STERANKO : FROGS!

It was probably the most cinematic narrative of its kind, but, ironically, **FROGS** was created to be something else, something that defied labeling.

That was thirty years ago, yet the concept behind it is still as modern as tomorrow. Here's how it happened: In 1971, I thought it would be possible to publish a professional magazine about the comics medium and allied art forms, from animation history to zeitgeist filmmaking. Because it was my concept, my effort, and my financing, I used it unabashedly as a forum for experimental layout and typography, color and design exploration, maverick reproduction techniques, and sometimes even a personal statement. It was my Frankenstein, but since that name had already been taken, I called it **COMIXSCENE**, then **MEDIASCENE**, and finally **PREVUE**.

Why experiment?

Years before I shaped a molecule of Marvel history, I realized that comics (and their common format) were still in their infancy. The devices that evolved during the dawn of the four-color form—panels, balloons, captions—had hardly changed in more than a half century. That stagnation, in a field predicated on the fantastic, was appalling. Even as a kid, I wondered why the wild imagery inside the panels was *not* matched by the form itself.

Music made its way from shellac to vinyl, from hi-fi to stereo. Movies ranged from square to Cineramic to 3-D. But the only perceptible changes in comics were their reduction from 64 pages to 48, then to 32, and finally to ever-increasing prices, starting with a dime and escalating to a handful of dollars.

The reason was that publishers and creators were either incapable of visualizing new formats or too complacent about the old one. As both publisher and creator, I had no excuse and conjured up a storm of experiments in a magazine that was in itself an experiment.

Cut to **FROGS**. In visualizing new narrative formats, I conceived what I called a *Story in a Single Image*. One way to accomplish that goal was in the approach I took with a plate drawn in 1978 for the **PORTFOLIO OF FINE COMIC ART**. The piece was titled *The Silk Stocking Killer* and told a story—beginning, middle, end—in a single illustration, each stage defined by a different light source. I took another direction with **FROGS**: many images grouped so they could be viewed simultaneously as a *single kinetic block*.

The idea was a variation on an aspect of perception I realized during my **SHIELD** tour: that both facing pages of an open comic book are seen *in their entirety* within the viewer's peripheral vision. There are numerous implications to this aspect that make specific demands on storytelling technique, such as any visual surprise must be placed at the top left corner of the left-hand page. The reason, of course, is that placed anywhere else, it tends to draw the eye to that panel first, after which the viewer must return to the top left corner of the left-hand page—essentially reversing direction or travelling backwards through the story and compromising its dramatic intent.

As I began to visualize the concept, I realized that I could not only mitigate that problem, but use the viewer's random vision movement to my advantage: I could make the viewer *collaborate with me* in structuring the story, make him an interactive partner in the process of creation!

But I didn't realize the full potential of the concept until later. I started by defining the cardinal elements of the format:

—A simple story that could be expressed purely in images.
—Images that had a single, specific dramatic point and could be easily "read."
—Text was prohibitive because the mind cannot decipher small lines of dialogue or captions in peripheral proximities. Text could only be used iconographically.
—To help the mind comprehend and organize the images, I chose the most comfortable panel shape that can be discerned: the square.
—All panels would be same-size squares.

How many was another matter—and that solution was predicated on the size of the magazine's double page area; in this case, 17x26". I determined that eight columns of six panels would perfectly accommodate my format requirements.

The next stage was to develop a story, one that would be enhanced by the two-color process in which the publication was printed. Black and red, I felt, would be fine; besides being the color of blood, red psychologically represented anger and hate. Immediately, a story materialized about a man in a straightjacket, confined to a padded cell. His only companion was a fly—and the tale concerned their relationship and the symbiosis between reality and dreams, sanity and madness. I called it **FLIES**. What else?

Unfortunately, red was the primary color in the previous issue and could not be repeated in the one which followed. Soon after I had begun to lay it out, I shelved the story. The color of the new issue had not yet been selected, but I knew that it would be dictated by the nature of the experiment's story.

FROGS was the solution. The color was green.

During the comping process, I realized that the tale was more complex than I originally expected because I'd incorporated several flashbacks—or depending on the spectator's viewpoint, several flashforwards—to different temporal periods. To denote those timeshifts, I used a number of graphic devices, none of which (to my knowledge) had been utilized previously for that purpose in the comics format:

—radical color changes
—image matching
—lap dissolves using color images over black images

Because the frame was static throughout the narrative, I equated it with a movie or TV screen and felt that readers would do the same. For that reason, I felt a series of lap dissolves (a cinematic device used from the '30s-'50s to denote changes of place and time) would be entirely appropriate. To underscore that idea, I separated each column with a vertical line to help readers' eye movement and suggest the aspect of a film strip. Of course, the eight columns reading from top to bottom was what might be called the "director's cut," not necessarily that of the viewer.

Because the cognitive process is so fluid, it was

apparent that different viewers would have *different perceptions* of the story—and possibly as many ways to "read" it as well: top to bottom, bottom to top, right to left, left to right, four corners, spiral, ad infinitum. In other words, one basic story could be derived from a viewing process in a multitude of ways! To some, it could play out chronologically like **THE GODFATHER**. Others could assemble it backwards like **MEMENTO**. Still others might turn it inside out, like **CITIZEN KANE**.

I found that conclusion stunning. Although it is apparent that films can be edited in an almost unlimited number of ways, the decision about what statement is made is determined much more by the filmmakers than the audience. The truth is that film generally requires the *least intellectual participation* of its audience than many other mediums. In most graphic works, artists, writers, and editors present the material already structured and meant to be understood in only one way. **FROGS** was static and only marginally structured; its comprehension, however, depended entirely upon the cognitive skill, experience, and imagination of the viewer.

The concept, if not revolutionary, was evolutionary.

Check this out: I took it to the next stage by imagining each image as one of a series of slides run rapidly through a projector in a *different order* each time. The result of every possible combination is a staggering 48 to the 48th power. A mere ten images could be arranged in 3,628,800 combinations. The possible configurations of 48 images would create 12 trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion variations!

But, the technology to accomplish it would not be available for *three more decades*.

The story was a study in morbid psychology. I admitted it was not new, only the way in which it was told, and cited a number of facetious examples of how it would have been done by my contemporaries:

—As told by Stan Lee, it would be titled *Frogg, Son of Redip*. In it, the biology prof would spend a lifetime dissecting frogs in his lab. At the end, an enormous, slithery tongue zips the startled teacher out of the panel. The look on his face shows he's repented—but too late!

—As written by Gardner Fox, the professor would have destroyed the swamp's frog colony, but only after discovering they were really aliens from another galaxy, bent on conquering the earth. The prof decides never to mention it because no one would believe his story. Then, it is revealed that the entire episode is a dream.

—As an Al Feldstein EC yarn, the biologist would have taken sadistic satisfaction in capturing and dissecting the specimens. One day, he does not appear in the laboratory and his students organize a search party for him in the local swamp. They find him on a giant lily pad, carefully hacked into sections, as though for the purpose of examination. Choke! Good Lord!

—As scripted by Denny O'Neil, the old prof would wipe out the entire frog population, upsetting the balance of ecology in the swamp, thereby creating an organic plague that dooms all humanity. In the final panel, a lone tadpole is seen looking toward the stars: When will man ever learn?

The following issue stated the experiment elicited the "widest spectrum of opinions in mail response" since I began publishing. Those who approved were excited by the concept. Those who didn't termed it a failure. And many just didn't get it at all. I wrote: "It is my feeling that the success or failure of **FROGS** is unimportant. What is important is the fact that it was published as an experiment, opening the doors for more of the same, perhaps expanding the perimeter of imaginative storytelling in the minds of fans and pros alike."

Numerous magazine editors (including Denis Kitchen, Roy Thomas, and Archie Goodwin at Marvel) made offers to reprint the experiment over multiple pages in their publications. I rejected them all because none offered any improvement over my original presentation.

FROGS would wait for the technology to catch up.

It may be a surprise to some that major advancements in communication during the history of mankind can be counted on the fingers.

—The first occurred when early man attempted to convey an idea to others by drawing lines in the dirt with a stick.

— Language, either spoken or signed, would be next in the progression to communicate on a grand scale.

—As pictures became more universal, symbols evolved; then, written language was developed.

—Gutenberg's invention of movable type around 1450 led to the supremacy of the printed word (a manifestation of writing); images were created with woodcuts.

—In 1816, the photographic process was developed by Nicéphore Niépce, capturing reality in black and white.

—In 1877, Thomas Edison discovered a method to record the voice, which could be replayed almost endlessly.

—In 1891, Edison used a series of progressive photographs to create the illusion of motion, in addition to extending the capability of the written and spoken word with the telegraph and telephone.

—In the 1900s, a cheap paper pamphlet combining text and images was published and, over the next few decades, become the modern comic book.

—In the 1920s, wireless telegraphy or radio allowed users worldwide to hear events as they occurred.

—In the 1930s, sound and imagery was transmitted by electrical waves and received on a device called television.

—In the 1990s, the internet allowed participants to communicate with creators by computer and interact with them in real time.

It is disappointing that, in the past ten years, the most innovative technology in mankind's history has yet to yield much that realizes its creative potential. Reproducing movies and animation on the computer screen simply restates the old and the obvious, but does not explore new territory, does not engage new formats.

That brings us back to **FROGS**, which has been dormant for three decades, waiting for the appropriate technology. It is presented here in a multiple-page format, much like it would have been had I allowed Marvel or others to run it as a standard left-to-right narrative (and, in this case, it also lacks the use of numerous dramatic and transitional color devices). It represents raw material in much the same manner as many comics which fail to employ the strengths of their format.

What you're looking at might be called the *before* version. To experience the *after* version—which allows the viewer to reconfigure the story *an unlimited number of times* to conform to their personal vision—keep an eye on the Steranko websites and make up your own mind if three decades was worth the wait.


FROGS!
EXTERNAL VIEW OF A FROG
STERANKO


PERATING RO