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COMICS, IN ALL ITS GLORY

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ABSTRACT

The research paper tries to dismantle the idea that comics are an insignificant medium. It throws light on the positive aspects of comics, and proves how comic books are a complex form than the existing mediums.

Key words: Comics, Understanding Comics, Status of Comics, Comics Today.

Origin

The earliest known comic book is *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck* which was originally published in several languages in Europe in 1837. It was done by Switzerland's Rodolphe Töpffer, who has been considered in Europe as the creator of the picture story. Comics have evolved a lot from its origin, and the major changes that it went through can be divided into four different ages starting with the Victorian or the Platinum Age, the Golden Age, the Silver Age, and the Bronze Age.

Status given to Comics

Comic book has been a medium which has been underrated as an art form. It has been chided away as a thing for children. It also went through phases where it was seen as a medium which corrupts the mind of the children and influencing them to commit crimes. The comics were often compared to literary works and termed as an insignificant form of art. This perspective may not have had a tremendous change, but it is been showing changes as the people are getting to know the flexibility and the commercial value that the comic book has in it.

Comics: Early Days

Comic book belongs to the popular culture or it is often called a low form of art. It was rated as

something which is insignificant and it was even held responsible for influencing the children in a bad way. Dr. Fredric Wertham, a German-born American psychiatrist was the primarily responsible for this view of comics. With his *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954, he took the world of comics by storm by calling it as a medium which affects the minds of its readers, especially children. His argument was that people who are exposed to comics are prone to commit crimes. This led to the establishment of Comics Code Authority by the publishers of comic books which cracked the whip on abusive content which is not suited for young minds.

Comics: Today

Looking down at comics as a low form hasn't still changed in a big manner, but people have started to realize the popularity of comics and are cashing in on it. Comic book as a medium has a flexible form in which other genres can be adapted into. Literary works are transformed into Manga Comics, Graphic novels, and comic books to reach larger audiences. Comic books are made into feature films which stands testimony to the huge popularity that comics enjoy. The field of comics has grown with the demands of the readers, and it has reached a stage where their huge popularity cannot be disowned. The comic books have reached the next

level through their recall value and their popularity. One can see their popularity in the forms of toys of comic characters and merchandises. Comics may not be a form which is hailed or canonized, but one cannot merely say it is of no consequence, as it has its own culture and following.

Comic Books Vs Literary Works

Comics when compared with a literary work, has always been looked down upon as a lesser form of art and a thing of no consequence. But only some know and agree that it has a culture and a following for itself. It is but natural to write off comics, as the presentation style varies from canonized. In literary works, the word forms pictures in the minds of the readers, but in the case of comics it takes the opposite direction. A comic book supplies pictures with many visual cues and gives the readers a chance to construct the narration with the details supplied through the cues.

It is the presentation of content (plot, theme) in a different form that works in the favor of comics. Comics have its own history to boast of and it has been continuously evolving since its starting point. Comics may not be an integral part of the mainstream but it too does have the same reach and can create much impact than the so-called superior art forms. In a literary work, images are created through words, whereas in comics the pictures form the story with the minimal help of dialogue and descriptions. It is through the pictures and the characteristics infused in it, the desired effect for the setting and plot of the comics is created. The words which the comic characters utter, their facial expressions, colors in the background, visual cues in the picture, and many other aspects come together to form the desired effect. One may easily read a literary work as the details are presented in the form of words, but reading a comic book definitely needs expertise as the reader needs to collect the details from the given cues.

One can say that a comic book reader decodes the comic strip along the process of reading. Readers have to give vent to their imagination where the comic strip is devoid of dialogues. Unlike the literary works where the reader remains passive most of the time monotonously reading the author's ideas, comic

book makes the reader indulge in it by creating spaces for the readers to fill in. This makes the whole process of reading a comic book an engaging one. The pictures used in the comic book play an important role in carrying the message that is to be conveyed. It is the vehicle with which the comic book runs with. Comics to define, is a perfect blend of form and content.

Reader of a comic book

An individual who has a keen eye for details and involvement in gathering the details presented in various forms can be a better candidate to read comics, in the manner in which it has to be read. Reading a comic book is entirely different from reading a literary work where the details are presented in the form of words. Comic's is a medium where the pictures speak the most and are used to communicate the intended narrative to the readers. It is also a medium where the words are scarcely used. In comics, the details are scattered in the form of numerous elements such as pictures, colors used, and facial expressions.

The task of the reader is to collect all the given details to know what the author of the comic book has intended to convey to the audiences. The process of reading a comic book may look complex compared to that of reading a literary work where a person can flip through the pages to know what is presented in the book. Reading a book seems easy, because in the text, the descriptions and the conversations give details. In the case of comics, the words are the least used and there are details provided in the form of pictures, which are used for the flow of narration.

Reader's role in comics

If literature can be called life in words, comics can be called as life represented through pictures or images, and it is the reader who is instrumental in giving life to those pictures. Comic book is a medium which works devoid of words most of the time. Words provide details, but as there is this minimal usage of words in comic books, pictures become the primary element which acts as a vehicle carrying all those details that has to be presented. The pictorial representation adds to the meaning. Comic book is a visual presentation of ideas and details which needs the readers to play an

important role in decoding to understand the provided ideas and details. It is a medium which asks for a great deal of participation. The reader isn't merely a reader but plays the part as an active participant throughout the proceedings.

So, one can say that the reader of comics is not merely a reader, but plays the role of an author in a certain manner as comics invites for readers' participation to assemble the details and ideas which are scattered in the form of pictures, dialogue, and color to make sense of what is going on in the narrative. The reader should also draw upon their imaginative power and assumption to make sense of their readings. The reader's engagement with the comic book takes the form of an interaction which is based on the response which he/she has with the comic-strip. The comic book's combination of image and text encourages a reading process that has its momentum yet is constantly disruptive. The disruptions are caused by the technical aspects of the medium which includes elements such as the panel-to-panel transitions, placement of text, and style of lettering in the comic book. The distinct combination of the visual and textual elements in the narrative of a comic book allows for a different type of reading, a reading where the reader has little choice but to create and recreate the narrative from panel to panel.

A comic book demands a close reading and rereading to enhance the reading experience and to promote better understanding of the narrative structure of the comics. It shouldn't be a medium which facilitates participation, but a medium which should have the properties that facilitate readers' participation. Comic book defies the ordinary notion of reading as an isolated act where the reader submits oneself to the contents of the text. It extends the part played by the readers, and makes them collect details and perform through the process of reading which makes the reading explicit.

M. Thomas Inge in his *Comics as Culture*(1990) points out that, "The comic strip may be defined as an open-ended dramatic narrative about a recurring set of characters, told in a series of drawings, often including dialogue in balloons and a narrative text, and published serially in newspapers" (qtd. by Berger in *Narratives in Popular Culture*,

Media, and Everyday Life. 99) . This stresses the role played by the reader and visualizes the structure of comics which needs reader's participation. The structural, textual and visual complexity of the comic books make them an excellent medium to be studied as complex narratives, mainly because they combine pictorial and textual elements. Thus, it can be stated that reading a comic book cannot prove to be an easier task as it is a medium which demands participation and doesn't merely encourage consumption.

Structure of a comic strip

Comics as a medium, is usually presented in the form of comic strips. The English translation of the French term for comics is "designed bands." The frames or pictures are arranged in a sequence accompanied by dialogues to help the flow of narration. A comic strip stands as an ideal match between form and content. This style of narrative helps the reader understand the comic strip. The combination of pictures and words make the readers pay close attention as not to miss out on the minutest of details, which also helps one to gain a deeper understanding of the medium. The pictures are used to make the reading experience engaging and interesting. It also helps in carrying the maximum details which result in a minimal usage of dialogues.

The structure of a comic strip is similar to a cinema reel, the only difference is that the images are projected at a high-speed to live the movie experience, whereas in the case of comics the readers unify the frames in their imagination to create the action taking place. The main reason for comic strips being so popular is that their narrative structure is simple and easy to grasp. Comic strips are simple but effective that they are used in advertisements and to even portray serious issues, which enables comics as a flexible art form.

The tools of expression in comics

Comics is a form where many elements come together to help the flow of narration. The elements used should align with one another to carry out the message which the author intends to convey to the reader. Pictures, colors used, and dialogues are the prime elements which have to contrast with each other to reach the effect which

has to be attained. The optimal usage of these elements enriches the quality of comics and elevates the reading experience of the comic book to the next level. All the elements which are used in comic books go hand in hand and are inter-related to bring out the effect that is needed. The dominant aspects of a comic strip are picture, color, and dialogue.

Pictures

There is a saying that a picture speaks thousand words, it is nonetheless true when it comes to comics as pictures are the driving force with which the comics move. Pictures play a significant role in the absence of words and effortlessly fill their void. They are visual representation of ideas and details. Pictures are not merely flashes of colorful portrayal of characters and settings, but a tool through which the dialogue is maintained in the absence of words as they carry the message effectively. The emotions and feelings of the comic characters are carried out with the use of pictures. A sense of desperation, horror, fear, sadness, joy, and any number of different emotions are portrayed through a series of images.

They are the vital elements which bring comics to life and maintain the significant aspect of keeping the storyboard moving. Pictures go along with the dialogue and the color to bring out the effect which is needed. They can carry a complex idea effortlessly in a still image. It can carry any number of details in it. Comic strip employs this usage of pictures to convey the idea with a minimal use of dialogues.

Colors

Colors play a significant role in posturizing the mood and setting of a particular situation. Color combinations are used to create a pleasing arrangement to the reader's eye, and to attempt to elicit a certain mood. Most of the time, this is done at a subconscious level, and when done correctly, will advance the story in a comprehensive manner. Color works together with the pictures that are provided and compliment them by increasing the effectiveness. It also helps in bringing out the desired effect which is needed for the setting of the plot. Colors are instrumental in producing the dramatic effects. It is used to play upon the subconscious of the readers.

We associate colors with feelings and feelings are associated with cool and warm colors. A cool color palette within a comic panel will evoke a feeling of despair, sadness or melancholy. At the same time, these tones will also slow down the pace of the story in that particular scene. In comics, colors are used to produce tension and also to produce harmony, depending on the response one is attempting to create. A certain set of colors are used to represent certain genres for effective narration and ambience which is needed. Dark colors like black are used to project an aspect in a mysterious way.

Dark colors also suggest gothic characteristics in comic characters and sets the mood for dark plots. Bright colors bring cheerfulness and portray celebration and joy. Using a combination of Blue/Blue Green/Green could create a feeling of doubt, mystery or an eerie, creepy effect. This is why it is commonly used in horror films and images. If a specific scene is calm and subdued, cool colors like blue and green are used to project those situations. Different colors are used to convey the differences in settings, themes and plots.

Dialogues

A medium where there are less dialogues and loads of action captured in pictures is how one can define comics. In its initial stages, comics had an equal mix of dialogues and pictures to narrate a particular incident or a theme. Now, the comics have reached a stage where the reader should involve himself to create imaginary dialogues to explain the action which takes place. There will be instances where there are no dialogues to substantiate, but the series of images given will be more than enough as it will have the necessary details. One cannot rule out that comics do not need dialogues, as dialogues play a major role when it comes to describing a particular thing and adds clarity when the narration shifts into a flashback mode. Dialogues along with pictures and the use of colors play a perfect role in reaching the target readers.

Reading a comic book

Reading a comic book is quite complicated than it seems. One can underrate it easily as a thing for kids, but it needs a busy mind to decode it, in the

context of comics - a working mind. It is a fact that comics with its plethora of details, demands a close reading. Ideas and details are scattered in the form of pictures, signs, colors, and facial expressions. One cannot look for details merely in dialogues and descriptions alone as it is the case in literary works. Words are the least used element to reveal the plot and setting. Their role in a comic strip is underplayed. The reader has to look for other significant elements in the comic strip like colors, facial expressions, and reread the signs and symbols to imagine the action taking place.

A comic book is a medium which provides only a little amount of textual information, and gives the opportunity to the readers to use their imaginative skills and makes them chip in as active participants. As a reader one has to interpret every facial expression, thought of the comic character, action, use of language, colors used to understand the narrative process. A comic strip makes sense even if it is devoid of dialogue and details in the form of words. The comic strip involves readers and makes the act of reading a pleasure. One tends to develop a more complete character and engaging stories when adding dialogues to a comic strip. The visual elements should be carefully placed as not to distort the flow and to provide necessary visual cues.

What are we arriving at?

Literary works are something which have been glorified and celebrated for ages. The amount of value that it offers is immense and so has comics. It isn't fair to disregard a medium like comics purely by the notions surrounding it. Comic books are not merely a medium which is full of colorful pictures and illustrations. It is like a literary work, but only the form it takes differs. The content of either form is the same, but the manner in which the comic books are presented is different. It is the presentation of content in a different form that works in the favor of comics.

A literary work is a coalition of ideas in the form of words, whereas in comics the ideas are dispersed into pictures, dialogues, and tactfully placed visual cues to build the narrative. When it comes to a literary work, the creator has to give form to his ideas, whereas in comics the idea has to

be dispersed. The dispersed idea is presented to the reader, who has to assemble the idea to understand the concept.

A person who reads a literary work can understand the narrative through the details given in the form of words. To understand comics, one has to decode the visual cues which are presented in the comic strip. One has to read the words in the literary work closely to understand and read between the lines to understand the underlying meaning. In the case of comics, one has to read various amount aspects which are presented in the comic strip. A reader has to look at the facial expressions, dialogues, and decode the visual cues to understand the action taking place. The person who reads a comic book has to ensemble the dispersed ideas.

Reading a comic book which is considered to be merely an insignificant act is a notion which ceases to exist. It is a not just a process of monotonous intake of an idea narrated by a person, but a process where a reader has to imagine and contribute a lot. The reader merely cannot play the role of consumer like one does while reading a literary work. In comics, one has to fill the gaps created intentionally for the readers to fill in. The person has to collect the dispersed ideas in the comic strip and unify them. One needs to play the role of an active contributor when reading a comic strip, as most of the time comics will be devoid of dialogues but with plenty of visual cues. The reader needs to group the idea together. The process of consumption is much different and a difficult one while reading a comic book, as the reader has to focus on lots of factors to make it into one single idea.

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