

Comics and Graphic Novels: Counter Narratives to Cultural Products

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Abstract

Adapting either comic stories or graphic novels for the big screen with their spate of sequels has proved lucrative for the film industry. A myriad of images have sprung out of this current surge in comic or graphic characters and stories associated with popular demands for an alternative source of entertainment – one that has hitherto been undermined by the mainstream genres. This attraction towards comics and graphic novels has skyrocketed as a recent phenomenon, thanks to Hollywood's commercialism. Paradoxically, too, the strength of burgeoning fandom is what boosts this industry to generate more profit while the industry itself remains morally equivocal in the way it responds to the committed viewers. But what panders to the endless promotion of entertainment has already been damaging to the core principles of this medium. In capitalist economy movies created based on comics or graphic novels become cultural products. Before reaching the consumers these are intercepted by the intermediary groups, namely the studio conglomerates. Thus the artists'/creators' rights are violated and talents frequently go unacknowledged. What matters in the process of being so is the devaluation of comics or graphic novels as works of art or aesthetic creations. The premise of this paper is to investigate the nature of graphic novels and how they retain the transcendence of art as the primary function. The secondary role of the graphic novels is not to be ignored, given that numerous examples are available to validate their insightful probing of ideas. The paper will also seek to determine the factors that transform art into mere commodities.

Keywords: *comics, graphic novels, superhero movies, media conglomerate, aesthetics*

In the postmodern era, society is being consumed by mass production of cultural products. Under the sway of late capitalism, everything gives into the deceptive aura of consumer culture. Big corporate houses work as giant machineries churning out lucrative but imitative commodities that are designed to accrue profit and disseminate pop history. This beguiling history seems to be lingering for a much longer period, and its anticipated longevity perpetuates threats unbeknownst to its passive consumers. Fredric Jameson succinctly encapsulates the trajectory of this confusing miasma in his seminal work *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. In his evaluation of the postmodern phenomenon, he evokes a sense of loss in that the status of cultural art or aesthetic production fails to sustain its inherent attributes of authenticity, depth, and dimension (Jameson 61-62). Instead, a new form of aesthetic production emerges which replicates or mimes its precedent. Dubbed as pastiche by Jameson who sees its ubiquitous presence all across the media and spheres of cultural production (64-65), his assumptions are justified when the latest trend in Hollywood franchise filmmaking reveals these elements of pastiche. The conglomerate culture poised in its strong foothold dictates the future of Hollywood's fame and ceaseless manufacture of movies for enthralled audiences worldwide. By critics derided and vilified, these franchise films have suffered critical defeats and humiliation; conversely though, they have garnered a massive

response from the mainstream audience – a fact buttressed by box office earnings and hits. Of the prevailing genres, the superhero genre has climbed to the top rung in the list of preferred genres to be targeted for franchise filmmaking. The superhero genre is basically derived from one such contentious format, namely comics or graphic novels, which are primarily seen as a mode of entertainment for young readers. Movies are being made based on the adapted stories borrowed from this format in print medium. The originality of the story loses its charm when mindless repetition of its storyline gets regurgitated through countless reproductions sans novelty and innovation. However, despite some stigma attached to the comic format and graphic novels with respect to their “hybrid” (Meskin 219) conception, mingling traits of high and low culture and resulting in being a product of consumer culture, comics and graphic novels are aesthetically superior to their counterpart, namely movies (albeit of a different medium). In the words of Hillary Chute and Marianne Dekoven, “(C)omics is a mass cultural art form drawing on both high and low art indexes and references” (qtd. in Meskin 234). Unfortunately still, the format or medium has failed to retain its former glory. Moreover, it has gradually faltered in the domain of other high arts like novels, poems. Critics have denounced the status of comic books and the role they play, remarking, “A comic book that is a work of fiction and has aesthetic merit may be a work of art but not a work of literature” (John and Lopes, qtd. in Meskin 223). This has added grievances to the creative heads behind the format. The purpose of this paper is to elicit the efficacy of this much neglected format not to be confused with the notion of treating the format as fodder for pastiche and uphold the artistic merit of the creator-artists.

Superhero Movies and Recipe for Blockbuster and Franchise Films

Superhero movies are fun to watch – the statement is the most uncritical and blunt appraisal of a genre of movies that are currently dominating the entertainment industry. In massive numbers across the US and the world over, strings of superhero movies are released, distributed, and later perpetuated as franchise films, thanks to the media moguls and patron conglomerates. According to Reddit Post and Wikipedia’s box office statistics, apart from *Interstellar* which was the only original movie to surface in the world wide box office top 10 in 2014, the other 9 were either in longer series like reboots, remakes, sequels, or individual entries. Out of them, half belonged to the superhero genre (Vego, *Clusory Connections*). Besides, the deluge of audiences throughout the globe going into movie theaters contributes to the success and further manufacture of umpteen movies which Mark Harris, the executive director of *Entertainment Weekly*, sums up in his insightful observation on the film industry: “franchises are not a big part of the movie business. They are *the* movie business. Period. Twelve of the year’s fourteen highest grosses are, or will spawn, sequels” (qtd. in Vego, *my italics*). Thus, the very nature of franchise filmmaking creates a recurring pattern. Taken at face value, the above observation appears to be denoting a harmless appreciation of “visual spectacle” (Pagello 5) evoking a “‘soft and fuzzies’ feeling of experience” (Meehan 61) – a common phenomenon quintessentially attributed to the postmodern condition where only special effects accorded by digital media prolong audiences’ enrapture (Pagello 5). However, this experience, as examined by Adorno and Horkheimer, actually reflects a passive participation of the audience surrendering to light entertainment which has always been decried for its superficiality in

content materials (95). This highlights the degraded status of the genre and reinforces its cheap entertainment value. No one can deny the magic of technological feats that these movies employ to a mind-boggling extent and at the expense of seriousness and depth of originality, as Peter Lamarque criticizes the genre for lacking in “rich characterization, theme, language and plotting” (qtd. in Meskin 220).

Nonetheless, the superhero genre has proved to be phenomenally successful, and its longevity is anticipated to span more than another decade or so unless the tide of popularity recedes. This looks somewhat unlikely given the fact that the range of audiences is ever escalating all over the globe. The appeal of superhero movies has been irresistible to many, irrespective of age and gender. Although it is purportedly the youth that this genre is supposed to cater to, grown-ups and adult fans also throng the theater contrary to popular belief. Together, the wide range of audience contributes to the industry’s profits. As a genre, traditionally superhero movies are a medium of respite and redemption for many. Attributed with mythical capacity and grandiose stature, these characters take the audience to a diegetic world through a conspicuous flight of fancy. The illusory nature is a welcome break from the gritty nature of many realistic films. And also the cathartic effects afforded by this genre prove wholesome at the end. Moreover, it propagates universal American moral values (Arndt, qtd. in Gagliardo 29). Therefore, suffice it to say that this genre spikes more interest in its avid followers. Consequently, this genre has assumed blockbuster status over the years.

The blockbuster mentality of Hollywood goes back to the ‘70s when its major studios plummeted. This also saw the concurrent rise in the franchise filmmaking. Following the footsteps of the erstwhile franchise filmmaking, Hollywood in the 21st century still practices the common formula as it promises commercial success, drawing in big earnings through the box office. There are some characteristic attributes of blockbuster films, like indulgence in commercial elements, focus on youth audience, saturation of market, and emulation of the successful endeavors by Spielberg and Lucas (Owczarski 203). Most superhero movies are based on superhero comics. Almost immediately after superheroes rose to prominence in comic books, they were adapted. However, in the decades following the ‘30s and ‘40s, their production declined. With intermittent gaps in the production of superhero movies, the genre resurfaced again at the turn of the 20th century, riding a wave of a new interest in fantasy and sci-fi. Lately, the franchise films have been banking on comics for content materials which are basically about a vigilante or group of vigilantes fighting against all forms of injustice. As of now, Marvel, in conjunction with its patron distributor, has yielded the highest amount of profits, surpassing DC and Time Warner, Inc. This is owing to properties that are crowd-pleasing – mostly leaning on “generous dose of action, violence, and PG rated content” (Dirks). Hollywood has managed to steer clear of the scathing allegations like “less reputable or artistic genres” by relying on these formulas (Neale, qtd. in Owczarski 209). Being the creator and publisher of comics with superhero characters and elements, Marvel and DC have been owned by companies which have been producing and distributing movies with exploits and heroism of superheroes in storylines. Thus, after a hiatus the superhero movies have been revived through rebooting, retelling, and remaking – all centering on the “endless variations

of the same motif” (Pagello 13), and now the genre has found a firm footing in Hollywood, reinforcing the postmodern condition of phantasmagoria.

Capitalist Economy and Cultural Products

In order to unearth the success of contemporary superhero movies – the film industry and digital media contributing to its dominance over other industries and media – it is pertinent to speculate on the nature and dynamics of the existing economy. One of the key components of capitalist economy is accumulation of profit. The capitalist maxim is to invest money to generate more money. It is a highly competitive economic system where big companies or corporations hold sway over the production and manufacture of products. Consumers here are a vital part of a mechanism that determines the demands or needs of the consumers. This mechanism is aimed at benefitting the sellers as they manipulate latest technological advancements through mass marketing. Cultural products are verily such results of an economic system where everything ranging from print to audio-visual industries including movies, TV, radio, music, and publishing are seen as commodities (Rauschenberger 2). In most cases, as bitterly derided by postmodern critics, cultural products are deemed as standardized and trivialized according to the manipulation of the media (Adorno and Horkheimer 95). In a capitalist society media plays an instrumental role in shaping people’s minds. For instance, movies target a large populace. They are the passive recipients of the products otherwise known as “industrial product of fiction” (Dorfman, qtd. in Rauschenberger 23). Since in the postmodern era it is the culture industry that takes the helm in promulgating false needs and consciousness through homogenization (Adorno and Horkheimer 97), it is all but evident that consumers will meekly accept what they are fed with, be they entertainment or advertisement. The culture industry, otherwise known as media conglomerates, thus flex muscles to ensnare unsuspecting and gullible consumers into meek acceptance of false reality (Adorno and Horkheimer 100). However, the machinery responsible for this takes the upper hand, for “mass-produced culture is a business, governed by corporate drives for profit, market control, and transindustrial integration” (Meehan 49).

Besides, the wholesale commercialization of culture ensures accumulation of maximum profit aligned with the prevailing rules of the market at the expense of the artistic content (Eco, qtd. in Sokolowski 310). Hollywood is an industry which runs like capitalist media business whose main goal can be seen as “shap(ing), construct(ing), recycl(ing), break(ing), and distribut(ing) the show for profit” (Meehan 62). The major studios as part of a larger media conglomerate are a principal source of revenue. The conglomerates own or acquire publishing houses like Marvel and DC as a source for generating more materials by licensing revenues. Interestingly, these corporations do not merely sell movies, they also promote ideologies to the consuming audience (Meehan 61). Hence, these giant companies have since then held captive the media. Big conglomerates have always been accused of dishonest practices of domination against media. It underscores how, despite having access to a rich repository of artists and writers for an authentic measure of success or failure, the conglomerates manipulate and control consumptions. In contrast, the comics and graphic novel format applies authenticity.

Comic Books and Popular Entertainment

Unlike superhero movies, comic books have not flourished in the same manner. Ironically though, the same content had proven to be a potent source for the adapted movies. Comics are “not accepted by society at large as an art form with the same rights to freedom of expression as other art forms” (Sabin, qtd. in Gagliardo 30). In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence” (199). Primarily originating in the pulp publishing business, comic books expanded its market by establishing its stranglehold among readers ranging from pre-teens to adults. During its golden era in the ‘40s, the comic book was the most popular form of entertainment in America. It was a time when comic book sales soared, attracting a lot more people than movies, television, radio, or magazines for adults as reading of comic books was gradually becoming a cultural practice (Gagliardo 26). However, towards the end of the decade and at the beginning of the early ‘50s, perceptions towards comic books took a downturn. In fact, there was a prevailing notion amongst the cultural elitists that comic books were low brow. The hitherto emerging popularity of this mass medium also took further blows when there was bitter outcry in the public as their perception veered negatively. Many pejorative tags like obscene, funny, puerile, and infantile were given to the form itself and its creators. They were dubbed as “the marijuana of the nursery” and vilified for having aspects in them meant “exclusively for children” (Nyberg, qtd. in Gagliardo 27). On the whole, comics/comic books were regarded as “conductive to wrongdoing of all sorts” (Hadju, qtd. in Gagliardo 27).

Moreover, since the imposition of stringent prescriptive standards curtail “creative endeavor,” the comics industry badly suffered from limitations unlike “other media” (Sabin, qtd. in Gagliardo 31). The readers too were not spared from the severe lambasting. Wertham, an anti-comic book crusader, classified the readers as having “the brain of a child, the sexual drive of a satyr, and the spiritual delicacy of a gorilla” (Hadju, qtd. in Gagliardo 27). The artists solely responsible for being the creative heads behind them were consequently relegated to an ignominious position no matter how professionally they were engaged to elevate the art form. The loss incurred by those working in the comics industry as professionals in terms of social status, the plight, and the dire circumstances were harrowing as reflected in the following comment made by Wright: “In the artistic profession, comic books ranked just above pornography” (qtd. in Gagliardo 29). “Freak” (Wolk, qtd. in Gagliardo 29) was a frequent appellation for those whose vocation was also regarded as “shameful” (Arndt, qtd. in Gagliardo 29). The repercussions continued unfortunately with its legacy in the 21st century as artists are “punished for having and using two skills and not only one” (Eggers, qtd. in Gagliardo 29). The practitioners of comic arts have shied away from the masses and opted for terms like “illustrators, commercial artists, and cartoonists” because of these negative connotations (McCloud 18). These professional artists and creative writers experienced massive losses in terms of income as well. As an industry it spiraled downwards in terms of sales too. Even in 2003 the bestselling comic books found it extremely difficult to surpass the 100,000 copies per issue milestone (Wright, qtd. in Gagliardo 30).

However, even though the form failed to attach any appeal to the mass audience, it proved to be by the '80s and '90s a compelling fodder for the biggest entertainment industry in America – Hollywood. This aggravated the decline in comic books readership but inclined more and more people towards the new form of entertainment. From the eighties onwards, Hollywood sustained its big budget productions, incorporating comic book properties. Thus, the old superhero genre was recast and revived, if not glorified.

Maturation, Coming of Age of Comics and Graphic Novels

The historical trajectory of comics shows how the format has gone through formative and evolutionary phases. With the implementation of self-imposed or self-inflicted censorship of the contents and production of comics, many publishing houses, authors, and artists sought to find their niche in the underground business, with contents verging on edgy subject matters like explicit depiction of sex, drug abuse, and violence epitomized in the Silver Age of comics. These were an attempt to subvert the complacency of the conservative mindset of the then society. After their revival again at the outset of their emergence from the underground, comics seemed to have focused on the delineation of reality through dark humor and sarcasm, the prominence of which testified to the ability of the comics to foil and disrupt the standards and naïve expectations of pliant society (Pagello 4). Gradually, comic books grew out of their so-called juvenile mode, trying to transcend the superhero genre and market domain hitherto targeted at the adolescents. There were obvious shifts in the artwork, approach, and thematic concepts (Gagliardo 28). By the '70s, which is known as the Bronze Age of comics, the major academia were eager to acknowledge the role of comics books, although an altogether new terminology came to be associated with the format.

According to Charles Hatfield, "(T)he graphic novel in particular has become comics' passport to recognition as a form of literature" (qtd. in Meskin 223). This assertion is also echoed in Will Eisner's words since he too regards it as literature "because the images are employed as language" (qtd. in Meskin 223). By definition, a graphic novel is a longer fictional work than comics. It is a book-length narrative as opposed to comics; but like comics, graphic novels are a combination of visual and verbal forms of communication. The term, graphic novels, has also attracted much criticism to the way the terminology is applied. To some, a graphic novel is synonymous to comics. However, with the publication of *A Contract with God* in 1979 written by Will Eisner, the term found much currency. In 1983, when Art Spiegelman's graphic novel, *Maus*, was published, it got firmly imprinted in the mind of the mainstream audience that the graphic novel is another authentic format in the print medium. With the term is implied a lot of seriousness of intent and complexity in terms of plot construction, narrative technique, and other stylistic aspects which are exclusive to the format. Although known for its close affinity with the superhero genre, the format runs a wide gamut of other genres like non-fiction and autobiography as well.

On the whole, the term "graphic novel" seems to have done justice to the notion of blurring the division between high-brow culture and low-brow cultural products. This in effect leads to the potent question of whether comics or graphic novel is equivalent to other literary works or works of art by dint of its aesthetic properties. In a postmodern context, resolving queries

like this arouses a string of questions relating to the preeminence of the notion of cultural capital. Comics and graphic novels, in fact, play a cultural role and their status also determines the status of their readers. Will Eisner in his seminal book *Comics and Sequential Art* claims that “the reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit” (8). This assertion in a definitive manner replaces any signs of inferiority on its part. Like any work of literature in prose, arts in comics shares the same structure as Eisner further negates the inherent assumptions misconstrued around the format by stating that “in the skillful employment of words and images lies the expressive potential of the medium” (13).

Aesthetic Value of Comics and Graphic Novels

Terry Eagleton, decrying the comic format as lacking any aesthetic value attributed otherwise to true works of literature, has stated, “Superman comics and Mills and Boon novels are fictional but not generally regarded as literature, and certainly not as Literature” (qtd. in Meskin 223). Since comics and graphic novels are basically multi-modal with a prominence of images, many might undermine this as aesthetically not up to the mark. However, images are embedded with subtle meanings and symbols as Eisner says, “the codification becomes, in the hands of the artist, an alphabet,” which the readers have to fathom and decipher (16). Comics channel the authors’ thoughts which are reconverted through the readers’ senses into thoughts again which Scott McCloud analyzes in the following manner: “(C)reators and readers are partners in the invisible creating something out of nothing, time and time again” (205). This assertion is reiterated in Eisner’s assessment of the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of comics and graphic novels because comprehension “demands of the sequential artist an understanding of the reader’s life experience if his message is to be understood” (13). For example, there are a number of elements like gutter, panel, mise-en-scène which “work together as clues from which readers draw inferences as they make sense of what they see on a page” (Karin Kukkonen 2). One of the elements like panels creates a phenomenon called closure (10). Scott McCloud sees this phenomenon as perceiving the whole through observing the parts which is basically a mental process (63). Will Eisner has also identified the regimens of art comprising of perspective, symmetry, brushstroke along with the regimens of literature like grammar, plot, syntax which, according to him, draw a parallel between both the structure of illustration and prose (8). Like films where the story unfolds in front of the viewers, comics and graphic novels both share the same principles of mapping out the imagination for the readers (Eisner 122). It can be assumed that comics and graphic novels as a format, if not more, is no less a complex medium than films. And as to the contours and components of comic arts and other prose works of literature, they share similar characteristics. Moreover, the diegetic world of comics is not linear or flat; the narrative resembles “weaving of a fabric” (122) because it entails “conception of an idea, the arrangement of image elements and the construction of the sequence of the narration and the composing of dialogues” (122).

Therefore, it is a gross misconception to consider the superhero genre as the only predominant category that does not justly appraise formats like graphic novels and comics. These presumptions wrongly mislead critics like Terry Eagleton to subscribe to faulty notions. Superheroes are no longer seen as indefatigable; there are anti-heroes with their persistent

failures, naïve Samaritans with finite possibilities – all of them are of human proportions and they bespeak of their ordinary ordeals of no lesser importance. Additionally, “Mainstream superhero comics typically possess much in the way of substantive literary values” (Meskin 222), contrary to the misapprehensions of the dominant ideology. Aside from this typical foray, there are plenty of subject matters with wide ranging thematic concepts touching upon darker and more life-like representations and associations. David Carrier has aptly grappled with the aesthetics of comics for their “inventiveness, originality, and consistency” (qtd. in Brandl). After all these analyses it will not be too far-fetched to justify the claim that the format of comics and graphic novels stands on its own right. Firstly, it is a unique form of literature that flaunts various stylistic features. Secondly, the comic book buries deep within it elements that have moral dimensions – the history of comics reveals that it has oftentimes been used as instruments of chastisement and correction as a means to fight ills of any given society (Topffer, qtd. in McCloud 17).

Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* departs from the conventional hero narrative and instead focuses on caricaturing its main protagonist as she transitions from the pre-pubescent phase to post-adolescent phase against the backdrop of the Islamist revolution sweeping across the entire Iran. Although the graphic novel takes issue with the then socio-political unrest in Iran, it successfully retains a casual and tongue-in-cheek approach to critiquing the radicalization of Iranian politics and gradual descent toward religious bigotry. Not unlike a bildungsroman, the narrative traces the author’s namesake through her journey in simplistic style – mostly a black and white illustration as opposed to the vivid and gaudy colors of other comic series. Her follies, flaws, and ambitions are made objects of both ridicule and hilarity resembling an everyman. It seems as though Satrapi is trying to redeem in retrospect the formative years of her younger days by fondly recalling the naiveté and guilelessness. Her plain illustration style accompanied with the comic elements offsets and counterbalances the serious contents. However, Starapi’s retelling of history by ingenious amalgamations of images and words enables her readers to partake directly in adventure, fantasy, and memory as experienced by the author herself. The very limitations of the graphic novel as opposed to its literary counterpart, namely a pseudo-autobiographical fiction, here play an adventitious role, for it allows the reader to vicariously and visually feel hooked to the events. Likewise, Alan Moore and David Lloyd’s *V for Vendetta* is also unconventional in its aversion to regular hero narrative or superhero genre and affinity to subversive issues dealt with in film-noir style. Moreover, the application of paler colors and surreal presentation make the graphic novel an outstanding accomplishment of genuine merit. If unaided by images, the words alone could not evoke or elicit responses from its readers, for the entire narrative is indebted to the way images bring immediacy and authenticity of emotions. The protagonist remains elusive throughout and becomes an embodiment of pure abstractions. A symbol of anarchy against totalitarianism, the leading character fights an ideological warfare against all kinds of ominous power that threaten to arrest humanity and its characteristic attributes. Both the aforementioned graphic novels have been adapted to the big screen and have been accorded critical approval. However, both as movies were departures from the superhero genre, and hence eschewed the oft-tried formula.

Conclusion

Late capitalism and cultural dominance of the postmodern era invalidate the distinction between high and low culture. In this era, aesthetic productions are merely seen as consumer goods. Does this imply graphic novels and comics are solely hybrid and pastiche? By that association, does this also mean that the artists, creative heads behind the creation of comics and graphic novels, are also mercenary professionals? Are they experiencing what Jameson has identified as loss of subjectivity, a quintessential postmodern phenomenon? To some extent, his argument holds true; however, it must be argued by refusing to bluntly accept the criticism that, unlike franchise films which are appropriated as end results of cultural production, graphic novels and comics are not subject to such mechanism leading to mindless replication of the original/prototype. Those who are complicit in this corroding destruction of transcendental art are called custodian players like art collector, the critic, the journalist, the manager, and the curator in the context of modern market paradigm (Jalbuena *Business Mirror*). Deresiewicz is quoted as saying, "The new paradigm displaces the preeminence and importance of the artist who, it turns out, is only one among a number of players who determine the value of art and what it is" (Jalbuena *Business Mirror*). However, with some exceptions, where modern artists appear to have fallen under the spell of market culture, most artist-creators of comics and graphic novels apply their visionary perspectives. Their work has transcendental value and hermeneutic dimensions. And it is the artists' den that produces true art, without any culturally defined value ascribed to it (Clow 27).

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