Art of Comics Midterm: An Analysis of the Ella Cinders Visual Narrative

At first glance, the given Sunday strips of “Ella Cinders,” written by Bill Conselman and drawn by Charles Plumb, are just simple drawings based around the comedic mischief of Ella Cinders. However, upon further analysis, both Conselman and Plumb have incorporated a number of visual narrative techniques that give the series of comic strips a sort of complexity. Each series of “Ella Cinders portrays its own unique tale, however, this does not mean that the visuals and styles of each series is unique compared to the first or last. The given sunday strips of “Ella Cinders” contain many similarities to one another, which give the events and the diegesis of the strips the effect the need to focus on the subject. That being said, there are in fact some differences between the strips, but to merely convey the situation that Ella and her companions are in. To successfully demonstrate the similarities of the comics’ style to convey the subjects and the differences of the their style to convey the situations, we will begin with the layout and structure of the panels and transition to the actual artstyle of the comics.

Within each storyline of the “Ella Cinders” strips, a similar framing technique is held relatively throughout each tier. However, as stated before the similarities of the comics stem from their focus on the subject but differ in the varying situations. For example, the distance of castaway and the stowaway sunday strips of “Ella Cinders,” maintain a medium shot distance, due to the polyphony in the two comics. Within the castaway story arc, there are a number of
wild animals closin in on Ella unbeknownst to her. The stowaway story arc displays a number of crates that shift, which will be explained later, as the comic progresses. However, in the masquerade story arc, about half of the panels consist of a conversation between Ella and an undercover detective. During these scenes, there is very little action happening outside of the main focus, Plumb focuses in on the two subjects as they converse. It is not until later in the comic when there is action to display when Plumb expands the distance of the framing, demonstrating the earlier claim that the differences come due to in part of the situations within the panels. Any other sort of framing distance would prove to be unnecessary as there is usually very little action taking place outside of the focus, and when there is, a simple medium shot will suffice.

Similar to the framing distance, the framing angle maintains a similar level throughout each of the comics as well. However in the case of the angle there are not any stand out differences. Each panel maintains an eye-level angle relative to the subject, which in most every panel is Ella Cinders. Even in situations when Ella is elevated in the scene, the angle maintains that eye-level framing. For example, in the castaway story arc strip, panels 10 and 11, Ella climbs a tree to confront a “man” who she thought stole her clothes. Even at such a height, the framing is kept at eye-level. In addition, in panel 9, when Ella looks up a tree at the being who stole her clothes, Plumb drew the scene at a medium shot distance, still focusing on Ella, and just seemingly drew the tree at an angle, fitting it within the panel, rather than changing the angle to give the feel of actually looking up a tree. Taking this into account supports the idea that the artist maintains a constant focus on the subject only changing the style based on the outside actions or the polyphony.
Unlike the other elements, the one visual narrative element that does not seem to differ between the comics so far are the transitions between panels. Each panel in each story arc seems to transition from action-to-action. This seems to be the best fit for the “Ella Cinders” comics because they like to keep the main focus on Ella while showing her antics in rapid succession. From the castaway story arc, where each panel transitions to Ella mistaking another animal for some sort of natural formation and represents a new ironic happening as Ella explores the island. Or as another example, the masquerade story arc. Each panel features some sort of new action whether it be a character speaking, fleeing, or hiding.

Throughout each of the three comics, there are fewer than expected emanata within the panels, illustrating about two to three types of emanata. As for the first Sunday strip, seemingly the only emanata illustrate are the water droplets from dropping from the hippo’s tusk and the ripples in the water it and Ella make in panels 7 and 8 along with the motion lines as the gorilla throws the coconuts in panel 12. As for the masquerade story arc, the emanata illustrated in this comic are the motion lines and small puffs caused by Ella running away and the detective rushing after her in panels 8 and 9. The third comic, the stowaway story arc, illustrates much more emanata than the previous two. In terms of motion lines, there are very few. The most noticeable motion lines are those that follow the stars that twirl around Waite Lifter’s head after being hit with the box in panel 12, indicating his dazed state. In addition, the boy Blackie has stars shooting from his head followed by motion lines as well in panel 5, which also indicates a dazed state. In panel 10, it seems at first that the lines represent motion lines, but in actuality, they represent symbols indicating sound effects coming from the boxes as they tumble to the ground.
Though the previous visual narrative elements indicate the artist’s distinctions based on situation fairly well, the comics’ layout supports this claim above all else. The first two comic strips, the castaway and the masquerade story arcs, have a very monotonous panel layout, though the last strip varies greatly in comparison to the others. The castaway and the masquerade seem to have simple story telling layouts with well spaced gutters, but the panels in the stowaway have a very aberrant organization. However, this complex story layout supports the sense of complexity, mentioned earlier, within the comics. The purpose of this layout serves to convey the feeling of being on a ship being pounded by crashing waves. The panels were not just dropped onto paper and lazily organized, but were detailed in a way that provides motion as the reader moves his/her eyes across the tiers as if the characters were bobbing up and down like they were actually out on the hectic waters.

In these “Ella Cinders” strips, the authors like to focus directly on Ella in each panel. However, when there are more characters on screen there artist used a different cartooning style to indicate the type of character they were, ie whether they are a main character, background character, or supporting character. For example, in the first comic, the castaway, Ella is drawn as a very cartoony character, ranging more on the “representational edge” near the “meaning side,” but all of the animals and scenery in the background are drawn with a very realistic style. Ella’s character lacks really any features other than her mouth, nose, and eyes, which are able to be identified as such. This style goes for Blackie and Waite Lifter in the stowaway story arc as well. In the second comic, the masquerade, every other character within the panels except for Ella are drawn to look more realistic, and given Ella’s cartoony look makes her unique in comparison.
This allows Plumb and Conselman to keep their original style of focusing on the main character or subject throughout the comics.

Based on the observed visual narrative style of Plumb and Conselman, it is easy to note that the two authors like to keep a very distinct style in their “Ella Cinders” comics, by maintaining certain visual narrative elements. Their focus in their comics is Ella Cinders which aligns with the subject of the comic based on its title “Ella Cinders.” However, Plumb and Conselman are able to adjust their comics if there is more than one important character or a larger amount of actions happening at the same time or a larger polyphony. Plumb and Conselman achieve this through slightly changing a number of the elements they used, such as the framing distance or illustrating their characters with more cartoony features so they stand out from all the other characters within the panels, whom have more realistic features.