

‘The Framing of the Verbal and the Visual: The Adaptive History of Comics as a Sign of the Times.’

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The adaptive elements that are simultaneous to the development of the comic strip from the early 19th century have an interesting prehistory of the well-established coalesce that art and language in the “early fusions of the verbal and the visual [that] occur in Egyptian hieroglyphs, Chinese ideograms, and Mayan glyph writings.” (Prinz 323) Other examples of “sequential art” (Eisner5) were Paleolithic cave paintings, the frescoes in Ajanta, the Chitrakathis of Paithan, the Kaavaads and Phad -bachanas of Rajasthan, the military preparations carved on Trajan’s Column to chronicle the wars (101-102 and 105-106 CE) and the Bayeux Tapestry. Similarly, emblem books of the seventeenth century, were used effectively for religious poetry and the trend continued with experiments in poetry: ‘carmen figura’ or pattern poetry seen in the works of Metaphysical poets like George Herbert and others, and continuing to William Blake who used illustrations with his poetry in the 19th century these were also precursors of the comic strip.

With the advent of printing, this art could be reproduced and it became available in mobile formats and in mass. By the mid eighteenth century the demand for content in various publications created the opportunity and space for sequential art, in satirical magazines like *Punch* (1841) and publications like the *Illustrated London News* (1842) (Chute 408).

These developments in art and theory run parallel to the development of the comic form which, historically speaking, has always been experimental and adaptive in nature. This combination of text and images can be traced back to the 1830s, in the work of the Swiss

illustrator Rodolph Topffer who, influenced by the “picture stories” of William Hogarth, created a series of eight *histories en estampes* or “engraved novels” that were presented as hand drawn and written narratives arranged in a sequence of frames placed horizontally and in rows on a page. Ultimately this form of narrative expanded into categories like the form of comic strips in American newspapers, and was enjoyed by the then growing immigrant population, and has remained iconic to this day. The first comic strip titled *Hogan’s Alley* by R.F. Outcault that appeared in 1895 gained popularity with its central character, the Yellow Kid, and had all the elements associated with comics such as speech balloons, encapsulation, recurring characters, etc. Other early comics strips that appeared in dailies like *New York Journal* and *New York World* set many of the conventions of comics, while simultaneously remaining experimental. Winsor McCay’s popular strip *Little Nemo in Slumberland* that appeared in the *New York Herald*, shows instances of McCay’s working against the regularity of the comics grid which otherwise resembled the photoframe that was part of the then recent developments in photography, demonstrating “a formal push and pull in the syntax of the medium.”, all the while remaining firmly entrenched in the mass medium of newspapers “as an obstruction to normal reading.”

In the socio-political context of pre-World War I, comics adapted to the readership demands with eye-catching covers, brighter colours and neater artwork, possibly to make reading easier and more attractive for children, who were a potential hitherto unknown market, as they no longer went to work and were given pocket money. The cost was kept as low as a penny. The adult comic *Puck* reoriented itself accordingly, and gathered a faithful readership aged between eight and twelve. Sociologically, comics came to adapt themselves and got included in leisurely and fun activities for children rather than as a diversion for workers during lunch breaks and train rides to and fro from work. Comics gave children a sense of ownership and empowerment to buy, collect, exchange or discard them with little or no adult supervision, thus

becoming one of the ways comics became integral to childhood experience and memory : “ Comics became a private reading space for children, a place where they could negotiate adult power and authority, where juvenile fantasies could be played out: a world of naughtiness, make believe violence and what primary school teachers called ‘messy play’. For this reason above all, comics formed a strong bond between children....Indeed, the characters themselves became ‘friends’ in many instances: a relationship re-established and fortified every week.” The logical offshoot of this readership trend was the emergence of ‘kid comics’ with popular characters in and as *Little Lulu* (1945), *Dennis the Menace* (1953), *Little Dot* (1955), *Little Lotta* (1955) and *Richie Rich* (1960), and their supernatural variants – *Casper the Friendly Ghost* (1952) and *Wendy the Good Little Witch* (1960) (Sasin 27).

The competition for sales and growing readership continued unabated during the Depression, with country wide syndication. The most tried and tested formula was the domestic comedy genre meant for a mixed age readership, but with the market largely tilted towards younger readers.

By the 1940s, anthropomorphic comic characters that had existed long before, got classified into the ‘funny animal genre’ with the publisher Dell striking a license deal with Disney Studios. Produced by Warner Brothers and MGM, film adaptations featuring Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse were very successful crossovers in both cinema and television. Pogo the Possum was one of the most popular and successful comic characters that originated from Disney. Pogo and other characters reflected very human traits and behaviour. After becoming an internationally syndicated newspaper strip, the characters and their antics showed political undertones with issues like civil rights, the environment and censorship, etc.

Comic strips from newspapers continued to be adapted into the book format, and have remained popular to this day – *Popeye* (Dell,

1941), *Blondie* (1950) – with additional characters and original storylines. The most recognized comic characters are from George Baker's *Sad Sack* (Harvey, 1949) which originally presented a satirical view of army life, but its book adaptations presented a somewhat tempered down view of the ironical strain that made Sad Sack and his colleagues endearing.

However in terms of reverse adaptation, flesh and blood characters from TV shows such as *I Love Lucy*, *Bilko*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and 'The Three Stooges' from films, were not as successful in their comic avatars.

For adolescent readers' the most popular comic was Archie (1942) which showcased small town high school life, with its rivalries and infatuations, and inspired several other comics for teenagers, who also now became the target audience for the emerging satire genre in the 1950s – *MAD* (1952) being the outstanding example. What raised the status of *MAD* as something more than a pastime pursuit for humour, is that its satire and parody was a reminder of the real world and offered an irreverent critique on politicians, pop and film stars, the royalty, other iconic comic characters and popular culture icons generally. The censorship campaign and the Comics Code of 1955, made the publishers take a risky commercial call and they changed the strip into a black and white magazine. This adaptation worked and its readership expanded exponentially, even as its content – modern politics and society, slanted towards bitter cynicism specially on events like the Vietnam War.

The craze for comics helped in the evolution of other genres (most significant being the super hero adventures) and came to be acknowledged as a appropriate form of modern communication as they served to promote a variety of purposes – propaganda, social issues and causes, and as a medium that created social awareness.

Once the comic came to be accepted as something more than 'comical', the advent of adventure stories saw their popularity peak

between 1940 and 1970. These post-war decades made great demands on the form both artistically and factually. The graphics had to be 'realistic' and "for young readers, meticulous accuracy was a large part of the spell."⁵ Parallely, cinematic techniques were adapted in terms of the art work – the use of stock elements like panoramas, p.o.v, angles, close-ups, etc. which attributed to the cinema in your pocket feel and a new level of sophistication to the reading/viewing experience.

In America action and adventure comics which were a combination of newspaper strips and pulp novels, diversified into several sub genres such as westerns, crime and science fiction. Sensational in tone, with colourful and garish covers, these were printed on pulp paper and were marketed at 10 cents to largely the working class.

The Second World War provided material for a spate of pocket-sized adventure series often illustrated by European artists that presented complex stories in highly detailed frames, but were rife with stereotypes of Hitler supporting Germans, hysterical Japanese and superior British bravehearts like Dan Dares the stiff upper-lipped spaceman produced by *The Eagle*. These formulaic war comics continued till the 1970s when unconventional material like *Charley's War* expressed the horror of war as seen through the eyes of a working class soldier in *Battle* (1977).

The depression following the stock market crash of 1929 is linked to the serious note that emerged in comics of the time. So along with being amused and entertained readers wanted to be assured by the presence of strong and ethical-minded men who could take charge and restore the world from the prevailing chaos and anarchy. Dick Tracy the detective(1931), Flash Gordon (1934), The Phantom (1936) and Prince Valiant (1937) – all different characters, set in different contexts but really the same persona, made the superhero comics one of the highest selling genres and the reason why the 1930s and 1940s were deemed the 'golden age' for comic strips and adventure comics.

The Superman comics were shipped to thousands of American soldiers fighting abroad in an effort to boost their morale, while Superman fought various imagined battles on the home front. Superman, who epitomized “the ultimate power fantasy: the sole survivor of the doomed planet Krypton,” could do extraordinary things. The analogy with Jesus was obvious- he was “a man sent from the heavens by his father to use his special powers for the good of humanity.” Superman’s personality moulded itself to the requirements of the time. As Roger Sabin’ noted:

“In his earliest outings, he had been a kind of super-social worker, in the comic’s words, a ‘Champion of the Oppressed’, reflecting the liberal idealism of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. Drunks, wife-batterers and gamblers received his attention, while in one edition a mine owner who forces miners to work in dangerous conditions is compelled by Superman to experience those conditions himself. Then, when the Cold War came to America, the character evolved into a fantasy guardian of the world order: an all powerful, and at times a slightly portly-looking conservative, fighting for ‘Truth, Justice and the American Way’. Later still, he would be revamped again for cynical times.” (Sasin 61).

Batman, similarly changed to suit the times, initially depicted as a revenge seeking, anguished gothic/noir like character, was adapted to suit younger readers and then later, in the 1980s and 90s returned to his former image particularly in the blockbuster movies that emerged from Hollywood but had fan audiences globally. The publishers, National Periodicals renamed as DC comics, sold millions of comics every month, capturing the comics markets just as superhero films dominated the box office.

Captain America and Captain Marvel were two other popular superheroes who embodied the patriotic super soldier during the war.

Marvel Comics produced *The Amazing Spider-man* whose alter ego is an angst driven bookish teenager trying to do his best in spite of

the odds. This comic series in the 1960s and 70s projected problems typical to urban America –drugs, pollution, racism, organized crime, etc., and was thus, reflective of the politics that other forms of mass media and popular culture like cinema, television and magazines also inscribed. Marvel’s marketing hyped worked well for their other super heroes – the X Men as well, whose characters frequently appeared in each other’s comics – underscoring the fact that they belonged to ‘the Marvel Universe’.

When America joined the war in 1914, was when the world’s first super heroine Wonder Woman emerged in *All Star Comics*. Many theorists have linked Wonder Woman’s origins to the history of feminism in America. The suffragette movement and first-wave feminist debates were reflected in the way that Wonder Woman negotiated female power in a world that was hostile to it. The importance of Wonder Woman’s creation and her subsequent presence in popular culture was iterated by Gloria Steinman who pointed out how Wonder Woman was the only comic character around and upon whom feminist discussions and arguments were most focused. Between 1940 and 1947 the demand for female labor in the United States shifted rapidly and with women entering the work force, they successfully multitasked managing both the domestic and job front – becoming wonder women of sorts, responding to the radical changes in demand brought by World War II (Bastein).

Wonder Woman personified the values of strength and self-reliance, along with the notions of sisterhood and mutual support, peaceful resolution and a dismissive attitude towards aggression and violence as a solution to resolving conflict (Bastein). The emphasis on the exaggerated body shape of super heroine characters like Barb Wire, Cat Woman, Lady Death, Witchhunter, etc. lent them a soft porn quality. But with the advent of women cartoonists and women’s comics, the representation of the female body has certainly adapted to other socio-political changes.

The two developments in the comic culture of the late 1960s created a watermark in the history of the comics tradition, due to which experimentation touched new heights in terms of art and subject matter thereby creating a remarkable counter-culture. For one, comics went underground in America, except in San Francisco mainly because of the damning influence of a study - *Seduction of the Innocent* by the psychiatrist Fredric Wertham who argued that there was a strong link between juvenile delinquency and the reading of comics. The Federal Comics Code of 1954 enforced rigorous censorship guidelines that prohibited the publication of comics with “risky” themes and artwork. This compelled artists to seek avenues outside these commercial regulations, and hence the comix underground movement. The other defining influence was MAD comics. These comics which later became a magazine, introduced several elements that spiraled its popularity amongst comics readers. Distinguished by its cutting satire of American politics and modern value systems, it also introduced a new aesthetics of “media-aware experimentation” and according to Art Spiegelman, influenced “virtually every single literary cartoonist working today...by its conceptualization and practice of comics as a self-reflexive form of critique” (Chute 410).

The underground comix - the “x” denoting adult content and cultural alterity - of the 1960s had some common traits – they were associated with the left wing press, reflected disenchantment with 20th century American values, and were often seen as the offspring of the drug and psychedelic culture of the underground movement of the 1960s. A cartoonist whose influence was significant in this era, was Robert Crumb. A fan of MAD comics himself, he who was able to publish and distribute his comic book, *Zap#1*, free of any commercial strictures. This was the moment when “comics was re-born as even more deeply avant-garde than it had been in its early incarnations” (Chute 411), and the best representatives of the counter culture of the 1960s. In spite of their experimental characteristics, these comics did have some

conventional structures like storylines and reading protocols in place. What they did do however, was to challenge the norms of accepted reading practices by defying linear, left to right textual and graphic sequences, moving instead in random directions.

Zap#1 published in 1968, was a game-changer. A handwritten statement, ostensibly by Crumb, on the upper left corner of the cover of the book: “Fair Warning: For Adult Intellectuals Only!” was an assertion that comics could be intellectual as well as entertaining. It had speech balloons that did not actually contain words, but were filled with icons or simply contained the word “speak” in some others. Zap’s experimental form established new ways of looking at and reading comics, shattering the common perceptions of what comics were and how they were perceived, clearly placing them as modernist works.

In 1980 Spiegelman and Francoise Mouly co-founded and co-edited *RAW* (one of the versions of the acronym being “Rectangular Accusatory Windows”) that described itself as an “avant-garde comix and graphix” magazine, and that solidified a place in culture for experimental comics. The second issue began publishing episodes of what would become the first Pulitzer winning graphic novel, *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*.

A year later Robert Crumb brought out a comics magazine *Weirdo* that showcased the works of highly regarded cartoonists like Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Peter Bagge and Julie Doucet bringing the underground comix movement into mainstream publishing, and creating space in not only a thriving popular culture but also as a serious form of literature in spite of some of their irreverent subtitles like “Required Reading for the Post-Literate” and “Putting the Litter Back into Literature.”

The designing and marketing of comics saw a paradigm shift in the 1970s and 1980s largely due to the shrewd marketing strategies used by Marvel and DC Comics to sell their wares as collectibles. Fans would

zealously collect their favourites and follow the careers of the artists/creators who acquired celebrity status among the community of comics fans. The conventional news-agent stall gave way to regular markets ('marts'), conventions ('cons') and mail-order options. Fans turned speculators and often brought comics, carefully preserving them in their original packing to sell at a profit, or exchange for other titles. This particular culture of 'geekiness' offered fans an opportunity to form cliques and discuss artwork, contribute to fanzines and make profits from re-sales, since comics in good condition could fetch astronomical sums at auction houses like Sotheby's and Christie's.

This new market of readers created a dynamic that helped in the comics boom. For one, the distributors directly went to the fan shops instead of the newsagent network, thus cutting costs. Newer publications offered royalties to creators thus addressing the long standing sore point of creators' rights. The freedom to experiment with different styles in typography, panel compositions, colour, paper and the use of collage and multi-media work revolutionized design in comics.

The rivalry between Marvel and DC comics was as engaging. The revamping of the *X-Men* by Marvel by adding new mutants – 'Wolverine', 'Nightcrawler' and 'Storm' depicted as fully developed personalities, and their particular mutancies could be read as metaphors for adolescence, race or sexuality. In response to this, DC revived *The Legion of Superheroes* and *Teen Titans*, commendable because of the artwork by George Perez and *Swamp Thing* by Alan Moore. Moore not only added psychological depth to his creation but also integrated contemporary issues like drug use, feminism, the American gun laws and most importantly, ecological concerns.

In the millennium, comics have acquired a cult and canonical status in popular culture and academics. They are not viewed as 'underground' literature that was once essentially oppositional in character,

but one that is constantly challenging, disruptive of reading practices, and adapting to contemporary concerns and demands. Artists like Chris Ware, Alison Bechdel, Joe Sacco and Spiegelman continue to experiment with spatial arrangements with and within panels, often using collage as a form. One can see a parallel history between comics and other kinds of printed literature, such as the artists' book.

Two prominent examples of the artists' books are Lynda Barry's *What It Is* (2008) and *Picture This! The Near-Sighted Monkey Book* (2010) which are painted non-narrative, interactive activity or work books that are a combination of collage, bits of narrative interspersed with reflections on color, hand writing and memory – creating a kind hybrid comics book.

Adapting the comics magazine into a book form has been done by repackaging two or three titles into hardbound covers. Marketing them as 'graphic novels' in an attempt to change the public perception of comics as juvenile, and to give them the literary character of a novel for adult readers – thus the nomenclature 'graphic novel' gained currency. 1986 was a significant year in the history of graphic novels: three classic graphic novels were published: *Watchmen*, by Alan Moore; *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller; and *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. All of these were essentially literary, where the storyline outweighed the artwork. *Maus*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, tells the story of the author's father and his survival through the Holocaust. Two other earlier best known examples of lengthy, complex narratives with a single theme are Will Eisner's graphic novel *A Contract with God* (1978) and the global favourite, *Tintin*. Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004) is an account of witnessing 9/11, and in which he describes more as "novel graphics" rather than a "graphic novel" is a striking example of how normal reading practices are obstructed by the impact of trauma.

Expressionist novels by artists like Frans Masreel, Otto Nuckel and Giacomo Patri, were mostly composed in black and white with sharp color contrasts and incorporated page structure and design as a part of their experimentation. Robert Peterson opines that these expressionistic wordless novels were obviously influenced by films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Calligari* (1920) and *Metropolis* (1927), though Masreel's graphic narratives – *25 images de la passion d'un home* (1918) and *Passionate Journey* (1919) were printed before the production of these films. In fact Thomas Mann spoke of Masreel's book as one of the most stimulating movies he had seen (Peterson 63).

Graphic novels have the same scope for elements that draw people to reading full length novels – the space to develop atmosphere, character and complex plotlines. And the art work can be more elaborate, extensive and superior. The presence of graphic novels in mainstream book store shelves, libraries, their reviews in newspapers and magazines, and as prescribed texts in academic courses is testament of the popularity and status that the graphic novel as a comic avatar, enjoys today.

Attempts at adapting classic novels and plays into the graphic form is seen as an inevitable part of the omnipresent and omnipotent visual culture that we exist in, and is another medium to familiarize the public with the classics. They cover a range of genres – memoirs, biographies, history, detective fiction, sci-fi, etc.

The twentieth century is a prolific period, with its advancements in language, visual arts and various, as well as combined modes of experimentation. Artists agreed that language being crucial to their art, oftentimes became the art itself, and “are not an aberration of art history so much as the fullest expression of the intellectual thought of its time” (Prinz 325).

The phenomenal growth of digital media and its impact on the publishing and creation of comics is still in the process of being realized.

The comics industry has found a way to adapt itself to the digital form. Various digital tools have been in use since the 1990s, and artistic flexibility in terms of technique, reduced production costs for translations and the possibility of greater diversity of titles has certainly been to the advantage of creators and readers. There are numerous examples of content and technologies adapting to each other to open up greater markets – manga publishers and Japanese cell phone companies have collaborated to increase sales at a staggering rate. The Marvel Comics app circulated as many as 500 of its comic titles on the iPad. DC comics had their own app soon after, and in a few months most major American comic book publishers were in the digital market, along with Japanese manga, European comics and *Amar Chitra Katha*. Additionally, websites invite readers to contribute their own comics – online applications and filters are available to amateur comics aspirants. Comics have been adapted into internet games and videos. Online gaming portals that are hugely popular are often found guilty of copyright infringement. Peterson explains this phenomena:

The challenge that Marvel and all the other publishers of comics now face is that the DIY movement gives ordinary players easy tools to engage with virtual superheroics of their own design, with that newfound power, players have usurped the long-standing role of comics as a vehicle of self-reinvention. (Peterson 234)

A new breed of digital comics is available only on the internet – which is now an “infinite canvas”, and comic greats like Scott McCloud, Bill Holbrook and Chris Onstad who have published their work exclusively online see the advantages of instant access to their earlier material and direct interaction with readers. However, harnessing revenue is a challenge with the easy availability of free content.

There is some skepticism about the manner in which comics have been adapted into new media, and there is concern about comics users

who are so now so fragmented that a meaningful assessment about comics cannot be done in the tradition of earlier popular comics artists. The language of graphic narratives is now ubiquitous in film, video games, and motion graphics. Comics continue to be adapted to communicate new ideas for example, the use of “scribing” or “sketchnoting” commonly seen in DIY You Tube videos. The journey of graphic narratives across the centuries and their fluidity to prevail as a hybrid word-text language representing a variety and complexity of ideas across various media is one of the best examples of adaptation.

As Wittgenstein asks in *Philosophical Investigations* about the boundaries of conceptual categories like “literature” and “art”: “Is a blurred concept, a concept at all?” – Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn’t the indistinct one often exactly what we need?”(Wittgenstein 71). The boundaries between discourse and art produce just such an “indistinct”, “blurred” and variable disciplinary boundary. And this is exactly what comics provide.

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#The Strange, Complicated, Feminist History of Wonder Woman's Origin Story

By Angelica Jade Bastién **SLATE'S CULTURE BLOG**. JUNE 12 2017 8:59 AM

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