

How Graphic Novels Work: A Visual and Verbal Reading of *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi

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Abstract

Reading a graphic novel is a skill that not many readers master. Thus, this paper analyses the tools that graphic novels use to convey meaning, so as to guarantee the utmost grasping of the reader to the intended message. The popularity of graphic novels as powerful forums of communication encourages researchers to conduct studies on them. Yet, less attention is directed to the study of form and style of graphic novels. Thus, this paper uses the formalist theory to approach the graphic medium, so as to offer an insight into how worlds are created in this unique medium of literature through the multi visual and textual angles of it. This approach requires an application to dive deeper in the unknown world of graphic novels and to decode its secrets. In this respect, the graphic novel *Persepolis* (2007) by the Iranian writer, Marjane Satrapi will be discussed. This formalist analysis aims to establish the graphic novel as a medium with a literary value and to destabilize the views that question the potential and value of this medium in literature. The major formalist theorists of graphic novels whom my analysis shall follow are Will Eisner (1917-2005) and Scott McCloud (1960), since their works offer explicit explanations of graphic novels' mechanism in delivering the message. Their theoretical works can back up the argument to be made in this paper; that graphic novels have their own visual-verbal language in expressing ideas and thoughts.

Keywords: Graphic Novel, Formalist Theory, *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi

Introduction

Graphic Novels have been evolved from comic strips and books. Comics has traditionally been considered a light and funny medium of art. Thus, comics has not received much critical or theoretical attention. Gradually, some prominent figures such as, Will Eisner and Scott McCloud begin to theorize on the topic. Scott McCloud defines comics as, “juxtaposed

pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). Will Eisner, on the other hand, considers comics as a form of “sequential art”. For Eisner, comics can be seen as, “means of creative expression, a distinct discipline, an art and literary form that deal with the arrangements of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea” (5). As McCloud illustrated, comics is a word that is plural in form, but takes a singular verb (9). He means that when the term comics” is used to refer to the medium itself, it becomes singular. For instance, *comics offers an amazing world to the reader*. However, when the term is used to describe a noun such as comic book/ comic strip, it depends on what follows it. For instance, *any comic book has a vivid visual and verbal language/ Comic Strips convey meaning in a simple way*.

The term “graphic novel” passed by different evolutions until it becomes a well-known term. Some critics prefer to abandon the term “comics” since it links the medium to funny and superficial content. Rather than the term “comics”, they prefer the term “graphic novel” especially that it adds more depth to the medium. Chute illustrated in her article “Comics as Literature?” that, “the first public use of the phrase, by Richard Kyle, was in a 1964 newsletter circulated to members of the Amateur Press Association, and the term was subsequently borrowed by Bill Spicer in his fanzine *Graphic Story World*” (453). Though Will Eisner did not coin the term “graphic novel” himself, he was the first to use it on a commercial scale, making it popular. Will Eisner, “is often credited with fathering the graphic novel, and for this reason, among his many other contributions to comics, the American industry’s highest award is named for him” (Van Lente and Dunlavey 163). The term “graphic novel” appeared on the cover of Eisner’s work *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (1978). Then, the term continues its popularity with the release of *Maus* (serialized from 1980 to 1991) by Art Spiegelman and *Watchmen* (serialized in 1986 and 1987, and collected in 1987) by Alan Moore; the writer and Dave Gibbons; the artist. Gradually, authors begin to trust the graphic medium to tackle profound issues. Thus, graphic memoirs (e.g. *Stitches: A Memoir* (2009) by David Small), graphic journalism (e.g. *Palestine* (2001) by Joe Sacco), and graphic historical novels (e.g. *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2002-2004) by Art Spiegelman); to name a few, begin to emerge. This expansion in the capacity of graphic novels is supported by,

“booksellers, newspaper and magazine editors, film directors . . . librarians, and academics” (Uchmanowicz 363).

Reading graphic novels requires discovering relationship between two forms of language that produce meaning. These visual-verbal forms serve as a challenge to the reader. Using the formalist ideas of McCloud and Eisner in approaching the graphic novel *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi proves that graphic novels follow certain criteria in manipulating meaning. Unlike the ordinary formalist analysis of literature that offers mere textual analysis, the formalist analysis of graphic novels pays attention to the graphic novel, as a hybrid of text and image together. It offers both a verbal narrative line—the text—and a visual narrative line—the image. Prior to discussing the text-image forms of graphic novels, a closer look is paid at Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*.

Marjane Satrapi (22 November 1969) is an Iranian graphic novelist, film director, and a cartoonist. She was born in Rasht, Iran, but she grew up in Tehran; in a middle-class Iranian family. The title *Persepolis* is a reference to the name of the ancient capital of the Persian Empire. *Persepolis* traces the life of Satrapi herself: both as a child and as an adult, during the Islamic revolution (1979) and the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). This graphic novel sheds light on the transformation that Satrapi undergoes, as a result of being caught in this state of political unrest. It narrates the continuous struggle of Marjane, her family, and the Iranian people against the Shah's rule at first and against the Islamic regime later.

The graphic medium provides Satrapi with flexibility in the delivering of meaning. The use of the graphic novel, “deploys significant ideological meaning, in the manner in which it combines words and pictures” (Davis 266). Both words joined by images offer the reader a real depiction of a period of history that may be too hidden to be realized or imagined. When Marjane Satrapi was asked about the reasons behind choosing the graphic medium to narrate her story, she answered:

People always ask me, "Why didn't you write a book?" But that's what *Persepolis* is. To me, a book is pages related to something that has a cover. Graphic novels are not traditional literature, but that does not mean they are second-rate. Images are a way of writing. When you have the talent to be able to write and to draw it seems a shame to choose one. I think it's better to do both. (“On Writing *Persepolis*” 1)

Tracing the visual and verbal forms that Satrapi uses requires having a closer look at the theoretical formalist methods of graphic novels, in general.

Theory

The popularity of graphic novels paves the way before researches to study their visual-verbal features. Such studies reserve a seat within academic circles for graphic novels to be examined on a wider scale, so as to identify the techniques of writing and reading them. Hence, the literary value of graphic novels begins to be emphasized. While some studies focus, “on the medium’s sociological and aesthetic aspects” (Uchmanowicz 364), the graphic novel’s form receives less attention. In the absence of organized theoretical research on graphic novels’ form, some theorists begin to present theoretical studies on the mechanism of graphic novels in delivering meaning.

The most influential theorists include: Will Eisner and his book *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) which has great influence on comics’ scholarship. There is also Scott McCloud and his masterpiece *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993) which is written in a graphic format. It is considered one of the bestselling books on comic theory and a popular choice by readers and writers of comics. Their formalist studies help in diving deeper in the visual-verbal sides of graphic novels, and to recognize, “the graphic system’s rhetorical complexity” (Uchmanowicz 364). The formalist approach to graphic novels is essential for reflecting the real potential of graphic novels and to map their position as visual-verbal art forms in literature.

Formalism is considered one of the critical methods of approaching literary texts:

[Formalism] entails considerations not only of what literature says, means, and does, but of how . . . [It] insists on attention to the shape and composition of the text as container and the impact they may have on the meaning and function of content. (qtd. in Uchmanowicz 364-65)

The works of Scott McCloud and Will Eisner follow this formalist criterion in analyzing graphic novels. They focus on the iconic feature of this medium, along with the mental role of the reader in interpreting it, and the significance of panels and gutter, in response to other elements. This paper launches an exploration of how methods that graphic novels in general and *Persepolis* in particular use to manipulate meaning. The (how) question is concerned with the mechanism used to deliver and express ideas.

Reading a graphic novel is not an easy task. McCloud believes that graphic novels, “command audience involvement” (59). Will Eisner, on the other hand, states that a graphic novel is a, “montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills” (8). This combination of text and image forms the narrative in a graphic novel. Thus, it is essential to shed on the tools that graphic novels use to convey meaning. The most important elements of form in graphic novels include: the panel, the gutter, typography or font, the style used in drawing, colors, speech balloon, and caption (i.e. text box) (see fig. 1). This paper analyses these elements and applies them to *Persepolis*. This application aims to prove that graphic novels are sophisticated narratives that follow certain forms to deliver meaning.

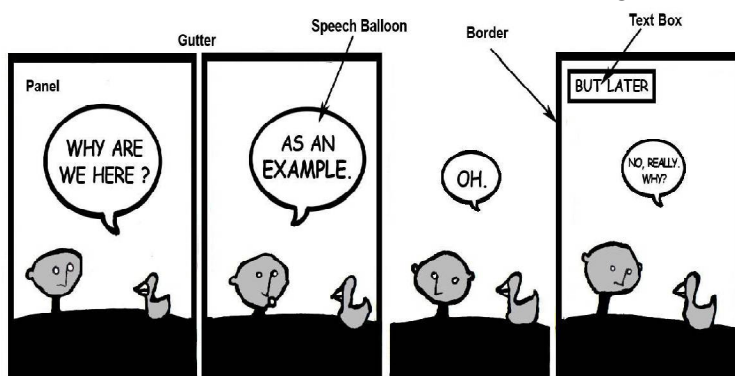


Fig.1 The basic elements of a graphic novel from “Writing about Comics and Graphic Novels,” handout, *Visual Rhetoric/Visual Literacy Series*, Duke Writing Studio, Durham, North Caroline, n.d. <<http://uwp.duke.edu/writing-studio>>.

Panels and Frames

Panels are the borders or frames that structure a graphic story. They are blocks placed in a sequence. McCloud believes that panels are, “comics’ most important icon” (98). The size, shape, and length of panels can convey different meanings. Eisner summarizes the panels’ important mission which is conveying time, saying:

The number and size of the panels also contribute to the story rhythm and passage of time. For example, when there is a need to compress time, a greater number of panels is used. The action then becomes more segmented, unlike the action that occurs in the larger, more conventional panels. By placing the panels closer together, we deal with the ‘rate’ of elapsed time in its narrowest sense. (30)

Persepolis shows the passage of time through the number of panels, placed in a sequence. For instance, when Satrapi depicts a party that was attacked by the Guardians of Revolution- fanatic groups responsible for punishing those who astray from the path of Islam- she shows the impact of this raid on people participated in this party. Panic causes people to flee in a frenzy way. This attempt of escape costs one man his life. While jumping from one roof to another, he falls. The number of panels depicts the stages of this action (see fig. 2). This kind of panels, as McCloud argues, shows "transitions featuring . . . Action to Action progressions" (70). The reader moves with his eyes from one panel to another to experience this event that happens so quickly. The absence of text, in these panels, is on purpose. Eighan says, "wordless sequences effectively transfer the power of creating a narrative temporality to the reader-viewer, himself. He is no longer hindered by the sequential nature of the verbal mode" (39). Satrapi does not want to slow down the reader and distract his attention. She wants him to perceive the action as quickly as it happens.



Fig. 2. Temporality within panels from Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2007, 312.

The size of panels shows the duration of a certain situation. The wider a panel is, the longer a situation is and vice versa. In *Persepolis*, Satrapi uses this form of panels in different situations. For instance, when Satrapi wants to depict the "2500 years of tyranny and submission" (15) that Iran witnessed, she draws a panel nearly more than half of the page's size (see fig. 3). This large and wide panel reflects the long history of Iran. The panel is divided into four parts; each of which traces a different stage in that history.

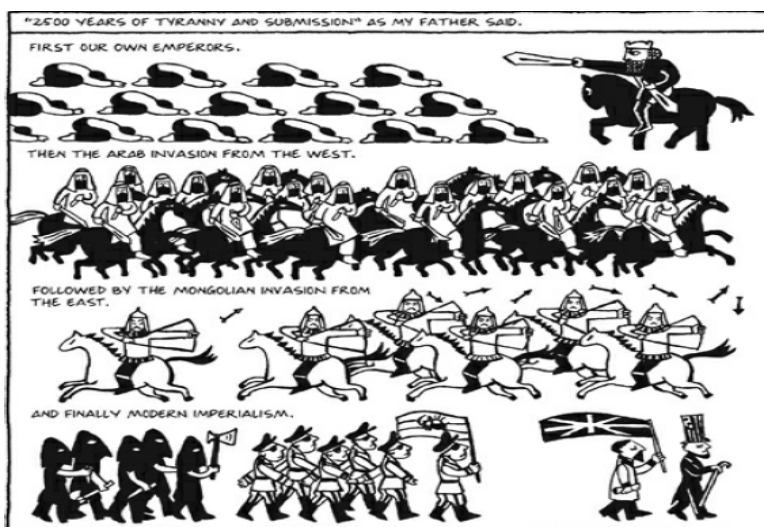


Fig. 3. The size of panel from Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2007, 15.

The length of panels indicates both duration and space. For example, longer panels in a sequence show that a certain situation happens so quickly. Long panels also indicate space. If a graphic artist, for instance, wants to draw a person who jumps from a mountain, he would rather draw this image in a vertically long panel, so as to reflect the great height of this mountain and the great distance of the jump. In *Persepolis*, the following panel depicts people running downstairs to the basement, when there is a raid. The panel is drawn in a vertical long way to show figuratively how the Iranians are descending deeper into chaos and anarchy due to the war. As they step down, they become more implicated in the war.



Fig. 4. Long panel from Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2007, 107.

The frames of a panel can even be used as narrative devices in a graphic novel. Some panels can have borders or frames, but other panels can have no borders at all. Both cases can deliver variety of meanings and add to the general atmosphere in a graphic story. They give hints to the reader, so as to perceive the action properly, as intended by the graphic artist. This is obvious in the following two examples.



In this figure, the image of the monster appears to be popped out from the assigned frames of the panel. This adds a sense of control, power, and domination.

Fig. 5. An image popping out from the panel's borders from Will Eisner, *Comics & Sequential Art*, New York, Poorhouse P, 1985, 46.

In this figure, it is noticeable that there are no borders for this panel. Here, the graphic artist wants the reader to feel the wide and unlimited scope and atmosphere of the sea.



Fig. 6. The absence of borders in a panel from Will Eisner, *Sequential Art*, New York, Poorhouse P, 1985, 47.

Satrapi employs the frames of her panels in a unique way to express her ideas effectively. The absence of frames from some panels in *Persepolis* is used for a reason. For instance, when Marji reads about the execution of her beloved uncle, Anoosh who was accused of being a Russian spy and was executed falsely, frames are used effectively in this scene. The newspaper that depicts his execution is drawn with no frames at all and with white background and two swans (see fig. 7). This absence of frames can be read as way to set the soul of her uncle free after a long struggle. Now, his soul can rest in peace. The white background reflects his innocent nature and his kindness to Marji. The presence of the two swans is effective, since her uncle used to make bread swans for her: he offers Marji two swans before. When Anoosh gives Marji the second swan, he tells Marji, "it's the uncle of the first one" (73). Now, she will lose the source of joy in her life.



Fig.7. The panel that depicts uncle Anoosh’s execution from Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2007, 74.

The excessive use of mirrors in *Persepolis* is obvious. The frames of mirrors serve as additional frames within the primary frames of panels to show some problematic issues. For instance, mirrors are used in *Persepolis* to confront ideological restrictions imposed upon Marji’s mother by the tyrant regime. When Marji’s mother goes in a demonstration against the compulsory decision of wearing the veil, a German journalist takes a photo of the mother and publishes it in most of the European newspapers. Since the photo appears in one Iranian magazine, the mother becomes in a real danger. She can be arrested at any time. Consequently, she has no option, but to disguise herself by dyeing her hair, turning up the collar of her coat, and wearing dark glasses for a long time (see fig. 8). Marji’s mother, who becomes now blonde, appears staring at her new appearance in the mirror and seems upset and sad. The mirror, in this example, has “a double perception namely the perception of the reader and the perception of [the character] looking at herself in the mirror” (Bruijn 19). To the reader, it is a mere outside disguise, but for the mother, it is a sort of masking of her beliefs and ideologies. The new hair color, “lightened to disguise her chosen identity” (Elahi 320).

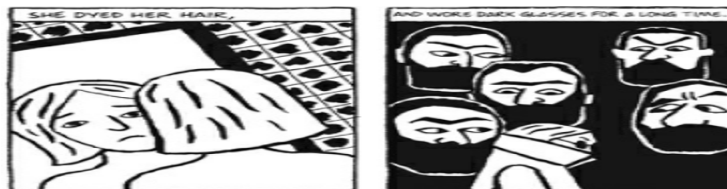


Fig. 8. The mirror and the disguise of identity from Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2007, 9.

The Gutter and the Closure

After panels, there is the gutter which is the black area that separates panels. It is this empty space between two panels. The gutter, “plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics! . . . the gutter . . . takes two separate

images and transforms them into a single idea” (McCloud 66). The real value of graphic novels lies in the hidden side (i.e. the gutter) and this is why McCloud calls comics *the invisible art* in his book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. It is up to the reader to invest the gutter efficiently to get a spontaneous transition between panels, as well as to make sense of and to give motion to the image. Otherwise, comics will be meaningless and motionless. McCloud introduces the term “closure” to describe the reader’s mental mission in completing the incomplete or missing parts to get the intended meaning. He defines closure as the “phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (63). This closure is, “a silent secret contract between creator and audience” (McCloud 69). The following example serves as a good illustration of the gutter and the closure:



If the reader sees the previous two panels in a graphic novel, he will realize; through previous experience, that since they describe a peek-a-boo game (i.e. a game played usually with a baby in which the player hides his face, then pops back, saying peek-a-boo), this means that in the gutter between the two panels, the player hides his face. Though there is nothing between the two previous panels, “experience tells you something must be there” (McCloud 67). Thus, the reader should interpret the gutter between these two panels to get the message and to comprehend the image (i.e. the closure). The reader should read the previous example, as follows:



Fig. 9. The gutter and the closure from Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, New York, Harper Perennial, 1994, 67. Print.

Satrapi uses the gutter in an exceptional way. This is obvious in the first page of *Persepolis* (see fig. 10). In this page, two panels are included. The first one shows a picture of Marji with the caption, “this is me when I was 10-years old. This was in 1980” (7). The subsequent panel depicts a class photo of Marji’s friends

and a part of Marji's image. The caption of this panel says, "and this is a class photo. I'm sitting on the far left so you don't see me . . ." (7). In this second panel, the veiled girls are dressed and sit in the same way, only their facial expressions and their bangs differentiate them. In this panel too, one can only see parts of Marji's elbow and her veil. The gutter that separates these two panels gives sense to them. The reader is invited to complete the missing parts of Marji's photo (i.e. closure). Marji separates herself from the beginning to assert her independent nature. Unlike her Iranian friends, Marji is different from the rest of them in her identity struggle, her views, and her behaviors. This separation is located at the beginning to clarify what follows.



Fig. 10. The special use of the gutter from Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2007, 7.

Typography

Typography is another unit that is essential in a graphic novel. In graphic novels, the text supports the image and works side by side with it. Eisner says, "lettering, treated graphically and in the service of the story, functions as an extension of the imagery . . . it provides the mood, a narrative bridge" (10). Sometimes, the graphic artist can add artistic effect to the handwriting to contribute to the general mood and atmosphere of the depicted scene (see fig. 11). In this example, the text is mixed with art to influence the way of reading it. Here, the lettering style, mixed with blood, is used in a way to generate the feeling of horror and terror.

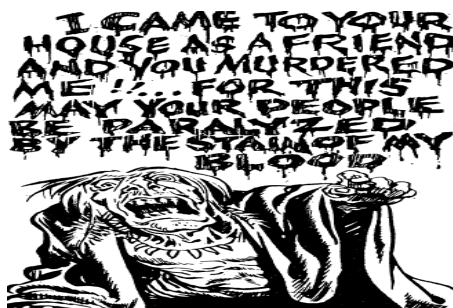


Fig.11. Adding artistic effect to typography from Will Eisner, *Comics & Sequential Art*. New York, Poorhouse Press, 1985, 12.

In *Persepolis*, Satrapi does not maintain the same font throughout her novel. She uses different fonts to serve her idea and to suit the context of her depiction. Using various styles of handwriting makes the reader, “urged to feel a more personal connection to the text” (La Cour 52). One clear example appears when she suffers a state of hallucination after taking anti-depressive pills. As a result of these pills, she imagines herself talking to two white ghosts who appear later to be her parents. The good part appears in the handwriting that Satrapi used to depict the conversation between Marji and her parents (see fig. 12). It appears fuzzy and cursive to suit her dizzy and instable state of mind due to the pills.



Fig. 12. Using cursive handwriting to express a certain state of mind from Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2007, 275.

The Style of drawing

The style of drawing characters is a feature that distinguishes a graphic novel. It could be, according to McCloud, either iconic or realistic (54). Iconic means cartoony style with characters usually drawn in a simple manner and cartoony anatomy. The realistic one tends to depict characters in a way that tends to be as close to reality as possible. The iconic depiction is more effective than the realistic one in encouraging the identification of the reader with the character depicted. McCloud says that we “don’t just observe the cartoon; we become it” (36). This may justify the obsession of children with cartoons and how they imagine themselves in the shoes of the heroes presented in these cartoons. The cartoony feature of graphic novels gives it more appeal to readers from different ages and cultures. Through the drawings, the story becomes more general; “the more cartoony a face is, for instance, the more people it could be said to describe” (McCloud 31). The cartoony depiction makes the character appears as an ordinary

person with no specific details that differentiate people in reality; thus it becomes closer to more readers. This feature is what McCloud calls, “universality” (31).

In *Persepolis*, Satrapi chooses to draw her characters in iconic or cartoony style to increase the degree of universality and identification between her characters and her readers. Contrary to expectations, the cartoony style depicts pain, not humor. Davis says that *Persepolis's* iconic style, “eloquently convey[s] both childhood innocence and indescribable pain” (271). The use of cartoony drawing can be seen as closely related to Satrapi’s childhood, especially that a long part of *Persepolis* is written from young Marji’s perspective. Satrapi continues using these cartoony drawings, even after growing up to reflect the depth of events. McCloud says, “by stripping down an image to its essential meaning, an artist can amplify that meaning in a way realistic art can’t” (30). This means that simplicity is the best policy in depicting the core of something and expanding the reader’s imagination, whereas the realistic depiction requires full details and minimum imagination.

While *Persepolis* is drawn in a cartoony style, some drawings appear so childish and unreal. This is obvious in depicting a massacre perpetrated against Iranians. This massacre, which took place on 18 August 1978 in the Rex cinema, “was one of the most painful and still unresolved events in the history of Iran” (Abedinifard 100). The door of the cinema is locked from outside before the beginning of the fire. The police officers, who are supposed to save people, hinder the rescue process by attacking those who try to save people locked inside the cinema. Even the firemen reach the site forty minutes later. Upon hearing this story from her parents, the young Marji imagines the state of these innocent people who are trapped inside the cinema and are burned alive. The panel (see fig. 13) shows the ghosts of the people flying from their seats. Their mouths are open due to the shock and the pain of the burning. Though the image seems childish, it is so expressive. Chute says that such depictions assert, “both the uncontainability of trauma and also the fleeting, uncategorizable images running through Marji’s imagination” (“The Texture of Retracing” 101). The caption, at the top of the panel, describes the BBC report concerning the incident: “the BBC said there were 400 victims. The Shah said that a group of religious fanatics perpetrated the massacre. But the people knew that it was the Shah’s fault!!!” (*Persepolis* 19). The caption is ended with three exclamation marks to indicate the deceit of the Shah; he is the one to be blamed.



Fig. 13. The burning of the Rex cinema from Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2007, 19.

Colors

An additional formalist feature of graphic novels has something to do with *colors* used. Graphic novels can be black-and-white, shaded, or colored either in flat colors or in expressive colors. Colors play a crucial role, they, “express a dominant mood. Tones and modeling could add depth. Whole scenes could be virtually about color!” (McCloud 190). It is up to the graphic artist to use the colors that serve his message and satisfy his need.

Satrapi draws *Persepolis* in black and white on purpose. She wants to put the reader in the picture by making him feel the state of dictatorship, oppression, frustration, depression, and alienation that prevails the Iranian society. This gloomy and somber atmosphere cannot be expressed in any other colors, but in black and white, since both colors call attention to the depth of trauma and the horror of history. Black and white is, “a language to communicate tension and tragedy” (Dallacqua 16). Like her graphic novel, Satrapi’s real life is black and white; full of ups and downs, failures and triumphs. The dominance of black over white in some panels reflects that the dark side is the prevailing one. McCloud says that through, “black and white, the ideas behind the art are communicated more directly. Meaning transcends form. Art approaches language” (192). The lack of vibrant colors invites the reader to focus solely and mainly on the meaning without being distracted by art. Satrapi explains the motivation behind her choice of black and white in *Persepolis*, saying:

I write a lot about the Middle East, so I write about violence. Violence today has become so normal, so banal – that is to say everybody thinks it’s normal. But it’s not normal. To draw it and put it in color – the color of flesh and the red of blood, and so forth – reduced it by making it realistic. (qtd. in Chute “The Texture of Retracing” 99)

She means that the realistic depiction of violence with its realistic colors normalizes our view and perception of it and makes the eye used to see it. Thus, she tries to prove otherwise by using black and white.

Besides the black and white colors, Satrapi uses in *Persepolis* entirely black panels to represent the traumatized memory and the unbearable pain. When Marji depicts her reaction after the death of her friend due to the bombing of her house during the Iran-Iraq war, she asserts that it is impossible to visually express her feelings after this awful trauma. She draws herself in one panel (see fig. 14) with her hands covering her eyes and this reflects her shock. This panel is followed by another black panel and the caption, “no scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger” (146). The panel is not only black, but also empty. Kate Flint argues that the act of remembering, “may be elicited by the depiction of deliberately empty spaces, inviting the projection of that which can only be seen in the mind’s eye on to an inviting vacancy” (530). Thus, the lack of extra details reflects the psychological impact of this traumatic event on Marji. No words can better translate her profound wound precisely.



Fig. 14. Using a black panel to represent a traumatic experience from Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2007, 146.

Speech balloons

They indicate the direct speech or thoughts of characters. Regarding speech balloons, Eisner explains, “the balloon is a desperation device. It attempts to capture and make visible an ethereal element: sound” (26). Speech balloons contribute to describing *sound* in this mute medium of art. Since graphic novels do not have the merit of assigning certain quotation to its speaker (e.g. he/she said), it is up to the tail of the speech balloon to indicate who the speaker is. The difference in the shape of a speech balloon (see fig. 15) adds different meaning and conveys different sounds. These forms are used in *Persepolis*. The normal speech balloon is used in most parts. *Thought balloons* are clear in several examples (e.g. *Persepolis* 49), so are sound speech balloon (e.g. *Persepolis* 69).

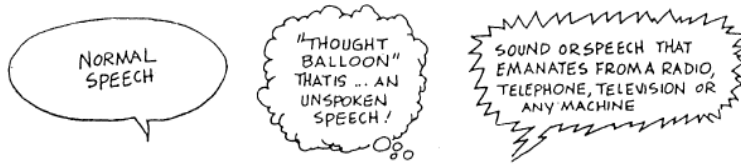


Fig.1. 1. The various shapes of speech balloons from Will Eisner, *Comics & Sequential Art*, New York, Poorhouse Press, 1985, 27.

In addition, since graphic novels do not include the advantage of describing the feeling of a certain character when uttering something (e.g. happy, sad, angry); it is up to the shape of the speech balloons' borders to denote how words inside them have been uttered by the speaker. For example, if the borders of a speech balloon are drawn in thick bold, this may indicate that the tone of uttering them is an angry one (Rogers 63). In the following example of *Persepolis*, the shape of the left speech balloon shows a normal speech. Unlike this left balloon, the borders of the speech balloon, on the right, appears jagged to reflect the crying voice of Marji when uttering it.



Fig. 16. Different speech balloons from Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2007, 41.

Captions

They are text boxes in the corner of panels that include some notes by the author to enrich his narration and to guide the reader in his reading process. In a graphic novel, the *word* works side by side with the *image*. Eisner suggests that, “in comics, no one really knows for certain whether the words are read before or after viewing the picture . . . But in any event, the image and the dialogue give meaning to each other—a vital element in graphic storytelling” (59). Thus, the presence of text, in a graphic novel, supports the image and shapes the whole story. Depending on one element solely is worthless, since both the text and the image elaborate, enhance, and comment on each other.

In *Persepolis*, the extensive use of captions suits the autobiographical nature of this graphic novel. These captions are

used to either clarify or comment on the memories being recalled within the events of the story. They signify the external voice of the narrator besides the inner voices of the characters. Captions reflect, “the distinction between a subjective account based on the selective memory of an individual and an objective historical account of past events” (Beckler 49-50). Speech balloons inside panels express history objectively, as it happened, but captions offer the subjective commentary of the narrator on these historical memories. This explanation may justify the use of the past tense in captions, since they are comments on past events; commentaries on memories. However, the text inside speech balloons is written in the present tense, as it depicts the original action. Thus, it is recalled according to its real context; the present.

Conclusion

Graphic novels are appealing mediums of literature, yet little is known about their methods in conveying meaning. This paper is an attempt to formalize the study of graphic novels by applying the studies of two leading graphic formalists: Scott McCloud and Will Eisner to the graphic novel *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi. This paper ends with concluding that the dual formalism of textual and visual blending offers an extended ability to express vividly what words alone fail to articulate. This duality combines the visual elements of movies, the textual feature of literature, and the appealing and entertaining sides of both in one medium. Thus, graphic novels prove themselves to be excellent means of communication. The formalist approach can enhance establishing the graphic novel, as a profound medium of literature and can help constructing literary meaning within this medium.

Graphic novels are chosen rather than any other form of literature for several reasons. Visual texts are important sources of information. They enable readers of different cultures who struggle with unfamiliar content to make sense of texts. Both the images and words work together to simplify complex concepts and to offer a better understanding. This combination allows more flexibility in the manipulation of meaning. In addition, though the medium itself represents an important part of the heritage of many cultures, there is not so much interest in critical literature exploring the mechanism of graphic novels. This paper aims at becoming a small step in honoring this incredible medium of art by giving the reader a closer look at this medium through highlighting, reviewing, and explaining the formalist devices of graphic novels (e.g. panels, gutter, colors, typography, cartoony drawings, captions, speech balloons).

Further research is needed to have a comprehensive perception of graphic novels and the way they function. This paper only discusses one specific example of graphic novels (i.e. *Persepolis*). Future researchers can broaden the area of study by analyzing full-color graphic novels, as well as the different forms of comics (e.g. comic strips, comic books, web comics). The increase in the cumulative pieces of research that analyze graphic novels in particular and comics in general can help in shedding light on these mediums of literature, on a wider scale. As a result, they can gain more acclaim, acceptance, and appreciation within literary forums.

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"آليات الرواية المصورة: تناول مرني ونصي لبرسيوليس للكاتبة مرجان ساترابي"

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ملخص البحث باللغة العربية :-

تعد قراءة الرواية المصورة مهارة لا يجيدها العديد من القراء. ومن هنا، يتطرق هذا البحث إلى تحليل الأدوات والآليات التي تستخدمها الروايات المصورة لنقل المعنى، وذلك لضمان أفضل استيعاب للرسالة المقصودة من قبل القارئ. وحيث أن الاهتمام الأكبر للدراسات التي تناولت الروايات المصورة كان منصباً على الموضوعات التي تناولتها هذه الروايات، دون النظر إلى البناء والتكوين الذي تعمد إليه الروايات المصورة لا يصلح الرسالة للقارئ، عمد هذا البحث إلى تناول نظرية التكوين البنائي لتقديم نظرة ثاقبة عن الأبعاد المرئية والنصية للرواية المصورة. ويهدف هذا التحليل البنائي إلى تعزيز القيمة الأدبية للرواية المصورة، وزعزعة الآراء التي تشكلت في إمكانيات الروايات المصورة. ومن بين أهم من قدموا دراسات عن الروايات المصورة وبنائها ويل إيسنر (١٩١٧-٢٠٠٥) وسكوت مكلود (١٩٦٠). وقد اعتمد هذا البحث على آرائهما لأن أعمالهما تقدم تفسيرات واضحة لألية الروايات المصورة في توصيل المعنى. والاعتماد على هذين المفكرين من شأنه أن يدعم الحجة التي يتبناها هذا البحث: ألا وهي أن الروايات المصورة لها لغتها الخاصة في التعبير.

وتقسم الروايات المصورة طبقاً لطريقة رسم شخصياتها. فيمكن أن تكون الشخصيات مرسومة بشكل كارتوني. ومن ناحية أخرى، يمكن أن تميل الرسومات إلى الواقعية في التصوير. كما تلعب الألوان المستخدمة في الرواية المصورة دوراً فعالاً. فيمكن لبعض هذه الروايات المصورة أن تكون بالابيض والأسود، أو مظللة، أو ملونة بألوان زاهية وبراقة. ويظهر النص في القصص المصورة في شكل بالونات. وفي هذا الصدد، تم تتبع استخدام هذه الآليات في الرواية المصورة برسيوليس (٢٠٠٧) للكاتبة الإيرانية مرجان ساترابي. ويظهر البحث أن ساترابي استخدمت عناصر الرواية المصورة كالخطوط، والإطارات، والمرايا، والألوان الابيض والاسود لإعطاء القارئ صورة أقرب للواقع الذي تعيشه إيران بوجه العموم وهي على وجه الخصوص.

وانتهى البحث إلى استنتاج أن الصيغة المزدوجة للتعبير النصي والمرئي توفر مساحة أفضل للتعبير بوضوح عما تعجز الكلمات عن وصفه. كما ان هذه الالتقاء النصي المرئي في الروايات المصورة جعلها فريدة من نوعها، فهي تجمع بين العناصر المرئية للأفلام، والسمات النصية للأدب، والعناصر الترفيهية لكلاهما في قصة واحدة.