

Thinking Inside The Box: Future Of Sequential Interplay Of Art And Words

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Abstract

Graphic Novels are hard to be defined as a mere sequential art. Evolved from comics, they are narratives comprising of fiction and nonfiction covering myriad genres, interdependent on words and images. Over the past 30 years, this narrative medium has transcended from being called "Alternative Comix" to permeate into contemporary mainstream literature, progressing to even make it into the long list of the Man Booker prize. This paper attempts to trace the promising future of the Graphic Novels by exploring its efficiency to illustrate complex concepts of urban life, societal stigmas, historical events, biographical/autobiographical elements and traumatic experiences across genres, across cultural and geographical borders beyond words.

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Graphic Novels are hard to be defined as a mere sequential art. Evolved from comics, they are narratives comprising of fiction and nonfiction covering myriad genres. Graphic novels may recently be a new platform in trend, but they are all about telling stories integrated with images and words that almost look different from traditional novels, poetry, plays, but the stories they tell have the same heart.

Graphic novel can include a wide variety of genres and is portrayed by melding image and word forces, where Images are not illustrations that simply repeat or amplify text, but offer multiple shades of meaning in places where the words do not seem to be present and vice versa.

The basic framework of graphic narratives consists of frames and gutters that enable to appreciate creative visualization that offers new horizons for readers to imagine from the story. Even though the images are static in nature, the graphic narratives succeed in enticing the readers to envision the panel's virtual image movements.

The main components of a graphic novel are the setting, characters, action, emotion and point of view. The setting and characters of the graphic narrative closely mimic majority of conventional literature. Action plays a pivotal role contributing visual flavour to the plotline. Action is executed through time, motion and sounds. "Each panel of a comic portrays a single moment in time. Between those frozen moments between the panels closure allows the reader's mind to fill in the intervening moments, thus creating the illusion of time and motion". [6] The time freezes in a specific panel whilst another panel has not yet experienced the action to fill the timeframe. Sounds are depicted through word balloons and sound effects. Word balloons use variety of symbols, font sizes to capture the live emotions in the narrative. Both visuals and words bring out the emotions and different points of view of narration.

Graphic novels had its humble beginnings in the 1800s through comic strips, then called as the funny pages that garnered the attention of newspapers which started adding the funny pages to its columns. This collection later developed into earliest comics.

Comics started as a single frame narrative collection which in turn evolved into multiple frames. "Comics are used as a way to tell a story with recognizable reproductions of human conduct". [4] It was during the world war era when people were looking for an escape from reality that the comic book industry boomed. Writers and illustrators combined forces with technology to churn out tales of superheroes reacting to the issues of the world.

Will Eisner took this form of comic book form which had concentrated only on humour and adventure farther and created the first Graphic novel, *A Contract with God* (1978). Over the past 30 years, this narrative medium has transcended from being called “Alternative Comix” to permeate into contemporary mainstream literature, progressing to even make it into the long list of the Man Booker prize. This paper aims to trace the promising future of the Graphic Novels by exploring its efficiency to illustrate complex concepts of urban life, societal stigmas, historical events, biographical/autobiographical elements and traumatic experiences across genres, across cultural and geographical borders beyond words.

Graphic narrative is progressively used as a genre in intricate and efficient ways to embody crimes against humanity. In Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* (1993), the reader follows Joe Sacco's character as he enters a war torn country and meets different people directly affected by war and atrocity. Sacco fills the visual narrative with comprehensive descriptions of daily life in Palestine, often bordering on the worldly, while documenting the countless traumatic experiences of average Palestinians in the Israeli occupied territories. Sacco takes on the role of a Westerner who gives the reader an illustrated report of the war torn country making excellent use of the visual narratives. Through this narrative medium Sacco transcends from being a journalist to a historian archiving the trauma and the moments of personal pain of the masses. He doesn’t take on the role of an authoritative author/tourist but rather guides us into horrors faced by the people of Palestine by featuring a translator who introduces the Palestinians to Sacco thereby subsuming himself as a major character and leading us into the stories. He humanises his characters by portraying their mundane lives in spite of being victims of endless horrifying abuse. The narrative as such has no climax and Sacco doesn’t give his readers any closure through which he reflects the never ending cycle of abuse the people go through every day.

Sacco makes use of images intimately, sometimes dedicating an entire page to depict the humiliation and suffering faced by the people in their day to day life. The drawings/images play a vital role for the readers as they are sometimes drawn in such a way that they look in the eye of the reader demanding justice for personal tragedies. This technique is employed by Sacco throughout the novel so as to impact the readers of the residual tension that cannot be solved through publications and yet it also recognises the impact that it has on the readership which is the only effective tool Sacco holds.

In the Indian scenario, what started as retelling mythological stories in illustrated books have now shifted to focussing on issues of the contemporary India. Apurva’s *Legends of Halahala* (2012) is a contemporary commentary which implements different drawing styles to bring out qualities of love, lust, absurd, envy and glory. His artwork is hand drawn and rarely uses words to convey the messages. Most of the novel is a ‘silent’ novel which relies heavily on the art and fuses very little words to bring out five different perspectives on love. The fictitious dystopic land reflects the universe we live in, mocks our tendencies to glorify superheroes, and uses dark shades of illustrations to bring out the futility of relationships interspersed with clever advertisements and tabloids about his book within his book.

According to novelist Art Spiegelman, young comic book readers may be able to understand 60-70% of a story by just using images alone [6]. The visuals which accompany the text may look less daunting for struggling young readers. Among the most acknowledged acclaim for graphic novels is that many of them are actually about ethnic diversity issues and different world viewpoints. Its reach to wider audience enables access to serious commentary about contemporary social issues.

One such graphic novel is Nick Drnaso’s *Sabrina* (2018) which got nominated for Man Booker Prize this year. It is a graphic novel set in the contemporary times, focussing on one man coping with the disappearance of his girlfriend. The graphic novel explores the themes of depression, anxiety, mistrust, combating fake news and online conspiracy theorists. The interesting part to note here is Drnaso’s use of real world conspiracy theories for the disappearance which makes the novel a chilling and anxious experience for the readers. The drawings are banal, dots for eyes and bare lines for mouth, it depicts the domesticity of an ordinary person ‘existing’ everyday. There are pages wordless, more panels which in its

own pace describes everyday activity which is a technique skilfully employed by Drnaso to depict the time taken for the particular activity. For example, while the main characters prepare to go to bed, it is depicted in six panels one next to another which makes the reader go through it at a slow pace to depict the time taken to do the same in the real world. The characters in the narrative are not sensational. In fact it's their subversion that highlights the novel. The grief and emotional breakdowns are heard through deafening silences and pauses in the panel.

Instead of utilizing the panels and gutter to speed up the movements, Drnaso cleverly uses it to pace the novel to give a real world notion which in turn makes it into an almost wordless novel. The tone is drab and deliberate which is what makes it out of the ordinary. Drnaso's graphic novel has questioned the traditional role of a graphic narrative as it distorts the warps the difference between a conventional novel and a graphic novel.

Graphic novels are free to explore the uncertain and ambiguous giving rise to a unique literary genre. Graphic novels endorse critical thinking through increasing discourse by providing thought provoking topics. This narrative medium thus demonstrates that it is capable of a literary review and criticisms like its other forms in literature. It is for this reason that McCloud feels it is a mistake to think of comics as merely a hybrid of graphic arts and prose fiction. As he puts it, "What happens between these panels is a kind of magic only comics can create." [6]

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