

## Presence in Comics

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**Abstract.** The term 'presence' is often used to denote a trait of an artwork that causes the feeling in a viewer that a depicted figure is a living being that is really there, although the viewer is aware that this is not actually the case. So far, scholars who have used this term have not explicitly provided criteria for the assessment of the degree of presence in a work of art. However, such criteria are implicitly contained in a number of theoretical texts. Three important criteria for presence appear to be: 1. size - the larger a figure is depicted, the more likely this artwork will instil a feeling of presence; 2. deixis - the more the work is deictically orientated towards the beholder, e.g. if figures seem to look or point at the beholder, the higher the degree of presence; 3. obtrusiveness of medium – if there is a clash of different diegetic levels within an artwork, the degree of presence is reduced.

These criteria can be readily applied to a single image like a painting or a photograph. A comic, however, consists of multiple images, and the presence of each panel is influenced by the panels that surround it by means of contrast and progression. Another typical feature of comics is written text: speech bubbles, captions etc. do not co-exist with the drawings on the same diegetic level, thus betraying the mediality of their panels and reducing their degree of presence. A comic that makes striking use of effects of presence, which makes it a suitable example here, is the superhero series *The Ultimates* by Mark Millar and Bryan Hitch (Marvel 2002 – 2004). The characters in this comic are often placed on splash pages and/or seemingly address the reader, resulting in a considerable experience of presence.

“Presence” is a term that is often used when describing works of art, particularly portraits, but the people who use this term hardly ever say what they mean by that. However, there are a few theoretical texts which refer to presence, or related phenomena. Therefore it seemed in order to review these texts and from there to arrive at a definition of presence, which was done in another recent article (de la Iglesia 2013). The following definition is proposed there:

presence denotes the vague and possibly subconscious feeling (or rather, a trait of an artwork to cause such a feeling) in a viewer that a depicted figure is a living being that is really there, although the viewer is aware that this is not actually the case. (De la Iglesia 2013: 60-61)

Presence in this sense is distinguished from three other concepts that are sometimes also referred to as “presence”:

a) physical (or bodily) presence – something is actually there and can be experienced in all its material aspects; b) magical or illusory presence – the viewer erroneously believes something to be bodily present, although objectively it is not; c) technological presence (including telepresence) – certain aspects of an object are medially transported or (re)created [...]. (De la Iglesia 2013: 60)

Furthermore, presence is defined as a range of different degrees, rather than a binary category: if we assume that the work of art causes the feeling of presence, and that the feeling of presence is sometimes stronger and sometimes weaker when perceiving different works, it seems likely that the strength, or degree, of the feeling of presence varies from artwork to artwork. Although extrinsic factors, such as the individual perceiving the artwork and the environment both are located at the time of viewing, also play a role in the creation of the experience of presence, the concept of presence becomes more easily operationalisable within a reception aesthetics approach when

concentrating on intrinsic factors alone. The degree of presence in a work of art can be measured by breaking it down into several other, mostly compositional, features. The more these features are contained in a work of art, the greater is its overall degree of presence (de la Iglesia 2013: 61-73, 75-76, 83-85). The following analysis will concentrate on those three of these criteria that are the most relevant for the examples used in this article:

1. Size – the larger a figure appears to the viewer from a given viewing distance, the higher the feeling of presence. More precisely, the closer to life size a figure is, the more likely the experience of presence will ensue. For art historian Michael Fried, for instance, “presence can be conferred by size” so that a viewer might feel confronted by a “surrogate person” (Fried 1969, de la Iglesia 2013: 61).

2. Deixis – i.e. the deictic orientation of the figures in relation to the beholder. The more a figure appears orientated towards the viewer (indicated through gaze, gesture, or body), the higher the degree of presence. For example, Michael Fried says about a self-portrait by Gustave Courbet,

[the painting] presents the young Courbet [...] looming, almost lunging, directly toward the beholder. [...] It is as though Courbet's object in this eccentric canvas were by an act of almost physical aggression to cancel or undo all distance not merely between image and picture surface but also, more importantly, between sitter and beholder, to close the gulf between them, to make them one. (Fried 1990: 61, de la Iglesia 2013: 77)

The most important deictic device for creating presence, though, is the figures' gaze, which can be perceived by the viewer as an “act of reciprocal seeing” and “mutual facing off” (Fried 2008: 17-18, 144, 158, de la Iglesia 2013: 78-80).

3. Obtrusiveness of medium – or, conversely, the ability of a picture to disguise that it only represents real objects and that it is distinct from these objects. This can be achieved in several ways, but here, specifically the concept of diegesis is important: if there is a clash of different diegetic levels within an artwork, then the degree of presence is reduced. This criterion is a narrower version of what is called “conflation of the figure's and the beholder's space” in the aforementioned article (de la Iglesia 2013: 67). The wording “obtrusiveness of medium” is taken from another text by Matthew Lombard and Theresa Ditton (1997): in order to create an experience of presence, the medium “should not draw attention to itself and remind the media user that she/he is having a mediated experience” (see also de la Iglesia 2013: 73). Under the name of “reflexivity”, a similar feature and its usage in comics has already been the subject of another article by Matthew T. Jones (2005), in which reflexivity is “conceptualized as a process by which the author of the text and/or the audience of the text functions to call attention to the text as an artificial construct.” Although Jones claims that “[r]eflexivity is not something that is located in the text itself, rather it is something that the author engages in while creating and the audience engages in while consuming”, all of his five forms of reflexivity – “authorial awareness, demystification, reader awareness, intertextuality, and intermedia reflexivity” – actually describe features found within comics themselves instead of external factors. There is also some overlap between these devices of reflexivity and the other criteria for presence previously mentioned here, for instance “‘breaking the fourth wall’ – wherein a character breaks the flow of the diegesis to acknowledge the presence of the spectator” – is similar to the criterion of deixis, which includes figures seemingly turning to the viewer etc.

It should be noted that presence, as it is conceptualised in (de la Iglesia 2013), is different from close-up shots in film and photography. A close-up is commonly defined as a “shot which provides a limited, magnified view of a character or an object in a scene” (Beaver 2009: 49). Such a

“magnified view of a character” is similar to the aforementioned criterion of size. However, aspects of deixis and mediality, the other two criteria for presence mentioned above, are not part of the definition of a close-up. For instance, a figure in a close-up might be turned away from the camera. If the same figure was portrayed from the same distance and under the same conditions, but this time looking into the camera, the effect of presence would be stronger, according to the definition of presence given above. In film theory, such a compositional device would be called “presentational blocking”, which “reduces the objective distance between viewer and dramatic action” (Beaver 2009: 205). Likewise, the experience of presence is less intense when viewing a grainy black-and-white close-up in comparison to a high-resolution colour version of the same picture, as the mediality of the former is more obtrusive than the latter. See also (Lombard/Ditton 1997): “Very high resolution images [...] have been shown to evoke more self-reported presence.” (Note, however, that Lombard and Ditton distinguish between “obtrusiveness of medium” and “image quality” as two distinct characteristics, whereas here the latter is considered part of the former.)

We can therefore say, a close-up is only one of several methods to achieve presence in an artwork. In other words, the concept of presence is more than just the concept of close-up shots. The close-up is certainly a powerful device for creating presence, though. Film scholar Frank E. Beaver describes the effects of close-up shots like this:

The close-up has been recognized as a device for (1) directing audience attention, (2) establishing identification with and immediacy for screen characters [...]. Emotions, feelings, and nuances can be suggested by the close-up by merely magnifying and isolating an individual in an intensely dramatic moment. (Beaver 2009: 49)

Keywords like “attention”, “immediacy” and “intense” in this quotation hint at the similarity between the effects of close-ups and the effect of presence. The aforementioned review article by Matthew Lombard and Theresa Ditton says as much: “Close-up views used in still images led subjects in a study by Hatada, Sakata, and Kusaka (1980) to report a greater sensation of realism” (Lombard/Ditton 1997).

So far we have only discussed presence in general, and mostly regarding single images. It would now be interesting to apply this concept of presence to comics, for several reasons: from the perspective of presence theory (or reception aesthetics in general), it is of interest to see how easily the concept of presence can be applied to another medium which is quite different from single images, and whether that concept fits or needs to be modified. From the perspective of comics studies, it is of interest to see if an analysis of presence in a comic helps to better recognise, understand and describe certain compositional, narrative and stylistic features of its artwork. This means that comics are only used as an example field of application for the concept of presence here. The concept of presence itself is not discussed or verified in this article; for a proper discussion of this concept and its deduction from previous literature, see (de la Iglesia 2013).

So what happens if we apply the criteria of presence to comics, in order to determine their degree of presence? First of all, we have to ask ourselves what comics are, or, more precisely, how they are different from other artistic media. According to the widespread (though not uncontested) definition by Scott McCloud, comics consist of “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence” (McCloud 1994: 9). If we follow this definition, this means that an artwork is a comic if it is clearly divided into at least two distinct images that are visible at the same time and have a clear intended viewing order. Therefore, when we talk about a panel in a comic, we also should take into account the panels that surround it.

What is missing from McCloud's definition is the combination of such images with words. This is a

deliberate omission by McCloud, as comics do not need to have written text in them, and in fact there are many examples of wordless comics. However, word balloons, thought bubbles, caption texts and sound effects are such frequent features in comics that we should consider their impact on the effect of presence. Such text draws attention to the fact that we are only reading a comic and not perceiving unmediated, real events. Similar observations regarding speech bubbles and their relation to reality have been made before by philosopher Lambert Wiesing:

[...] the usage of speech bubbles is literally connected to a reality effect ['Realitätseffekt']: the speech bubble bestows a reality on the comic figures which these figures would not have in images without speech bubbles. [...] Every speech bubble is a combination of two ontologically distinguishable levels: the depicted person is artificially present in the image; but the speech bubble with its writing is as really present in the image as a normal thing can be [...]. Following Husserl, one can speak of a comic-specific conflict ['Widerstreit'] within the image: a conflict between the real, visible writing and the depicted, visible figures. (Wiesing 2010: 31-32, my translation)

With these two characteristics of comics in mind – sequentiality and combination of words and images –, let us now turn to a specific example of a comic. *The Ultimates* is a superhero comic book series published by Marvel in 13 issues of 20–40 pages each, in the standard US format of approximately 26 by 17 centimetres. The issues came out almost each month between March 2002 and April 2004. They were scripted by Mark Millar, drawn in pencil by Bryan Hitch, drawn in ink by Andrew Currie and Paul Neary, and coloured by Paul Mounts.

There is nothing extraordinary about the formal aspects of this comic – in fact, it is a rather typical example of a present-day mainstream superhero comic. However, my hypothesis is that it makes striking use of the effect of presence, possibly more so than other similar comics, which is why some sequences from *The Ultimates* are used in this article to illustrate the effect of presence in comics.



Figure 1: panel 1 from (Millar 2002: 11). © MARVEL

The first example is the first panel on p. 11 of the third issue (figure 1). We see a picture of the face of an old man. It is framed as a close-up, filling the entire panel except for small areas to the left and right. The man's head and shoulders are almost fully frontally orientated towards the picture surface, and his gaze seems to meet ours. The word balloon, containing only the name "Nick Fury" and a question mark, looks tiny in comparison to the rest of the panel. Thus, if we wanted to assess the degree of presence of this image in isolation, it would be quite high, as the size of the figure and its orientation towards the beholder enhance the effect of presence, and the word balloon is so small that it hardly betrays the mediality of this image and does not reduce its effect of presence that much. Overall, it is likely that this image can make us feel as if a real man was looking at us.



Figure 2: (Millar 2002: 10-11). © MARVEL

When we take the whole page into account, this impression is confirmed: it is the largest panel on the page, taking up more than half of it. The figures on the other two panels are dwarfed in comparison to the one in the first panel, and seem far less impressive. Likewise, the panels on the preceding page are small, the figures are not frontally positioned towards the picture surface, and there is a lot of dialogue text that, as it were, interferes with the drawings. The large panel with the old man stands out from the adjacent smaller panels, it punctures the sequence with its vastly greater presence. This is one way in which the panel sequence of a comic influences the effect of presence of one of its panels: by contrasting an image of high presence with surrounding images of low presence, the former panel is made even more striking, impressive, and present.

The highlighting of this panel with the old man marks a significant moment in the story, as we witness the first meeting of Captain America and Bucky Barnes since they served in WWII together. Captain America's body, which had been frozen in ice in suspended animation, is still as young as it was in 1945, whereas Bucky Barnes has aged normally. It is also the first time that we, the readers, get to see Bucky in 2002, after he was introduced in issue #1 in a flashback to 1945. Although Captain America knows that everyone he knew, including Bucky, is now 57 years older, it must still be somewhat surprising for Captain America to see Bucky so drastically changed. The effect of presence, which carries in it elements of shock and amazement, allows us readers to share Captain America's feelings as we take more or less his position on Bucky's doorstep and look Bucky in the eye.





Figure 3: (Millar 2003: 24). © MARVEL

In addition to contrasting panels with different degrees of presence, another method for enhancing presence is increasing it from panel to panel. Contrast and progression of presence are usually used in combination, as on p. 23-24 in issue #12. The panel on p. 24 fills the entire page (figure 3), but apart from that it is quite similar to the panel with Bucky Barnes in it. The figure of Captain America takes up almost all of the panel, with only two small patches of smoky background visible. Again, the word balloon is relatively small and thus hardly disrupts the illusion of reality. Captain America's head is not quite frontally orientated towards the picture surface and his gaze does not seem to be directed at the beholder. Therefore, the feeling that we, the readers, are being addressed by this figure, is not as strong as in the case of the Bucky Barnes example. Still, the overall impression of this panel might be a strong feeling of presence – particularly if we perceive it in its sequence. On the preceding page, p. 23, we see Captain America fighting against a naked man, and it is this opponent that Captain America's gaze, and his words “You think this letter on my head stands for France?” are directed at. Again, small panels are contrasted with one that is much larger, which heightens the effect of presence of the latter.

It is noteworthy here, particularly in the last two panels on p. 23, that the degree of presence increases from panel to panel until it culminates on p. 24. There is a significant increase in the panel size – first by roughly 400 per cent, then by another 120 per cent –, which allows the figure of Captain America to become larger and larger in relation to the page. Additionally, our viewpoint does not only come closer to Captain America, it also revolves around him, changing from a profile view to an almost frontal position.

Again, the heightened effect of presence in this panel serves to underpin this moment as a significant one in the story: by ramming his shield into the villain's chest, Captain America seems to have defeated him, but the fight cannot be over before Captain America delivers his punchline, “You think this letter on my head stands for France?” – he is an American soldier, not a French one, so he will never surrender. The end of the dialogue between the two marks the end of their battle.

Of course, it is not only possible to increase presence in a comic through contrast and progression, it can also be decreased. An example of that can be found immediately after the previous example, on p. 25 of issue #12 (figure 5). Captain America puts his boot on the villain's head in the first panel, pulls his shield out of the presumably dead body in the second panel, and walks away from the body in the third panel. While all three panels are about the same size, the figures become smaller and smaller, until we find ourselves at an elevated point of view from which communication between us and the characters seems unlikely. Suddenly, the word balloons feel enormous, like a veil separating our reality from Captain America's. By these means, the degree of presence is gradually reduced in this sequence. This not only serves as a smooth transition from this scene to another, which takes place inside a helicopter above where Captain America is standing. It also removes the viewer visually and emotionally from the gory sight of the lifeless body, which softens the abhorrent atmosphere of the scene in a comic book that is, despite its Parental Advisory rating, still targeted at a mainstream audience. Such an alleviating effect is similar to that of readers physically increasing the distance between their eyes and a comic in their hands that they perceive as scary, as described by psychologist Martin Wambsganß (2012).

To sum up, presence in a comic panel is different from presence in other images, as the effect of presence can be increased or decreased by the surrounding panels, either by contrast or progression or both. There are some questions left unanswered in this article: can the claims made here be confirmed by empirical studies of actual beholders? Can speech bubble text also enhance the effect of presence (which is probably a question best left to linguistics)? How do we assess the presence of a whole comic, rather than single panels? Is *The Ultimates* really a comic of outstanding presence,



and how do we measure and compare that? Is this use of the effect of presence part of the personal style of Mark Millar, or Bryan Hitch, the primary authors of this comic? Or is it a stylistic property of contemporary American superhero comics? These questions will be left open for future research.



Figure 4: (Millar 2003: 23). © MARVEL





Figure 5: (Millar 2003: 25). © MARVEL

## Note

This article is based on a paper presented at the conference *Presence and Agency: Rhetoric, Aesthetics and the Experience of Art*, Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society, 13–15 December 2012.

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