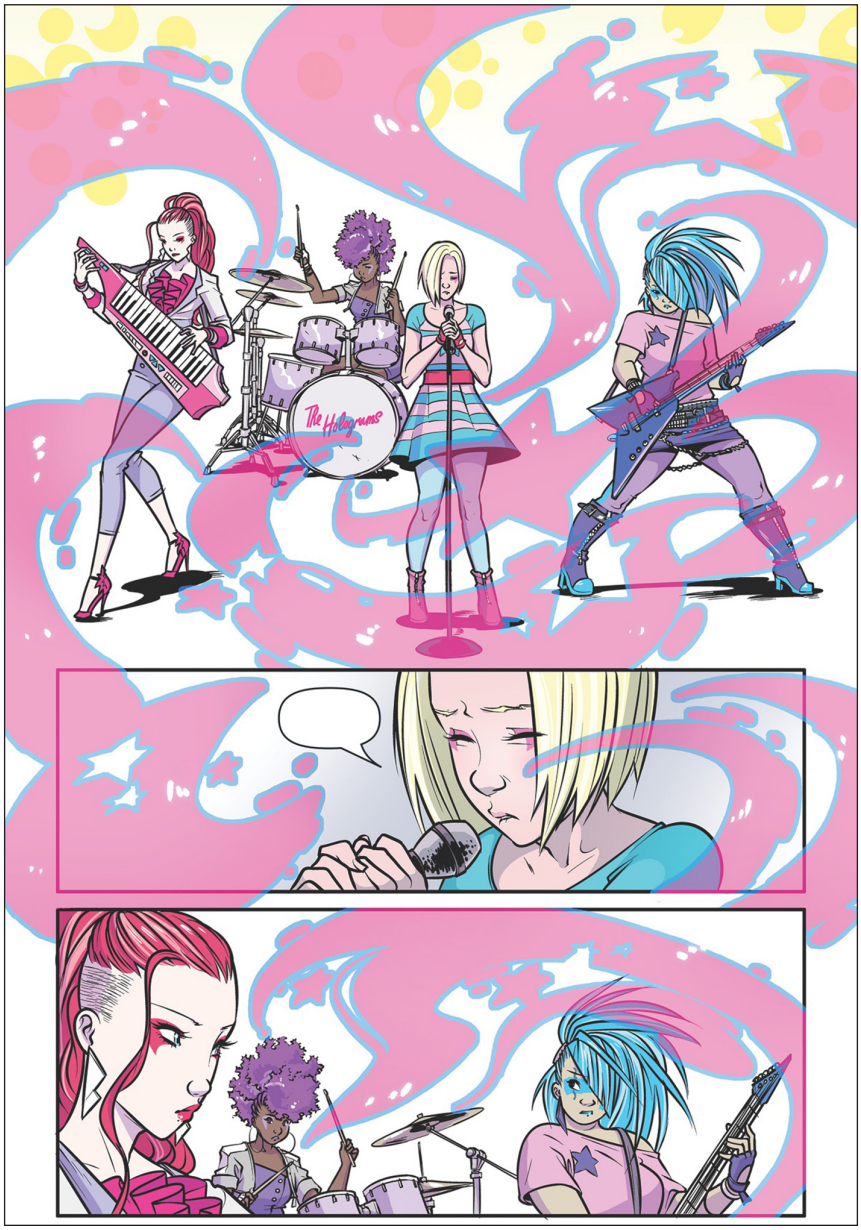

Figure 2: Jerrica tries to sing *Showtime* (Thompson and Campbell, 2015. © Hasbro 2015).

The other difference between music clouds and regular speech balloons is that they don't consistently have attribution tails: because the clouds are shaped irregularly, they frequently have protrusions that could be tails, but they're not specific

enough to have a clear meaning. Unlike the music balloon clearly emerging from the instruments in O'Malley (2004: n.p.), Campbell's music floats over most scenes in a general wash.

More dramatic than the shape and colour difference of the music cloud is how it interacts with the rest of the content in the image. Unlike regular speech bubbles or sound effects, which are opaque, the speech bubbles are translucent, floating over the scene which is thus viewed through them. When there are lyrics in the music (i.e. when someone is singing) they are framed by the music cloud, but unlike the cloud, they are not translucent. It is clear that the lyrics in the balloons are song instead of just speech because on the first page of the first issue of the series, Campbell shows what speech during a song should look like: Jerrica is too shy to sing and then chokes, and her silence and then choking sound are shown in speech bubbles on top of the music cloud (see **Figure 2** for the first example of this). The lyrics are behaving slightly more like art than like words: Campbell even explains in an interview that despite having another person lettering the rest of the text, putting the lyrics on the page was part of her domain as artist on the series, though not as writer: "Kelly wrote all the song lyrics, but I hand wrote the lyrics onto the page. Sometimes I would ask her to edit the lyrics down if there wasn't enough room, since my hand lettering was on the large side" (Dueben and Campbell).

The variation in opacity in the song clouds provides an illusion of depth to the music scenes that is not present in other parts of the comic. Speech bubbles do not typically interact with the rest of the art: where possible they are situated separately from the images on the page, but when that is not possible they sit on top of the art. By contrast, the translucent song clouds interpermeate the world of the comic: the opaque lettering lives in the translucent sound cloud, which is in the foreground of the image instead of being on top of and separate from it.

While the song clouds do not clearly point to the origin of the music, they do provide other deictic functions in the musical sequences. One thing the shape of the music clouds achieves is to help separate the constituent parts in the music scenes. In **Figure 3**, there is no gutter to separate the mid-range shot of the singer

Figure 3: Blaze singing with the Misfits *Dark Jem* (Thompson and Campbell, 2016. © Hasbro 2016).

from the close up of her face, but the jagged song cloud acts as a barrier to help clarify where one panel ends and the next starts. The other deictic function of the music clouds is to help direct the reader with what order to read the images. Reading the text of the top layer guides the reader's eye across the page, helping determine the sequence panels should be read in when there is no clear temporal relationship between them.

The shape of the song clouds also helps explain how to read them: the long slender clouds behave like meandering ribbon paths. Potsch and Williams (2012: 20–23) describe how ribbon paths, a common visual trope in comics, describe the path of an object in space. There is no physical object crossing the space in the musical sequences; instead the clouds describe the track the reader's eye takes. In their discussion of ribbon paths and other conventions of action in comics, Potsch & Williams (2012: 34) note that it is not just the conventionality of these techniques that makes them legible to readers: "While these symbols do become familiar to readers through repetition so that their interpretation becomes automatic, they are nevertheless readily decipherable by novices precisely because they are yoked to these familiar patterns in the human mind". The ribbon-like music clouds can help direct the eye of the reader even without them being conscious of it.

Regular paneling functions in comics like the rhythm section in a rock band. It sets up a regular beat that moves the comic along but operates below the consciousness of the reader until it is disrupted. Campbell employs regular paneling like this throughout *Jem and the Holograms*, jarring her readers out of this regular rhythm by allowing her panels to bleed to the edge of the page during moments of outsized emotional importance. During the musical sequences, she abandons the traditional paneling altogether, and also uses aspect-to-aspect closure between the elements of her images, breaking the relationship between chronological and narrative time. It is only the music itself in these scenes that instructs the reader how to sequence the images, following the zip lines of the music cloud in the order the text appears. Campbell's musical sequences initially seem chaotic, but the music itself makes them legible.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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