Pictures that Speak: A Compendious Study of the Poly-Semiotic Visual Language of Comics

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ABSTRACT

Previously dismissed as an escapist reading matter, comics have evolved from a temporary novelty to a very dominant visual form of modern popular culture worldwide. They have later on come to be treated as serious literature that reveals a lot about the culture and other aspects related to it. Comics have a language of their own- the language of visual art. The paper makes an effort to study it as a separate and distinguishable genre, providing an illuminating discussion on the relationship between words and pictures.

Keywords: comics, visual language, layout, image-text relation, representation, format.

Comics are a medium having a tremendous mass appeal with its easy accessibility and intrinsic simplicity. The academic restraints that insisted that the old canon should continue to be the sole area of interest and research in the humanities are no longer extant. Consequentially the genre shed the cultural disdain attached to it and made its mark as an expressive new artistic form. Of late comics have drawn a lot of intellectual responses, all pointing to their value and importance as a potent form of popular culture spanning social, ethnic and generational divides.

Comics were a hugely popular adult medium through the latter half of the last century before the advent of the technological revolution. They have grown over the years and the influence has been all-encompassing and affecting every single facet of life. Popular comics were discovered in the late 19th and early 20th century in the US, to compete with other mass media published on a daily basis. The term 'comics', a 19th-century coinage, is a misnomer and misguides one into collating it alongside caricature, and cartoon which is founded on humour, and perceived by many as the opposite of the grand and the sublime. It is perhaps one of the oldest forms of communication and the word 'comics' has its origin in the Greek word '*Comus*' the name of the God of the revels. (Murray, 2008, p.7).

Sequential graphic images have existed long before written language. The origin of comicart can be traced to the sequential pictorial narratives of the ancients like the Egyptian hieroglyphics, Aztec, Greek, Persian and Roman manuscripts etc. (Williams, 2011). They go as far back as civilizations such as ancient Egypt, spanning the centuries through the birth of America and its evolution into classic newspaper funnies and graphic novels. Even before the 1900s, pictures had been used for political propaganda and satirical criticism. It is from these rudimentary beginnings that comics evolved and came to appeal to diverse cultures all over the world.

Having transcended time and distance, comics

have come a long way evolving constantly over the period of time and serving as a potent medium for the dissemination of radical voices and ideas. As comic books are a form of narrative fiction, they have a plot, characters, setting, dialogues and symbolism. They also make liberal use of traditional literary devices like satire and irony in addition to idioms, puns and slang to relate to the everyday individual. But what sets the genre apart from other literary forms is the use of text boxes and dialogue balloons along with pictures for narration. The research article titled "Pictures That Speak: A Compendious Study of the Poly-semiotic Visual Language of Comics" is an exploration of the genre of comics focusing on its unique format, and the distinctive syntax that make it an instrument for entertainment, education and even acculturation. The study centres on a few popular American, European and Indian titles that demonstrate the structural uniqueness and richness of this underrated medium.

Comics are an unusual kind of literature and cannot be subsumed into prevailing models. The American comic format is the most accepted one with 32 pages divided into sequential panels, carrying apart from visual images, speech and thought balloons, and narrative text. Structurally the Indian comics adapted the same model and the comic magazine *Chandamama,* published in more than 5 languages since 1947, is the first attempt at this genre in India (McLain, 2009, p.2). The *Delhi Sketchbook* (The Indian Punch) of the 1850s with its single panelled cartoons may be construed as the earliest attempts in India at graphic narration (Dastidar, 2019). But the true change came in mid-60 when a national newspaper publication house, The Times of India, launched the *Indrajal Comics.* This was the first serious effort to develop comic culture as these were well within the reach of the masses and available at newsstands everywhere. It was the editor Anant Pai of the India Book House who had first put forth the idea of bringing out comics with the first half, about

16 pages carrying Phantom tales and the second half of 12 pages devoted to general knowledge local tales featuring Indian characters. It was from issue #29, that Indrajal adopted the conventional

32-page format. In 1967, Pai launched the series, *Amar Chitra Katha*, with the objective of transmitting the great stories of historical figures and those in the religious texts to the children(Kasbekar, 2006, p.95). Most national production of comics continued to follow American models that played with fantasies and dealt with readers' desires. *Tinkle*, the first Indian comic magazine was launched at the beginning of the 1980s by India Book House. It expanded on the educational themes developed by *Amar Chitra Katha*, to include topics on science, contemporary culture etc. (Rao, 2001, p.42). The year 2006 saw the birth of a new company Virgin Comics formed as a result of the partnership between Richard Branson of the Virgin group, and India's Gotham Comics. Though the Virgin Comics creative team was inspired by the more mature western comics available in India, especially in adopting the typical 32-page full-colour format and the western style of comic storytelling and art, they also attempted to create new lines of comics rooted in Indian mythology and Indian history (Mathur, 2010, p.175).

The popularly accepted form of the genre is characterized by its distinctive layout that consists of a series or sequence of pictures. As an art form, comics constitute a fertile

combination of words and images. "Comics is a useful term for designating the phenomenon of juxtaposing images in a sequence" (Duncan and Smith, 2009, p.3). The verbal and the visual elements work in unison to contribute to the end, which is that of creating one unified experience of the total artwork. It is this integration of art and literature that makes the medium worthy of academic interest. No wonder Zizek defined them as, "the epitome of postmodern art" achieving a more precise culmination of ideas and forms than other recognized artistic and literary genres (Bernard and Carter, 2004, para.19). In *Understanding Comics* Scott McCloud writes:

> Comic books are considered a visual piece of art in sequence …juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an authentic response in the viewer (1993, p.9).

It is true that comics, with their style of supporting words with pictures, make for easier reading than literary texts. Unlike fiction, comics employ a technique of narration in which, the story progresses mainly through action and dialogue with lesser interventions in the form of descriptions or comments. It makes fewer demands on the reader's cognitive skills and power of comprehension.

Comics' theory is not a field devoid of any history of research. Of late, the semiotics theories have come to be employed in the analysis and study of comics, providing a solid foundation for academic enquiry into comics. Semiology and structuralism dominated early comic research. The complex semiotic process embodied in comic art needs to be analyzed to unravel the relationbetween word and image. "A philosopher may be tempted to draw an analogy

with Descartes' account of the unity of mind and body....The unity in comics of image and text is, ideally, as close a bond as this unity of body and soul bound together to form a person"(Carrier, 2000, p.73).

Comics are a highly challenging form by virtue of their quality that is "at once seductively visual and radically fragmented" (Hatfield, 2005, Introduction p. xiii). The genre also has grammar and a vocabulary distinctive to itself. This is how Roger Sabin has attempted the difficult task of defining comic books, "The fundamental ingredient of a comic is the 'comic strip'...A 'comic' *per se* is a publication in booklet, tabloid, magazine or book form that includes as a major feature the presence of one or more strips". "...the intricate system of comics signs does more than visualize landscape and mindscape; it stimulates, emulates, actualizes soundscape through the functioning of affective assemblages" (1993, p. 5).

Comics blur the distinction between literature and visual arts. The format is of great importance for the aesthetics and the content of comics. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* is a monumental work that has offered so many formalist insights about comics and their malleability and endless potential. In this influential book McCloud "describes the formal apparatus in comics and presents a grammar of comics based on six basic elements: drawing style, spacing of panels (closure), time, gestures, image-text relations and use of colour" (1993, p.13). "Hunig (1974) for example, described a comic sequence as a totality that can be divided into

'syntactemes' (panels/sentences), visual objects(characters/persons, i.e. the ballon 'words' of the comics) and visual minimal units

(e.g. mouth and eyes of characters)....Koch ... analyzed the minimal differentiating units in comics- 'representemes'-such as lines and shadows and Kloepfer (1977) and Oommen (1975) ...analyzed systems of phonemes and paradigms. This type of research is representative of the early semiology of images, and the endeavour to build a 'grammar' of comics" (p.13). Roman Gubern's study on the language employed in comics introduces the *iconeme* to represent the minimal graphic element like a short curved line for an eye or a mouth (Piepoli, 2011, p. 459).
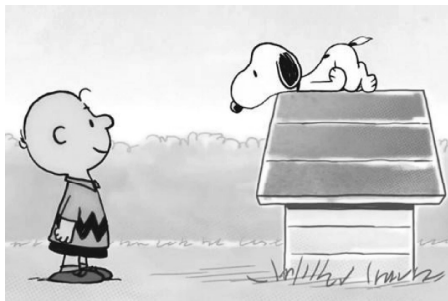

Fig. 1. "New Peanuts" *Comics Alliance*

Comics possess above all other media, the power to express the wide and varied range of emotions with greater amplitude, despite its limitation of the two-dimensional textual-visual worlds. The true power of comics lies in visceral expressions, not representations.

Comics are a potent and versatile medium in the production of affects/affecting, without appealing to the actual hearing. "Hearing in comics is not about the simulation of sound; it occurs on the level of the effects aroused by the intricate interaction among text-image clusters" (Tu, 2011, p. 75). The sonorous quality of comics, as studied by the French theoretician

Thierry Groensteen, is based on the assumption that a kind of rhythmic effect is produced by the succession of panels. The synesthetic transfer is made possible through various devices like "transmigration of senses through onomatopoeia, void-crossing, affective graphic patterning, and inter-panel rhythms …etc." (p. 75). Thus the construction of an acoustic world in a visual medium is achieved by venturing beyond the visual to assimilate other senses too. Sound effects are evoked through visual images without reliance on the auditory faculty. The comic artists are continually experimenting with trans-sensual expressionism, to create the illusion of movement and sound, and overcome the problems presented by the medium's silence and discontinuous nature.

Fig. 2. Herge. *King Ottokar's Sceptre: The Adventures of Tintin.*

It was Saul Steinberg who first recognized the properties and features of comics- the onomatopoeic exclamation, the speech balloon, the bubbled line indicating thought etc. (Carrier 2000, p.30). In the comic genre, the text consists of the verbal content wrapped up within boxes or the balloons as speech or thought.
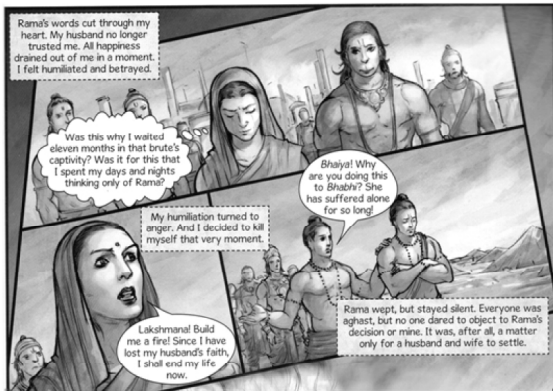
Fig. 3. Nagpal, Saraswati. *Sita: Daughter of the Earth.* Campfire

The balloons can hold words, images, allegorical pictures, exclamation marks and so on. Thus balloons employ both verbal and visual means to represent thought. They can also be left blank to show that the character has no thoughts. They are an extremely useful device for a visual artist, who is concerned about the communication of emotions as well.

Fig. 4. Herge. *The Castafiore Emerald.*

Fig. 5. Surti, Abid. "Bahadur and The Invisible Saviour". *Indrajal Comics*#322

The classical tradition assimilated the contents of the mind to pictures and believed that thought involved visual representation. This view was refuted by the more recent philosophers for whom mental representations were mostly verbal (Carrier 2000, p.44). The comics brought a consensus by presenting thoughts through words and pictures. The balloons themselves constitute a powerful element in the visual field as they also possess specific visual qualities that 'speak' more about the nature of the thoughts or words they enclose. Sometimes rough edged or jagged balloons indicating disembodied words.
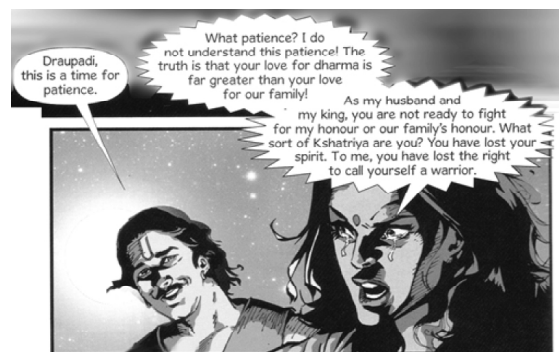

Fig. 6. Nagpal, Saraswati.*Draupadi: The Fire-born Princess.* Campfire.

The sophistication achieved by the genre in recent times as far as the visual and the textual contents are concerned is quite astounding. They have a rich tradition with a multitude of themes, styles, genres, and formats.

Angelo Piepoli commented that comics " are probably the most complex form of static multimedia pieces of communication using verbal and pictorial elements and characterized by peculiar rules of linear reading" (p. 458). The integration of words with pictures is what elevates the comic form from a mere sequence of images to a genre worthy of serious academic consideration.

Comics actually occupy an interesting position between paintings and motion pictures. It is possible to draw a lot of comparisons between comics' creation and movie making. The format of the comic is such that the story is unfolded before the readers in more or less the same fashion as it happens in movie films. The role of the projector is taken over by the reader, who can easily connect the successive images as the gap between them is relatively small. The eyes of the readers run back and forth across the entire visual field from left to right and top to bottom, offering the feel of a stream of scenes akin to a movie. Comics also use strategies similar to cinematography like montage, framings, frame forms and decoupage.

Fig. 7. Kapur, Shekhar. "Shekhar Kapur's Devi".

Regarding the structuring of artwork around the concept of the 'male gaze', one cannot deny the presence of subtle or overt erotica, in some comics. As comics are a visual medium, the effect is clearly perceptible establishing with certainty that comics are also products of our society just as fashion, films, and TV. They do make use of sexual innuendoes to complement the narration.

Much like movies, comics also make skilful use of devices such as flashbacks and foreshadowing. The usage of these techniques allows the creation of a text, where the present and the past merge together with good fluidity relying at the same time on the reader to do a vivid connecting of space and time (Wainer, 2014, p. 113).

Fig. 8. Wonder woman. *Adventures in DC Universe*

Fig. 9. Nagpal, Saraswati. *Draupadi: The Fire-born Princess.* Campfire.

But unlike cinema, comics deploy non-continuous action by deftly juxtaposing texts and images to produce a semblance of continuity and create an emotionally intense experience for the reader. The sequential ordering of discrete images is another essential quality of comics. The gaps and voids demand the participation of the readers and compel them to read between the panels and bridge the gaps or gutters. It is the absence of an implicit narrator that enhances the importance of graphic presentation. The illustrations often compensate for the absence of the narrator, enlightening the reader as to the setting and the tone of the story. The importance of dialogues is enhanced due to

the very nature of the medium. It embraces the whole complex of narrative devices and expressive techniques and stimulates the reader to the constructive activity of filling in the gaps and cues. This gap is the "closest thing in comics to transubstantiation, and it happens in the unseen crack between two discreet moments. It is everything, yet nothing" (Rushkoff, 2010, p. ix). However, it is also illusory to suppose that pictures are always transparent, for it does require sophistication and skill to decipher the ideas and values conveyed by them. The reader's participation in the creation of meaning is significant. As McCloud pronounces, it is the reader's experience that forces a sort of closure that "allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" even when the actions are separated by panels (1993, p.67).

The 'traditional' panel comics are now being exposed to experimentation due to the overpowering influence of the internet and other forms of multimedia. Comics and graphic novels belong to a rich artistic and literary tradition as they make also extensive use of the techniques of cubism and futurism. Their natural ability to manipulate the space-time continuum and achieve a tangible fourth dimension gives comics an advantage over other mediums (Bernard and Carter, 2004).

Comics are now very much ubiquitous on the net in the form of online comics, animation movies and games. The presence of comics on the internet and movie adaptations of various comic titles have also contributed significantly towards the global popularization of this art form. The study of this highly focused and compelling visual medium will promote eclecticism by facilitating the dissolution of professional boundaries and the mingling of theories and modes of inquiry from various fields. A rapidly accelerating field, it is changing aesthetically, commercially and critically. It cannot be denied that it is the lack of disciplinary justification that had been the greatest impediment to the ideological approach to the study of comics. However, in recent times, literary pedagogy has come to confront highly sophisticated visual and textual material from various sources. The development of comics theory and criticism will lead to an elite ghettoization of a certain type of comics which will be a move in the right direction. In India, academia is still in the process of opening the door to serious deliberations and research on comics. It is hoped that the study undertaken here will serve as a springboard for future academic investigations, and promote critical and theoretical thinking on the medium in the broader field of inter-medial studies.

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