Chapter 10: Uncertainty between Image and Text in Ben Templesmith's *Singularity 7*
Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Narrative and Performance

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Comics perform a peculiar mediality in the interplay between image and text, which serves as the basis of their specific aesthetic quality and their storytelling capacity. This interplay sets the comics medium apart from written text (as in novels or short stories, for example) and audiovisual media. Many scholars who have discussed comics as a medium argue that comics require a specific imaginative input by the reader (McCloud [1993] 1994: 65–66; Saraceni 2003: 9, 51–52). While every text works with gaps of information the reader needs to fill, comics deploy visible gaps (the gutter) to modulate the pacing and development of the narrative. In this way, comics rely on a fundamental uncertainty as each gutter opens a space of speculation on how the reader is to interpret the difference between two frames. Between what the panel shows and what the gutter hides, speculation in comics makes thinkable what is inaccessible to propositional knowledge at the moment. Because of this intrinsic quality, comics may help us analyze acts of speculation more generally. Reflecting on or filling in gaps, speculation is, after all, a way of dealing with the uncertainty of not knowing for sure.

Yet unlike in written text, visuals in comics also introduce a different instance of apparent certainty in tension with another form of uncertainty. This has to do with their mode of showing and the visual pleasure they offer (Mersch 2005, 2011; cf. Boehm 2007). Images seem to suspend speculation, because what one sees has a certain presence for the beholder. The image in comics makes the fictional world present in a way that a written text cannot. Yet, as has been emphasized by phenomenology, this sense of presence in image objects has a particular quality: they bear an "artificial presence"—"a presence precisely without substantial attendance" (Wiesing [2005] 2009: 20). Although comics work through varying degrees of abstraction and a conventional visual 'language' is recognizable to readers familiar with the code (Varnum/Gibbons 2001; Saraceni 2003), they retain this quality of evidence beyond or before speculation and narrative. This artificial presence introduces a paradox for the role of the image in acts of speculation: the image ob-

ject is both present and absent at the same time. It is, after all, no coincidence that the etymology of "speculation" connects to the spectacle and to an act of looking. This paradoxical relationship of the image to a mode of presence has important implications for how comics modulate uncertainty between image and text.

Comics specifically use and play with these tensions between certainty and uncertainty in any act of reading and viewing, which opens up space for speculation in a performative rather than a narrative mode. Image and text in comics thus not only work together to tell a story, but to produce an effect: they can create speculative worlds that have a reality effect for the reader/viewer. This bifurcation of realities does nothing to bring the story forward, but it adds another level of uncertainty—and, with *Singularity 7*, of discomfort—unsettling meaning-making. In comics, this bifurcation enables conscious acts of producing uncertainty, demanding equivalent acts of speculation by the reader that both maintain and suspend the ambiguity between present tense and past (or future) tense. While the box commentary may speak in the past tense, the images and the speech bubbles unfold the story in the present. In comics, seeing, deciphering, speculating, world-making, and storytelling operate on several layers that the act of reading and seeing keeps together and in tension. This is how comics work as a medium.

While all comics share this quality, there are comics that make this type of speculation their central concern. *Singularity 7* (2004) by Ben Templesmith is such an example.[1] *Singularity 7* creates a fascinating and disturbing aesthetic experience between its apocalyptic narrative and haunting images. Pushing the conventions of both science fiction and horror to their limits, the comic engages with forms of non-knowing and uncertainty in narrative and scientific speculation—always contending with the (illusory) certainty of the visual. *Singularity 7* makes use of the language of comics to present worlds within the tension between the possible, the probable, and the impossible in science fiction, in ways that are relevant to thinking about how speculation works. This tension plays out in the comic between the written text, the visual image, the narrative, and the performative in multiple layers.

Although comics studies is now an established field if not a discipline, approaches to comics as a medium differ between disciplines. Scholarship has long understood comics as imagetext, and comics studies has been an interdisciplinary endeavor from its inception.[2] However, disciplinary proclivities continue to shape perspectives. Scholars trained in literary studies tend to focus on comics as

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1 All citations of *Singularity 7* in this chapter refer to the 2011 digital edition.

2 On comics as both text and image and neither, see Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons's edited volume, *The Language of Comics: Word and Image,* which focuses explicitly on "the balance of power between words and images" (Varbum/Gibbon 2001: ix). The journals *Image[&]Narrative* and *ImageTexT* likewise focus on this synthesis, attending not only to comic strips and comics but

narrative (Kukkonen 2013; Groensteen [2011] 2013). Scholars trained in fields that focus on mediality or visual culture tend to look at comics as sequential art—following the lead of comics artists Will Eisner (1985) and Scott McCloud ([1993] 1994), and continuing with Jan Baetens's work (2011), to name just a few examples. These different perspectives produce discrepant, sometimes contradictory readings, calling for an interdisciplinary approach to comics that makes these conflicts productive. Such a dual perspective informs our study of comics as a specific practice of speculation. An interdisciplinary dialogue between literary studies and image studies enables us to show how the comic accomplishes this conscious play with uncertainty by tapping and interrelating two principal modes of speculation: narration and performance.

Furthermore, because of the unique relationship between image and text, comics favor affirmative (exploratory) types of speculation. In *Speculate This!*, the uncertain commons conceptualize "affirmative speculation" through its openness: "To speculate affirmatively is to produce futures while refusing the foreclosure of potentialities, to hold on to the spectrum of possibilities while remaining open to multiple futures whose context of actualization can never be fully anticipated" (uncertain commons 2013: ch. 1). The sometimes uneasy tension between image and text constitutive of comics opens up spaces of speculation instead of shutting them out.

How does *Singularity 7* engage in such speculative practices? Most obviously, the narrative is speculative fiction—a dystopian science fiction story that imagines an unusual alien invasion, in which the aliens terraform the earth for future colonization. The sequence of images, however, encourages speculation by the reader, as well, and this is crucial to the narrative. Without such guesswork, the story does not come together to make sense as a dystopian narrative. Combining and layering images and written text to present a dystopian world, the comic creates a disturbing narrative flow that culminates in extinction (even of the alien invaders) and an uncertain new beginning. Box commentary and character speech, then, work together (or across one another) to undermine the stabilizing tendencies of both story and image.

From the perspective of narrative analysis, *Singularity 7* engages virtually all speculative genres. Not only that, the comic reflects upon the act of storytelling as speculation, as well as on the fundamental uncertainty and non-knowing that emerge from science and technology knowing too much. All comics tell a story through the interaction between text and image, yet *Singularity 7* adds another layer through narrative embedding, a story within a story. Even though the narrative holds the comic together, there is much more to speculation in this comic

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also to illustrated fiction and children's books. The journal *ImageTexT* takes its title from W. J. T. Mitchell's coinage of "imagetext" in *Picture Theory* (Mitchell 1994: 83).

than just storytelling, and this other aspect does not yield meaning or reveal itself through interpretation. Image studies, a young field of research in the European humanities, enables us to inquire into the specific visual experience that comics offer. The images give the comic as a whole a completely new dimension—a dimension that does not have to be directly linked to narration. *Singularity 7* features particularly striking visuals. The images are richly colorful, deliberately working with the vivid contrasts between complementary colors and juxtaposing different design styles (typographies, graphics, schemata, scientific scribblings). There is so much to see in each panel and across the pages; even photographic layers are included—for example, a photograph of the UN headquarters (Templesmith [2004] 2011, #1: 7). *Singularity 7* fully engages visual pleasure—even scopophilia. While the images in this comic attract attention and stimulate a positive affective response, they also encourage a strong repulsion that throws the reader from the realm of pleasure into a sense of disgust, horror, and anxiety. The images show grotesquely distorted characters, physical destruction of the landscape, human bodies suffering atrocious violation. This strange tension between attraction and repulsion produces a discomfort that works hand in hand with the story told—yet it is the visuals and the mixed response they elicit that make *Singularity 7* so disquieting. The pleasure one experiences regarding these images is deeply disturbing.

Responding to these observations from two distinct methodological angles allows us to focus on narrative embedding, voice, and intertextuality, as well as on visual layers, artificial presence, and sequencing to explore how uncertainty shapes the interactions between these differing medial practices. Which textual and visual strategies are performed by *Singularity 7*? How do these strategies work together to tell a speculative story? Which effects are produced by the visuals, and how do they relate to those produced by the text? How do the images enact a paradoxical presence of speculation? How does this presence interact with the narrative of disappearance? Addressing these questions together will enable us to investigate the comic's specific intermedial performativity in relation to storytelling, and to explore the potential of intermedial comic assemblages in general.

Narration and Sequential Images

In the interplay between images and text in comics, one may regard the narrative as the backbone or hinge, the element that keeps all parts together even as they tend to drift apart. The embedded narrative enables *Singularity 7* to reflect upon and disrupt the act of fictional speculation, but it also interweaves major speculative genres and tropes, including genesis and apocalypse. The narrator turns out to be a character in the story: an old man with all the paraphernalia of a teacher.

Figure 10.1: Mapping the night sky. Singularity 7 *(Templesmith [2004] 2011, #1: 3).*

He speaks to a group of young children in an enclosed space that looks like a cave. He is telling a story of origin for the dystopian narrative world, and his narrative connects with biblical Genesis. The box commentary floating on the opening page duplicates what is shown in the image, but it also gives it specific meaning in relation to the narrative: "So, it started with a light in the sky" (fig. 10.1).

The image and the text perform together here: the mise-en-abîme, the act of storytelling within the story, enables a rupture in the narrative voice right from the beginning. This embedded narrative comes to an abrupt end when the Gosiodo—the creatures whose simultaneous approach has been traced at the bottom of the page—invade the enclosure and kill the whole group, including the narrator and the children listening to him. This is especially disturbing, since many of these characters are named as if they were going to feature as central characters in the story. This disruption of the first narrative strand introduces a second: an alien invasion narrative with nanotechnology as its central risk technology. So, the dystopian narrative is cut short by the intrusion of the science-fictional apocalypse, with a new narrator voice that speaks in the present tense and shifts the performance of storytelling to another diegetic level. This shift dissolves the temporal distance between narrative and image. All inhabitants of the human enclosure have been killed, with one exception: Chon, the boy with the dragon tattoo. A third narrative strand emerges that centers around a group of special human beings who are immune to the nanites and in fact are enhanced by them. These characters introduce a connection to superhero fiction. The three narrative strands—story of origin (dystopian world), catastrophe (alien invasion), and balked rescue (superhero narrative)—correspond with three central biblical narratives: genesis, apocalypse, and redemption. Repeatedly disrupting the plot arcs it sets up, continually gesturing toward completion without fully suturing the ruptures in the storyline, this comic demands reflection upon acts of speculation that too easily rest on well-worn narrative expectations.

Time and narrative sustain an uneasy relationship in this comic, not only on the level of narrative voice but also in how the images work with the text to create a world and a story. First of all, there is a tension between the presence and immediacy of a whole page as image and the temporalization that only comes into being through an image sequence, frame by frame, gutter by gutter. But temporalization is not the same as narrativization—some uncertainties remain. For example, the three narrow panels on the top of page 6 (fig. 10.2) can be understood (according to McCloud's terminology) either as moment-to-moment—that is, temporal—transitions that show the transformation of Bobby into the Singularity, or as aspect-to-aspect transitions that depict the very moment of change. Due to the narrowness of the frames, they appear like three stroboscopic snapshots happening at almost the same time. Time itself appears unhinged, jagged, disrupted.

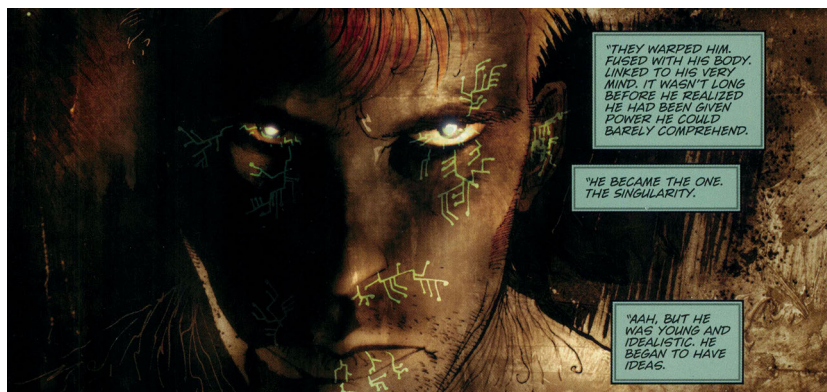*Figure 10.2: Moment-to-moment or aspect-to-aspect transition?* Singularity 7 *(Templesmith [2004] 2011, #1: 6).*

Figure 10.3: Looking straight at the beholder. Singularity 7 *(Templesmith [2004] 2011, #1: 6).*

Singularity 7 deploys a number of visual strategies to further increase the uncertainties about the comic's temporality and its relationship to the moment of reading. The gaze of Bobby the Singularity breaks the 'fourth wall' of the narration: at the moment of reading, he is looking directly at us, the audience (fig. 10.3). This is anathema to classic cinematography, but quite common in comics. The Singular-

ity addresses us directly—*we* are hailed. This disturbing sense of being watched, of the image gazing back at us, is an effect of the image—not the text. It invokes a Christian iconography of the Messiah realizing the medial performativity of the image: "what we see looks back at us" (Didi-Huberman 1992). The same pages of the comic use parallel montage, a cinematic strategy. In the blue frames below the embedded narrative, a parallel storyline unfolds. While the narrator tells his story, unaware of the imminent threat, the reader sees the Gosiodo approaching. The color contrast between the frames and the repetition of this pattern on several pages separates them as two realms and indicates this as a parallel montage, although this second realm initially emerges almost unnoticed and then merges with the first in a subtle way. Two layers of the story are pictured in different colors: a swarm of nanites attacking and Chon being attacked. But the colorful contrasting images produce uncertainties. While the story tells us that the nanites arbitrarily form a protection buffer making Chon special, which depends on a spatial continuity, the images present two worlds that, on some pages, are sharply separated by colorful contrasts. These contrasts both distinguish two spaces and suggest simultaneity, creating a tension between the two presented spaces as well as between the written text and the visuals. *Singularity 7* incorporates other cinematographic temporalizations, as well—ones that support the narration. We see Chon cry out loud (#1: 17), requiring us to translate a drawing of an open mouth into another medium: sound. What happens with Chon in this panel? The end of the page acts like a cliffhanger and turning the page opens a new chapter in the story (#1: 18). Here, the frames slowly fade in and, for these three frames, we suddenly have a subjective perspective of Chon, the new hero, reopening his eyes. However, while cinema deploys parallel montage, color contrasts, and—at least in conventional cinema—a correlation between image and sound, the comic intrinsically retains an indeterminacy between simultaneity and sequence. The sound remains imagined, the pitch, timbre, and accent of the narrative voice unspecified (adding other indeterminacies, as well, including the gender of the speaker). The mise-en-page and each individual panel suggest both a temporal sequence enabling narrative flow and an immediate presence, drawing attention away from this flow. *Singularity 7* makes full use of the medium's ability to push the story forward and to encourage a lingering gaze at the image, both at the same time.

In this comic, different narrative layers thus come together and collide, creating a structure of uncertainty that engenders or even presents and performs speculation itself. The images participate in telling the speculative story, but the speculation is already realized: we see what happens, a disturbing and new strange world, the events unfold in front of our eyes, the world becomes present and, in the moment of seeing, is no longer speculation.

Presence Effects of the Image

How to understand the medial differences between images and texts, between narrativity and showing? To take up an idea from Lessing's *Laokoon* (1766), we could differentiate iconic and textual qualities as follows: while verbal text as a *discursive* medium operates in a linear progression, the image as an *aisthetic* medium presents itself in a spatial mode, where the whole image is visible at once.[3] Comics, however, show how these distinctions intersect with each other. The sequentiality of images in comics operates in a mode between image and text: similar to reading, it enables a linear and thus discursive progression in the perception of a series of panels. Usually the panels in a comic are organized according to the reading direction of the respective language. Therefore, comics in English start at the top of the page, beginning with the first frame, and move from left to right and downwards, very much like written text does. At the same time, the performativity of the image and the specificity of visual perception guides the reception of comics. While texts have to be read to be understood and to be interpreted, images address our sensual perception. Thus, even if we start looking at a comic according to our writing and reading conventions, the whole page and the juxtaposition of the images will be in sight and call for our perception—we will not be able to *not* see the contrasting colors and figures of the whole page. The medial specificity of the image allows us to see the panels as separated (by the gutter) as well as connected, an ensemble image that spreads over a whole page, since all panels on a page are present at the same time. In a similar way, written text in comics—to be precise, its 'writtenness' (cf. Krämer 2003)—also has iconic qualities: its typography might indicate its function as speech via italics, or as commentary via boxing and capitalization, or as sound via onomatopoetic visualization. The visual mode of showing (Mersch 2002b, 2011) is why the image is connected to a certain presence, thereby producing effects of evidence.[4] This is what we propose to call the "visual performativity of comics." As the image produces presence, it generates visibility, it shows something and shows itself. The presence of what is shown stands in conflict with claims of the possibility of subjunctive images (cf. Wolf 1999; Buckland 1999; Metz 2008). The grammatical format of the subjunctive, like the possibility of negation, seems instead to belong to the medial logic of the text/language in a literal sense. This becomes evident, for example, when the image performs an act of immediate interpellation—as when the character looks out of the panel as a

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3 In order to underline that focus is not on "aesthetics" (with its associations of beauty and the arts) but instead on a mode of sensory perception (Ancient Greek: αἴσθησις, *aísthēsis*), we use the term "aisthesis" here with respect to the dimensions of showing/looking related to the image.

4 A textual mode of showing in literature might also yield instants of a peculiar presence, which Roland Barthes named the "reality effect" (Barthes [1969] 1989).

disturbing presence addressing us, the beholders (fig. 10.3). This visual evidence-effect exceeds the meaning-making process of the narrative, while the text narrates the event as in the past. Two realities, two worlds, two narrative possibilities face the reader at the same time. The staring face addresses us as readers in the here and now, drawing us not only into the story but into the story world, while the narrative instance situates us both somewhere else and in another time.

Textual and Visual Layering

The textual and the visual dimensions of the comic therefore engage us in different ways. Images address our visual perception, they can affect us before or beyond any cognitive process, before or beyond understanding: we see them and they might look back (Didi-Huberman 1992) or puncture our perception (Barthes [1980] 1981). Text addresses our cognition, requires us to read and understand words and sentences. The boundaries between these two aspects of the comic are blurry since text has to be seen in order to be read and images frequently have to be read in order to be understood. It is this imbrication of modes that makes comics so interesting as a medium of speculation. The narrative emerges between the text and the image, a process that requires our imagination, our ability to speculate, to fill in gaps. But the interplay between text and images also has an effect that goes beyond their function in creating a narrative—together, they perform a presence that counteracts the temporal flow of the sequence and the story. In other words, they are performative, in the sense of J. L. Austin's definition of a performative speech act: they do something by saying and by showing (Austin 1962: 6).

Singularity 7 not only uses the performative and narrative means of comics as a medium, but also reflects upon the act of storytelling through speculation, and its images reflect upon their status as images as well as their relation to spoken and written text. This raises the question of how *Singularity 7* deals with uncertainty and speculation specifically. One of the most prominent features of *Singularity 7*, one which it shares with many other speculative comics, is the use of multiple layering techniques. As explained above, the images give the comic as a whole a completely new dimension—a dimension that does not have to be directly linked to narration. They are characterized by a richness and a distinctive layered aesthetic that is a result of the specific production process, which Ben Templesmith describes as follows:

> [T]he art is all hand drawn, on tonal paper, then I ink it, lay in some grey tones and white highlights using paint and markers and anything that comes to hand. Then I scan them in and add photographic layers, be it textures of cracked walls, collages I've made and bits of faces, before adding color, all in Photoshop. At the end of the

day it's still about 80% drawn and 20% computer. But I don't actually draw on it, I just use Photoshop as a composition and layering tool really. (Templesmith quoted in Ambush Bug 2008)

This layering process allows Templesmith to superimpose very different techniques and textures. Yet while the layers remain visually effective, we have to concede that, superimposed upon each other, they melt into one visual experience, one picture, in which the different layers become at the same time indistinguishable as they constitute the initial visual effect.
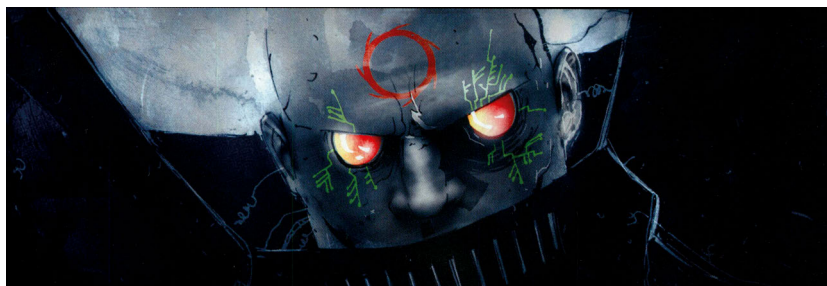

Figure 10.4: Layering with photographic images. Singularity 7 *(Templesmith [2004] 2011, #1: 9).*

It is this interweaving of different layers and different styles that make it difficult to notice why the characters in *Singularity 7* are so disturbing. Many of the drawn faces are layered with photographic images (fig. 10.4; cf. #1: 9, panel 1). A careful look reveals that some parts of the faces include photographic traces: parts of the chin, the eyes, but mostly the regions around the nose. To understand the strange effect and affect of this photographic layer, we have to take into account that the photographic medium in our culture is understood as indexical: what can be seen on the photograph has been in front of the camera. Because of the indexicality of this medium, photography is often ascribed a status of mechanical objectivity, neutrally registering what has been in front of the lens, a realistic medium (Barthes [1964] 1977; Kracauer 1960; Daston/Galison 2007). Furthermore, in contrast to the abstracting or typifying graphics in comics, a photograph always presents a concrete individual and concrete object. For the comic as an otherwise clearly constructed, fictional and abstracted product, this insertion of bits of face-photographs produces a very disturbing yet unconscious effect. It brings the characters closer to us, they become human like us, as if they were our own undead in a photographic-indexical sense (cf. Fürst/Krautkrämer/Wiemer 2010).

This means that, in terms of the images, the comic dissolves the boundaries between the characters and the readers, the dystopian narrative world and the

world in which we live, at the moment of reading. They 'have been there'—to invoke Roland Barthes's account of the photographic "*having-been-there*" (Barthes [1964] 1977: 44). Through the photographic layer, these image objects appear as emanation of a referent, as if they existed in our 'real' world. Not only the protagonists are shaped by these traces of humanity and individuality, but also the foils, the Gosiodo. This makes the aisthetic experience even more ambivalent: we cannot ban the antagonists as nonhuman, for they share the same traces of humanity even in their grotesque physical form. Again and again, a Gosiodo gazes out of the frame, looking directly into our eyes—they are us at the same time they are the Other, they are addressing us, calling for response and pulling us into their disturbing world.

With respect to the textual performance in comics, we can observe that the written text depends on the images and, at the same time, enforces a temporal flow in the panel. Yet the relationship between text and images in comics is far from trivial. Speech bubbles and commentary boxes frame much of the text, suggesting a particular relationship with the visuals that oscillate between immediacy and (narrative) mediation. Speech bubbles, like quotation marks in a novel, suggest the presence of voice and add not only temporal sequence but also an auditory layer to the image, highlighting the performative dimension of written text. Yet the text in commentary boxes, using past tense, serves to create a temporal distance between the moment of reading and the story world, the diegesis. In *Singularity 7*, written text is used in different ways to further emphasize this distance. The narrative begins with an embedded narrative related to text written in quotation marks in box commentaries. Text is also scribbled into the images themselves, usually providing seemingly redundant information—for example, an onomatopoetic "boom" creates a sound effect for the image, whose high-contrast composition already suggests a loud sound in a synesthetic manner (#1: 13, panel 7). While the images address the beholder directly in the present tense, the text here creates an effect of distance and absence through the use of past tense. Thus, while the narrative rests on the interplay between text and image, it is the written text that situates the narrative temporarily and marks its genre affiliation. In comics there is therefore always a tension between the temporal distance of the narrative world in the act of storytelling and its presence through the embeddedness in the images. The act of narration as presented in fiction also constitutes the make-believe or imagination of presence: the narrator and the reader conceived as embodied and engaged in the act of making meaning at the same time (Berns 2014). The act of narration is not only the performance of telling a story; it is also the performance of gender (cf. Lanser 1981)—alongside ethnicity, sexuality, and class.

The images in comics make the fictional world present and rely on the written text to create the sense of a performance with actors acting out the narrative on a stage. This is relevant when we look at graphic narratives as practices of specu-

lation in a wider sense, since speculation always requires a point of reference. In other words, speculative fiction is fictional only in relation to an assumed actual world: the world in which the act of reading must take place. The assumed actual world affords to the fiction the condition of make-believe. In this way, in comics, speech bubbles signal performance and immediacy, yet the box commentary also serves to indicate the presence of mediating speech. *Singularity* 7 at the beginning presents a character in the act of storytelling, whose speech is identified through quotation marks in the box commentary—highlighting the embeddedness of the narrator's words within the control of another narrative instance, but also signaling the physical presence of the narrator in the frame. The quotation marks suggest both temporal distance and immediate presence, allowing the comic as a whole to oscillate between narrative and performance, both pulling the story forward and producing a series of immediate effects between image and text.

Intertextuality/Interpictoriality

While the aisthetic experience in this comic breaches the boundaries between speculation and evident factuality, between this world and another, the images also have another agenda that connects them with other images. Just as narrative in *Singularity* 7 draws from the traditions of storytelling in biblical apocalypse, science fiction, dystopia, and superhero fiction, so too do the images draw from the visual iconography of shared fear and hope. Visual intertextualities become relevant to the comic's entanglement or engagement with speculation; these intertextualities are quite transparent, but they do bring in another level of complexity to the speculative work these images perform.

As the story of genesis told in the embedded opening narration, a redemption narrative is set up and swiftly cut short without much fanfare. When the aliens finally arrive on earth to survey the terraforming work performed by their nanites, the Singularity greets them as "the Masters" in a pose that clearly references Christ on the cross (fig. 10.5).

The Christ imagery is far from subtle and thus tightens the irony of the moment. It also reinforces the religiously informed visual language used throughout the comic that references the visual history of the Bible without either creating a critique of Christianity or hailing religion as a solution to the technoscientific uncertainties that literally plague the narrative world.

Figure 10.5: Christ imagery when the Singularity greets the aliens as "the Masters."
Singularity 7 *(Templesmith [2004] 2011, #4: 17).*

This imagery is reminiscent of German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer, who was instrumental in shaping Western religious iconography. His series of fifteen woodcuts on the Apocalypse, *Die heimlich offenbarung iohannis* (*Apocalipsis cum figuris*) (1498), still have a powerful presence in the visual tradition of the end of history. References to this tradition in *Singularity 7* anchor the comic's religious borrowings from an era before the advent of both modern fiction and probability calculation, that is, before the emergence of a contingent future in the modern world (cf. Esposito 2007: 7–12). These images contradict the idea of the future as subject to change based on events in the world rather than predestined by an external power. On one level, these visual references point to an idea of certainty that is lost by imagining the future as contingent upon what happens in the world. This memory of certainty is in tension with the radical uncertainty with which the comic is saturated, in terms of both its visual aesthetics and its narrative. In other words, the idea of certainty suggested by—in this case—the figure of Christ on the cross throws into relief the uncertainties in the comic.

In a less obvious way, a young woman who appears out of nowhere in issue #3 may also be seen as a related instance of visual intertextuality. She appears incongruously at a point in the narrative when the makeshift superhero-posse gets ready to face the threat of the Singularity. On a cinematic, three-panel page showing different iterations of light at the end of a tunnel, she emerges from the light apparently walking directly towards the viewer. The first panel is empty; the

second panel shows her walking form indistinctly; and the third panel shows her gazing out of the center of the image pleadingly, holding an infant, awash in light from the tunnel: "Help me, please . . ." (Templesmith [2004] 2011, #3: 17). This image calls up representations of the Virgin Mary with the Christ child (including Dürer's), suggesting fragility, vulnerability, and invoking nostalgic notions of domestic bliss, reproduction, and procreation—as well as the question of who may be the father of the child. Ultimately, the woman turns out to be a bomb. She will become one in a series of terminal catastrophes in the comic, all of which are entirely contingent and follow no apparent logic other than that of destruction. The child will be the only remnant of humanity, its lone survival testament to the way in which the comic scoffs at teleological speculation.

A very different interpictorial strategy is invoked by the promotional group shot that announces the superhero narrative in the comic (fig. 10.6), another opportunity to frame a narrative of redemption.

Figure 10.6: Superhero group shot. Singularity 7 (*Templesmith [2004] 2011, #1: 24*).

The group shot invokes a particular subgenre of the superhero narrative that features bands of superheroes working together to counteract and manage the contingencies of the narrative world and restore a safe equilibrium. The classic superhero provides certainty in a contingent world. Like the references to Christ and Mary, the band of superheroes in this comic ultimately signify the opposite

of what they visually suggest. Applying the weaponized nanites produced by the human scientists, they cause the complete dissolution of virtually everything in the narrative world, including the seemingly omnipotent aliens. Again, the intertextual reference introduces an additional layer of meaning to the image here, one that highlights the contradictions among the disturbing visual aesthetics, the iconography of certainty, and the ambiguous and paradoxically open-ended narrative.

These various references invoke the certainties of religion and classic superhero narratives neither nostalgically nor critically. These certainties simply hover in the background and intensify the effect of the comic's disturbing uncertainties. While it makes sense to *read* the images, to contextualize them culturally and historically, the images also create an affective response long before we start thinking about them, long before we historicize and categorize the images of Christ, Mary, superheroes, and science. Narrative embedding and layering, as well as a multiplicity of different layers in each individual image, become instrumental in engaging with uncertainty in this comic. Yet the comic adds yet another, crucial layer that comments on these acts of speculation; in this layer, the comic looks back at itself and reflects upon its status as a composite of images, written text, performance, and narration.

Reflexivities: Disrupting Boundaries between Text and Image

Taking a closer look at the opening page (fig. 10.1), which we discussed above in terms of narrative embedding, we see another layer of text in addition to the box commentary: the star constellations of the zodiac superimposed on the image of the night sky. Besides just presenting a world, this page also invites an intertextual reading, for it represents an astronomical map that spatially organizes the sky and gives it meaning. It references long-established scientific certainties, the periodic return of the same, marking the seasons, marking time. The image thus points to both the biblical story of origin and the beginnings of science, two historical paragons of absolute certainty.

Yet in addition to this graphic reference and the box commentary, the page features handwritten notes haphazardly scratched across the image, as if the image were just a draft and not a page in a carefully edited and published book. The note says "the light"—or perhaps "THE light"—turning the indefinite article of the narrator's speech ("a light") into a definite light, the light of the story, the light that always marks the beginning, that is, the clichéd light of all creation narratives, duplicating the light already seen in the image and also undermining it, as if imaging were insufficient to convey these meanings on its own. This note introduces another layer of uncertainty while simultaneously announcing the text's fictional

status, as well as its perhaps ironic reference to myth. The handwritten note poses as a simple description of the light in the image, yet it remains entirely indeterminate. At the same time, it is not clear at all where this writing comes from or where it belongs. It is almost invisible. And what about all the other written text: the speech box, the astronomical terms? The use of three different typographies points to the visuality of written text, its notational iconicity (*Schriftbildlichkeit*) (Krämer 2003) and the relation between image and text: the visual appearance of the letters gives us hints for assigning them specific functions in the comic. Yet the layering of three different typographies on this first page of the comic appears to make script itself indeterminate. Is the scribbled phrase "the light" an image caption? Is it a performative speech act that makes the light appear? Or is itself an image of a written text (or act of writing)? This image play is reminiscent of René Magritte's many variations in his picture series *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (1928–1966), which performs the differences between image and text, words and things, while at the same time blurring the relations between them (Foucault [1973] 1983; cf. Mersch 2002a: 294–305). The play between image and text is infinite. The indeterminacy of the written "the light" reflects the mediality of the comic medium itself—and, in doing so, frames this comic as self-reflexive of its own medium. The interplay between image and text, the visibility and iconicity of script, and the schematic and abstract graphics themselves become texts instead of images. Yet it is the visual dimension of the comic that produces this indeterminacy between text and image.

Rereading *Singularity 7* with awareness of this framing calls attention to multiple iterations of such scribblings. For example, the panel that presents the superhero posse of "specials"—human beings somewhat immune to the nanite invasion—also features multiple layers of script (fig. 10.6). On a narrative level, the specials are taunting the Gosiodo and getting ready to fight them. Yet the panel does not simply tell the story and ironically reference the superhero genre. The narrative flow is disrupted yet again by a haphazardly scribbled note in square brackets on top of the scene: "standard group shot." Very similar to "the light," this note offers a descriptive commentary that does not describe the scene in the narrative world, but instead categorizes the type of image as a clichéd shot showing a group of superheroes displaying their individual superpowers as well as their coherence as a group. There are many handwritten notes throughout the comic, but these two offer explicit metalevel commentary, outside not only the narrative world but the act of narration itself. They announce that the comic is embedded in cultural practices of speculating (envisioning) origins and destinations, pasts and futures. Since the two scribbled notes appear to be in different handwriting, they may also be notes from previous readers providing their critical reading of the comic.

Figure 10.7: Nanites dissolving a human. Singularity 7 *(Templesmith [2004] 2011, #1: 22).*

The way in which the images visualize catastrophe and dissolution creates another medial reflexivity. Figure 10.7, for instance, shows the physical dissolution of a living human subject in an experiment conducted by surviving scientists in a desperate attempt to stop the nanite infections: the body not only dies but vanishes as a whole. This decomposition is visually performed as a dissolution of the very material constituents of the comic itself. The texture of the face disappears, the graphic lines dissolve, and nothing but a green mist remains—without iconic contrasts anymore, as if the image itself vanishes or becomes an almost empty green plane—a non-image which appears more as a modern abstract painting.

In the final catastrophe this aesthetic strategy is much more radicalized (Templesmith [2004] 2011, #4: 24–25). The final destruction dissolves the Gosiodo and the Singularity again by dissolving the graphic lines and then infecting the whole page spread, erasing the frames and, in the end, dissolving the medium itself—everything becomes a whitish picture plane, nothing will be left over, and we are almost at the end of the comic. It would have been even more radical if these were the very last pages of the comic, but they are not.

Visually, the comic dissolves, but the reference to biblical apocalypse here also gives this page spread a narrative significance. Specifically, the image can be read as a reference to the book of Revelation in the Bible, which details the final judgment: "And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:15, King James Version). This line does not represent the end of revelation, as the next verse envisions "a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea" (Rev. 20:16). In this context, the final words on this comic page, "this is the end of

everything," correlate with the uncertainty, the guessing in the narrative world and in the act of reading, but also with the certainties of demise and resurrection, prophecy and revelation suggested in biblical apocalypse and superhero narrative alike. In *Singularity 7*, as in the biblical book of Revelation, the end is a new beginning, even if it remains entirely uncertain here. The certainties suggested by the evidentiary character of the images, by the biblical narrative and the superhero genre, throw into relief the fundamental uncertainties radically explored in this comic. And these are the catastrophic uncertainties emerging from the idea of accidental human disappearance, with no narrative left to imagine an alternative ending, except an improbable fresh start with a crying baby that may bring life or new death. Who knows?

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