

From Four Colors to the Silver Screen: The Semiotic Similarities Between Comics and Live Action

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In Dr. Lloyd's Spring 2004 Linguistics: Signs and Symbols course, J. Robert Novak was required to consider semiotic theory and apply it to a topic of choice. In "From Four Colors to the Silver Screen: The Semiotic Similarities Between Comics and Live Action," Novak investigates comic books and finds that contrary to their popular image as a lower form of expression, they contain a very specialized semiotic system.

In one scene of Batman: A Death in the Family, a Middle Eastern terrorist is arguing with an evil American businessman over the launch coordinates for a cruise missile. Though the two are speaking Farsi, the readers know what they are saying. Meanwhile, forty feet or so away, Sharmin Rosen, Israeli agent, Judo-flips another businessman into the air. His gun goes off, loudly, startling Batman and Robin. Meanwhile, the terrorist pushes the launch button slowly, with doubt. Unexpectedly, the missile explodes on the launcher, killing the terrorist and the first businessman, while Batman and the others are thrown down a sand dune. (Starlin 40-41). This scene is a pretty standard comic scene, with the good guys coming out on top, while the bad guys get what they deserve. It's all pretty black-and-white in its morality, and there are very few words on these two pages, letting the actions speak for themselves. To the lay observer, it may seem that the comic book is a very simple, and therefore "lowbrow" form of entertainment. What this observer may not realize is that there is actually a very complex

semiotic system at work, in the form of the medium as well as in the content. Though comic books have their own specialized language of signs, they share many semiotic features with film and stage.

Perhaps the easiest way to start a discussion about the semiotics of comic books is to describe the similarities they have in common with films. In his book, The Field of Drama, Martin Esslin says that one of the first signs viewers of stage and screen productions encounter is the frame, or the actual screen. He says, "a mystery play performed in a church will have a different meaning from that . . . [if] presented at a cabaret" (54). He goes on to say that the program, brochure and the pre-publicity for the show all are symbols which affect the overall meaning of the performance that the viewers take with them. (54). Viewers perceive meaning in regards to a performance before they actually view the performance. They have certain expectations because of the theater, the advertising, etc. In other words, the packaging of the performance informs the reader.

Comic books, too, use packaging to create expectation. If one reads a monthly comic, such as Batman, the experience is different than if one reads the trade paperback Batman: A Death in the Family, even though a trade paperback is nothing more than a collection of monthly issues. The format makes the book seem somehow more important. If one reads the graphic novel Batman: The Killing Joke, the book seems even more important, even though it is just a comic book written for this particular format. And it is difficult to read The Complete Frank Miller Batman, the leather-bound hardback edition, without knowing that one is reading a piece of literature. The format of the comic is like the theater, program, and press combined. The way a book is bound informs the reader of a level of importance (example: a book collected in trade format means someone thought the book was important enough to collect). Like a play's program, comic books have credits to tell the reader who was behind the book. Trade paperbacks and graphic novels often have plot summaries printed on the back, functioning as programs, as well as a testimonial, which is advertising. An example of this is the first trade Paperback of DC/Vertigo's Preacher, which has the quote "'More fun than going to the movies' – Kevin Smith: Writer/Director, Clerks and Mallrats" (Ennis cover) printed along the top. Though the quality of the content in the aforementioned books may vary, the format does signify to the reader a certain level of artistic merit.

Another symbol used on stage and screen productions is set design. This includes the colors and lighting used to evoke a mood (Esslin 73-77). Obviously, this can also be applied to comic books. Esslin states that "the whole mood and meaning of a dramatic performance can be determined by, for example, a **basic color scheme**" (75, Esslin's emphasis). Scott McCloud, in his book Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, seems to agree with Esslin's opinion of the power of color. He states, "Colors could express a dominant mood" (190). For example, one could look at the comic book Hellboy. In one scene of the story "The Nature of the Beast," the eponymous character fights a dragon. Though Hellboy himself is bright red, and the scenes where Hellboy is getting hit are yellow, the use of blacks and grays on the rest of the page give a foreboding feeling (Mignola 13). Compare

this to the graphic novel Rogan Gosh: Star of the East, which uses bright swirling colors to represent an opium dream (McCarthy 7).

McCloud takes the idea of use of color one step further. He states that, in comics, “because costume colors remained the same, panel after panel, they came to **symbolize** characters in the mind of the reader” (188, McCloud’s emphasis). It is difficult for a comic book reader to see the colors blue, red, and yellow without thinking of Superman. Just think of how many ice cream stands offer red, yellow, and blue “Superman” ice cream.

Though comics do share the above features with the stage and the screen, they also have their own specialized language. For example, the “word balloon” is rarely seen outside of the comic book, nor is its companion, the “thought bubble.” These are the obvious sign system of comic books; most people would know what I mean if I said these terms. Some other sign systems include the use of brackets to indicate a foreign language is being spoken, caption boxes for narration, etc. However, there is a more subtle relationship between the reader and the image on the page, and this comes in the form of the panel, as well as the space between panels. In this relationship, though the images are static, comics take on an even greater similarity to film than they do with light and design.

One does not usually think about the panel, or the space between the panels, known as “the gutter” (McCloud 66). However, as McCloud says, “in . . . the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into one idea” (66). Look back at the example from *Batman: A Death in the Family* in the beginning of this essay. We know that the terrorist moves his hand toward the button and presses it, even though the pictures do not move. We ascribe motion to the act, even though the act “happens” in two static images. McCloud compares this to “closure” which he defines as “the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (63). When we see a part of something, such as a face obscured by sunglasses, we take for granted that the eyes are there. We do not need to see the eyes; our mind puts them where they belong.

Our minds do this to actions in comic books. The two panels showing the terrorist pressing the button represent the action by showing two important points of the act. First, he asks which button to push, then, he pushes it. Our mind, knowing that movement is implied, puts the movement “in the gutter.” The fact that we ascribe movement to the panels is evidenced by my description of the panels. I did not describe the scene as “first, the terrorist is standing, with his hand pointing towards the ‘fourth wall’; then, his finger is on the button.” Such a description would be ridiculous, and would be hard to follow as a story. Instead, I added all of the action implied by the panels.

Along with the closure in actions comes a closure in time. McCloud breaks comics down to six different types of transition, five of which imply a certain amount of time between panels. Applying his breakdown of transitions, and referring back to the example at the beginning of this essay, we see several types of transitions. Between the first and second panels, there is a scene-by-scene transition, which implies that these two panels happen at roughly the same time. The second panel, through use of motion lines (another “word” in the language of comics), we know that this panel covers the time it takes for the businessman to be flipped over Sharmin Rosen’s shoulder. The next transition, again scene-to-scene, shows that in this time, the terrorist has not pushed the button, but is preparing to. Next, there is a moment-to-moment transition, signifying that he pushes the button slowly. While the business man is flipped in one panel, the pressing of the button takes two. Finally, as the button is pressed, a scene-by-scene transition shows us the immediate consequence of the action, as well as the state of the other characters (Starlin 40-41).

Another example of the use of panel transitions, and one which will illustrate this point, is in Brian Michael Bendis’s *Goldfish*. On page 76, he uses a pretty standard long panel to show action in a scene. People clap, and the singer poses and thanks everyone for listening to her. Compare this to the first panel of page 84, where he breaks such a long panel into 5 smaller panels. There is still only one action (or in this case, a lack of action) in the scene, but now Bendis has broken it down. Four men sit at a poker table, waiting to see what the main character has in his hand. The breakdown of the panel into five smaller panels makes the reader’s eye slow down over the panel, simulating a pan shot in a movie. The panels, and the space between the panels, now represent a movie camera.

Because of this relationship between time and space, as illustrated by *Goldfish*, one can see that comic books function much like films. The panel tells us what to look at, much like the camera in a movie. We see what is in the panel, and imagine that the world exists outside that panel, just like we imagine that the borders of the movie screen can not fully contain the world of a film. Like film, the comic panel can pan and zoom. In fact, in these ways, comic books represent the movie screen. This is evidenced by the cinematic credits page of *Goldfish*

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(14-15), as well as the special thanks page (272). The “thanks” page serves as the closing credits, as Bendis names all of the people used as photo references for the characters.

While at first, comic books look like a simple form of entertainment, a closer study shows a very complicated system of signs and symbols is at work. Though comprised of static images, comic books actually share many features with stage and film, such as framing, the use of colors, and the framing of a scene, and in many ways try to emulate films.

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