

Graphic Novels: Meaning, Form, and Distinction

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Abstract

Graphic novels and comic books are frequently assumed to be interchangeable, yet they differ in important ways in terms of structure, purpose, and presentation. While both use sequential art to tell stories, graphic novels typically offer a more extended, cohesive narrative, often resembling the depth and complexity of traditional novels. In contrast, comic books are usually shorter, serialized, and episodic in nature. This article explores the defining characteristics of graphic novels and examines how they diverge from comic books in storytelling approach, thematic scope, and publication format, highlighting why the distinction between the two forms is significant.

Keywords: Comics, Graphic Novels, Sequence

Graphic Novels convey a powerful message or tells a story through a subtle blend of art and narrative. As a literary genre they evade a clear cut definition. What is a Graphic Novel? Is it the same as comic books? Is it a special type of comics? It is often unclear as to what is actually meant by the label "Graphic Novel". The effective way of defining graphic novel would be to

regard it as not just a genre but also a medium. Graphic novel as a medium is part of other, more encompassing cultural fields and practices namely, graphic literature and visual storytelling. Within the domain of graphic literature, the basic categories are graphic novels, newspaper political cartooning and comic books. Graphic novel is a storytelling medium; political cartoons can also tell stories but that is not their primary aim. There are also some salient features that distinguish graphic novels from comic books. Both comics and graphic novels tell stories but a whole range of features distinguish them. Dale Jacobs in his discussion of multimodal literacy explains the concept of Graphic Novel as, “The ability to create meaning with and from texts that operate in print form and in some combination of visual, audio, and spatial forms as well” (181).

Quite often graphic novels are branded as comic books and are not given the importance and seriousness they deserve. But graphic novel as a medium has certain key features that set it apart from a comic book. These features can be situated at four levels: Form, Content, Publication format, Production and Distribution aspects. Amy Devitt holds the view that, “Based on our identification of genre, we make assumptions not only about the form, but also the text’s purposes, its subject matter, its writer, and its expected reader” (575).

At the level of *Form*, difference between graphic novel and comic books are not always clear cut as shown by the major works that first introduced the notion of graphic novel, such as Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (four issues comic version in 1986) or Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’s *Watchmen*, the dystopian reinterpretation of superheroes comics (twelve-issues comic book version in 1986 and 1987). These commercially successful works were first published as comics and then were republished as graphic novels. Graphic novelists try to give an individual twist to their work regarding the drawing style but here it is important to emphasize two more encompassing dimensions of form: the page layout and narrative. The graphic novel differs from comics in terms of “grid” and “sequentiality”. Comic books have

always followed the same fundamental structure. Their images are juxtaposed in a grid, which intertwines horizontally and vertically organized images that are supposed to be read in a sequential order.

Comics are a way of storytelling based on the sequential decoding of juxtaposed images. Graphic novels follow these rules perfectly. They can use the drawing style of the “typical” superhero comics (*Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen*), they can use the layout rules that the comic industry has been using for decades and they can also use the narrative dimension of juxtapose images. But graphic novel does explore each of these rules and tries to break the limits imposed on it. Graphic novels try to emphasize more individual styles. Graphic novelists crave for a “recognizable style” and this does not mean a decorated version of the traditional comic style. Certain graphic novelists even pursue an ugly or clumsy style for the achievement of personality and street credibility. The graphic novel tries to turn away from the conventions that characterized the comics field in the late 1960s and 1970s. Unusual layout techniques were employed by Will Eisner, one of the founding fathers of the graphic novel, who worked with unframed panels creating a more fluid dialogue between the various images on the page. Graphic novels can also be innovative at the level of narrative. Unlike a comic book where the story tells itself without any direct intervention from the narrator, a narrator is very much present, both verbally and visually, in the graphic novel.

Content is the second feature that distinguishes graphic novel form comic book. The graphic novel has strived hard to distinguish itself from comics, especially from superhero comics. Content matter is “adult”, not in the sense of pornographic, but in the sense of “serious” and too sophisticated for a juvenile audience. Graphic novel is inclined toward realism (contrary to the superheroes comics) and is not restricted to fiction. Many graphic novels are autobiographical or semi-autobiographical. The three best-known graphic novels, which do not belong to the dystopian superheroes genre, have an autobiographical foundation. Art

Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986,1991), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000), and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) are all personal memoirs. Spiegelman's story is about himself as much as it is about his parents surviving the holocaust; Bechdel's account has a double protagonist, *Fun Home* is about the coming out of both daughter and father; and the hero of *Persepolis* is not only Marjane Satrapi but also the whole generation of Iranians exposed to the violence of Islamic Revolution. Frank Miller in an interview made the remark: "In the *Dark Knight* series, there is a much more direct use of my real life experiences in New York, particularly my experiences with crime" (Groth and Fiore 63). Such is the importance of autobiography as a theme in the graphic novel. "It is arguably the ability of the graphic novel to work on the borderlines of first-person narrative, history from below, and oral history, as well as to introduce fiction with historical meaning and vice versa , that makes it so fascinating and important a body of work" (Baetens and Frey 12).

At the level of *publication format*, graphic novel has a strong preference for the book format and it tends to avoid serialization. Graphic novel tends to adopt a format that is similar to that of the traditional novel (in size, cover, pages etc) and that which would enable it to easily distinguish from the cheap comic books, sold in roadside stands etc. The graphic novel prefers a one shot formula. The one shot formula alleviates the graphic novel from the commercial demands of the cultural industry which converts an idea or character to an endlessly repeated series. The refusal of serialization is indicative of its craving for prestige and is aimed at cutting through all the possible ties to the trivial connotations of comic books. However, the combination of the affinity towards book format and a refusal of serialization is very hard to put into practice. Serialization (episodic publishing) makes possible the pre-publication of parts of a work in progress, enables the graphic novelist to interact with the culture of the day and also catalyses commercial success. The British artist Charlie Adlard's works portrays this ambiguity. Adlard has published two highly prestigious one shot graphic novels, *White Death* (2002) and *Playing the Game* (1995). But Adlard is now popular for his hugely successful horror series *The Walking*

Dead, a serialized work where philosophical questions about society are implicitly explored and it has been converted into a popular television series and a video game.

With regard to production and distribution independent publishing has been crucial to the rise of graphic novel. The production and distribution of graphic novels depended on the efforts of small independent publishers and the specialty shops which offered a mix of comic books, gadgets and graphic novels. The publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus I* by Pantheon (independent publisher) and the launching of more serious works by the comics publisher DC was crucial. The industrial impact of Pantheon was important to the success of graphic novel. "The degree of creative freedom given by Pantheon to artists such as Spiegelman or fiercely independent artists such as Chris Ware is light years away from what is often said about the cultural industries' intellectual and ideological disposition for the mutilation of creativity" (17). Independent publishers that dominate today's graphic novel market like Seattle-based Fantagraphics and Montreal-based Drawn and Quarterly owe something to the commercial impact of Pantheon, Penguin, Faber and Faber etc.

The foundation for the graphic novel was laid by the *Underground Comix* during the 1960's in the United States. It was during the mid 1960s that the university campuses (Michigan State, University of California etc) and some radical districts of major urban spaces (Haight-Ashbury and Village in New York) produced graphic narratives aimed at adults, with little or no connection to superheroes and were printed and circulated using off-set presses that enabled self-publishing. Robert Crumb, Gilbert Shelton, Kim Deitch & Jaxon and Justin Green were its main proponents. Among them, Robert Crumb was a pioneer in this field his important work being *Zap Comix*. They produced amusing, sexually explicit and satirical comic strips in self-produced magazines. Their work was self-conscious, quasi-autobiographical and fully irreverent. They did not restrain from using any topic for their endeavour. For them, no topic was taboo. The underground comix altered the pre-existing notions of what comics should achieve. With regard

to both style and subject they influenced the breakthrough of graphic novel in the later years of 1980s.

Charles Hatfield in his study *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* opined that the underground artists addressed topics that would later become the subjects of graphic novels particularly the autobiographic and introspective strips about the artist's life and outlook. He also opined that, "the comix created a market of production and consumption outside of mainstream superhero comics" (Hatfield 31). The underground artists showed that the artists could achieve success without being entangled in the formal comics industry. They also demonstrated that comics need not be always serialized plots published in a daily or weekly newspaper. Comix prepared artists, publishers and readers for graphic narratives to be available in any mode, including the longer form of the one shot "novel". The collapse of the underground comix in the mid 1970s, which was triggered by the United States Supreme Court verdict of 1973 that the definition of obscenity should be left to the local authorities and the Vietnam War, contributed to rise of the graphic novel as much as its emergence. The underground comix invented formats and contents for the graphic novels and their slow death presented a cultural-economic gap to be filled. The majority of the graphic novelists, including Art Spiegelman and Will Eisner, learned their art through the underground comix. More than anything, the comix taught the artists to practice, draw, redraw, design, narrate and publish.

The term "graphic novel" gained popularity with the publication of Will Eisner's *A Contract with God: A Graphic Novel* (1978). Eisner was clearly under the influence of the underground artists but he deliberately used the term "graphic novel" to distinguish his work from other forms of comic publication. Eisner had previously published superhero style works but on discovering the underground approach he thought of making comics for adult readers and this resulted in the publishing of *A Contract with God*. Eisner portrayed in it the struggles faced by the Jewish community in New York during the Depression. Eisner saw his work as a radical

innovation. Though being under the influence of the underground comix, Eisner organized his theme into a non-satirical and explicitly ethnically positioned narrative with a historical setting. Eisner clearly saw his work as something completely different from comix. The year 1986 saw the production of the “big three” graphic novels which gave huge impetus to its development and its acceptance as a medium for literary and visual creativity and storytelling. The “big three” are Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon’s *Watchmen*, Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. These gentlemen dealt with themes that were far from superhero style and unfitting for a juvenile audience. In *Maus* Spiegelman portrayed his parents’ holocaust experience particularly his father’s. Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* and Moore and Gibbon’s *Watchmen* dealt with the themes and images that riddled contemporary United States Cold War politics and society.

The literary status of a graphic novel is related to the specific way it tells a story not only by the means of words but also by the means of images. In other words, graphic novel is a way of visual storytelling and several of its characteristics make it particularly literary i.e. visual literature. Quite often the visual dimension of the graphic novel is reduced to a mere illustrative role.

The graphic artist is given no more credit than just adding images to texts (speech balloons and narrative captions). The mechanical visual transposition of a completely finished script, which cannot be modified by the graphic artist, is seen as a crippling practice that prevents the graphic novel from being a specimen of real literature. But this does not mean that a good literary visual storytelling refuses a screenplay. Martin Vaughn- James’ experimental graphic novel *The Cage* stands proof to this fact. *The Cage* was first published in English and, after its translation, was fully incorporated into the French literary system. Vaughn- James’ work is monumental in the history of graphic novel both for the story it tells and for the way it tells the story. *The Cage* is a lengthy narrative of about two hundred pages without any human characters, its protagonists

being places and objects that continuously morph into each other, with no apparent plot or previous script. “The fact that each page of this graphic novel contains only one drawing and one short caption insists that the reader’s eye is educated as he or she assimilates progressively the idiosyncratic laws, constraints, exceptions, and organic growth of Vaughn-James’s visual universe”(Baetens, *Graphic Novel* 79). Still, *The Cage* does not suggest that a good visual storytelling should be wordless. In literary graphic novels words and images intermingle, creating an autonomy for the image overall.

The graphic novels attain a more literary status through the structural independence of its images. The images are not only the links of a narrative chain but also autonomous items. The narrative and non- narrative part of the images contribute equally to the overall storytelling. Images cannot speak for itself if it is not clearly involved in the narrative. The difficulty of the verbal paraphrasing (narrative) is reduced by the visual qualities (non-narrative) of the image. Baetens has emphatically pointed out “thus it is absurd to oppose the narrative and the non-narrative. Each picture tells a story, yet not all aspects or elements of a picture do so, and a literary graphic novel attempts to maintain a healthy tension between these two forces” (80). Nevertheless, a good visual storytelling must exploit the narrative possibilities of the images themselves. The images, not independent from the verbal and the textual elements, should play its own creative role. The images should contribute to the making of the story. The readers should understand the story from the images itself. The images should co-create the story by exploiting the narrative possibilities of montage and sequentiality. The transition from one panel to another should not be a passive indicator of the progression of the story. The literariness of a graphic novel does not only depend on textuality and verbality but also on the specific use of visual storytelling devices.

The graphic novel challenges the traditional idea of literature and also forces the readers to adapt methodological and theoretical tools to study literature. The broadening of the novelistic

field at present includes works that are wordless and they question the understanding of notions such as text, novel and literature. The blurring of the boundaries between the world of comics and the world of literature is an incentive to the regime of postmodernism. Such blurring of boundaries is typical of postmodernism's global tendency towards "de-differentiation". The graphic novel helps to redefine certain general tools and concepts in the literary field. For example, the concept of the narrator or certain types of narrator. The case of the narrator can be explained by studying autobiography in graphic novel. The most striking feature of autobiography in graphic novel is the tension between the style of the drawings (image) and that of the text (word). There is no divergence at content level between word and image but there is no guarantee that these two aspects would converge at the level of the 'enunciation' (the production of both word and image). As explained by Philip Marrison the enunciation in a graphic novel is split into two conflicting registers: the verbal and the visual (which he calls 'graphiation') (41).

In autobiographic graphic novel not only is the partial or complete identity of author, narrator and character important but also the convergence or divergence of words and images. Combined with the structural practices in comics, of using space to represent time and the relaying of emotions and other affective states of the mind through gestures and other formal attributes, graphic narratives' specific architecture allows the artists to impart their subjective experiences of trauma with a considerable degree of veracity. Not only do these narratives promote reader participation but the power of visual images deployed in the narratives also serve to invoke an ethical and moral responsiveness in the readers regarding the suffering of others. The emergence of web comics and graphic narratives in digital blogs stands as an evidence to this socio-cultural role of comics as they open a common platform for the readers to comment and participate in the evolution of multiple texts from the main narrative. Even the graphic narratives produced in print format reinforce this ethical function by the McCloudian universality and reader identification with cartoony images. In other words, readers (virtual and real)

recognizes the specific demands of comics in producing a “closure” both to the narrative as well as the fragmented bits of traumatic memory unfolded through the blend of words and images.

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