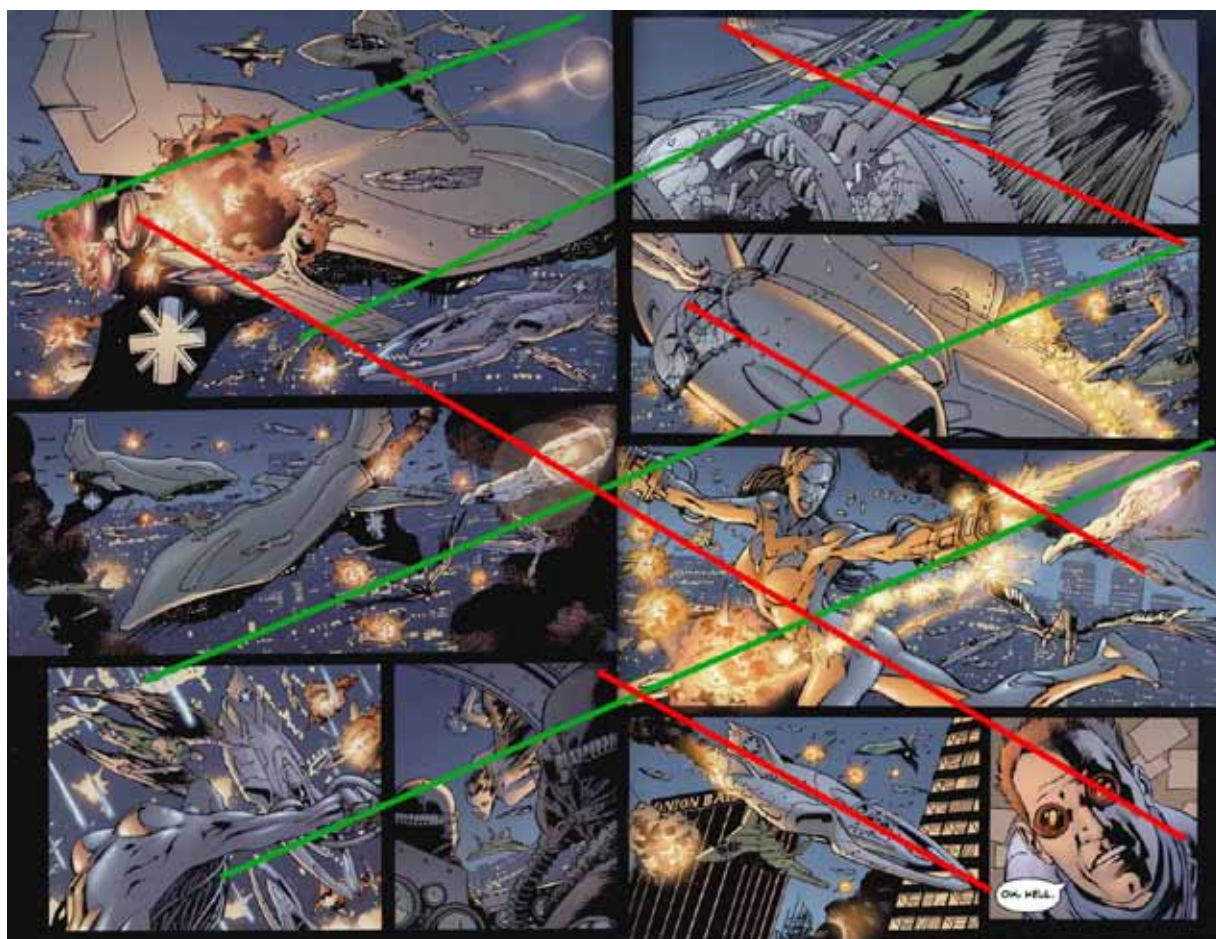


Disrupting the flow: *The Authority*

by Nicolas Labarre

The first twelve issues of *The Authority*, a super-hero series written by Warren Ellis, penciled by Bryan Hitch, with inks by Paul Neary and colors by Laura DePuy (now Laura Martin) were published by DC/WildStorm in 1999-2000, and are widely credited for influencing the aesthetic of super-hero comics in the following decade. In this two-page sequence, members of the Authority are fighting ships from an alternate dimension over Los Angeles. This is one of the numerous extended battle scenes for which the series is famous, and some of its salient characteristics are on display here: black margin, bleeding panels (1 and 7), panels occupying the width of the page (the so called “widescreen” style), the absence of sound effects, captions and speed lines.



Ellis, W., Hitch, B., Neary, P, and DePuy L. (1999) *The Authority* v.1 n°6, “Shiftships” (La Jolla: DC/Wildstorm, 8-9) [Image annotated by the author]

The apparent simplicity of the sequence is deceiving. Following the canonical reading order, the reader is confronted with apparent spatial contradictions. In panel 2, *Apollo* is still flying left to right, yet the damaged ship in the background seems to have reversed its direction. The same phenomenon occurs between panel 5 and panel 6: the ship in the background maintains its orientation, while the action in the foreground (*Swift*'s tearing apart a cockpit) is reversed. Besides, the abstract cityscape cannot be used as visual reference, and all the elements in the frame can be assumed to be moving. In other words, the sequence does not construct a coherent *diegetic* space. Instead it relies on systematic graphical panel-to-panel matches, which conceal these impossible spatial relationships: in each case, an element in the background is moved to the foreground (*Apollo* in panel 1-2, the *Engineer* in 2-3, *the ship* in 3-4, *Swift* in 4-5, *the ship* in 5-6, the *Engineer* in 6-7, the ship in 7-8). The last two panels share no graphical elements and signal a break in this system. Buildings also appear, in panel 8, to re-anchor the scene within and understandable space. This restored sense of space allows the reader to perceive the ship as being about to crash on *the Doctor*. Furthermore, at this point, *diegetic* space coincides with the topography of the comic page, as the bottom of the page coincides with the lowest point in the *diegetic* space.

In addition to their sequential meaning, the two pages must therefore be read as a surface, to use Charles Hatfield's taxonomy (2005:48). While the row of panels are perfectly horizontal, the page is structured along two sets of parallel diagonal lines: the heroes are placed on a series of ascending lines (in green) and the foes mostly aligned with a downward diagonal (in red, especially in the second page). This may seem counterintuitive, as the heroes' trajectory runs counter to the reading order of the page, yet this is not the only device aiming to slow down reading instead of facilitating it.

These alignments also suggest ways to read the sequence across the fold, instead of going from top to bottom of each page. The most striking example is the continuity between the trajectory and position of *Apollo* in panel 2 and 7, two panels that are de facto connected by the absence of margin in both cases. The alignment between the ship in the bottom right corner of the first panel and the cockpit in the 5th panel obeys the same logic, which makes possible a tabular rather than linear reading of these two pages (Hatfield, 2005: 48). This is not a decorative strategy, though, in that these possible connections recreate to some extent the disorientation of a three-dimensional battle within the page. By inviting the reader to explore alternate sequences, it also expands reading time to the point where it is disconnected from the ostensible brevity of the action depicted.

The last strategy used in this regard is the overabundance of potentially relevant elements, especially at the moment where classical narration is about to be restored. The overabundances of details within single panels make it difficult to account for them all: however none of these background elements cannot be overlooked, since one of them is bound to become the focus of the action in the following panel. This is especially remarkable in the 7th panel, as no less than nine alien ships, three jet fighters, three superheroes and a series of explosions compete for the reader's attention. The

superimposition of the flashes of Engineer's weapon and the explosions caused by Apollo make it even more difficult to read properly.

None of the devices (composition emphasizing surface over sequence, tabular reading, panel overload) are new, but their presence counteracts the deliberate simplification of the comic grammar at work in *The Authority*. Only in the last two panels does an immediately legible sequence take place, concluding the sequence, with the panel's composition now paralleling the reading order. The Doctor's face is aligned with the crashing ship, and with the wing of the huge ship of the first panel. His chin even points toward the bottom right corner of the page, where the reading ends. The panel also contains the only speech balloon of the sequence, standing out in white, which as noted by Thierry Groensteen (1999:42), becomes remarkable thanks to the black margin, and the panel eschews the blue dominant of the rest of the sequence. The enlarged margin around the panel and its perfectly square shape reinforce its isolation, to ultimately draw the reader's attention away from these two-pages, to restore the narrative order.

What this scene suggests is that the aesthetic of *The Authority* requires formal innovations to allow for an effective reading, in particular to control reading speed and the perception of time in wordless action sequences. The voluntary renouncement to some aspect of the comics grammar leads to formal innovation that cannot but recall other examples of constrained narratives, such as those developed by the *Oubapo* (Beaty, 2007: 77-80).

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