

## Multimodal Semiotic Units In Graphic Novels : Structure And Interrelationships

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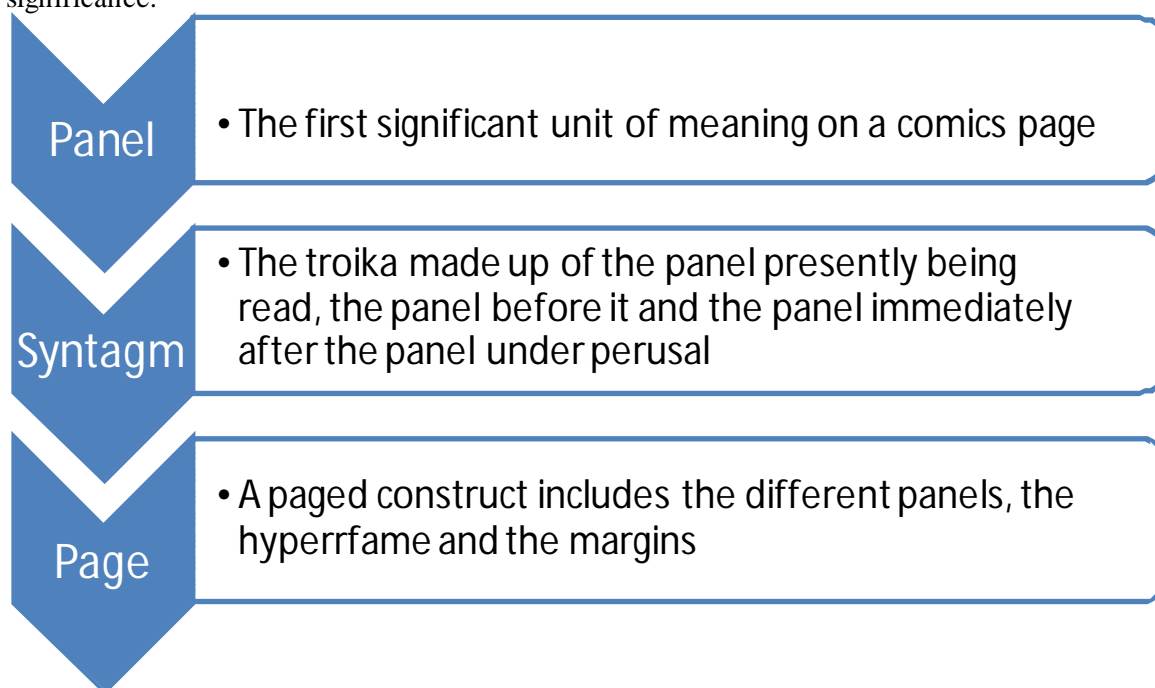
### Abstract:

Over the past century, with the increasing importance of the graphic and visual media, extensive work has been done in the genre of Graphic Novel. This work has been both in the form of original works (as Graphic Novels, like Sandman, Maus, etc) and also the adaptation of established literary works into the medium of Graphic Novels. The latter is a relatively new field and is growing in import due the promise it has exhibited in the introduction and pedagogy (and teaching) of important literary works to a younger audience, who would have otherwise been bereft of any such exposure, partly due to a decline in reading habit over the past decades and also due to the relatively involved subject matter that these literary works come with. With time, Graphic Novels have evolved into an accepted form of fiction and nonfiction for readers and students. The adoption of the Graphic Novel in classrooms has proven to be a rather powerful tool as an instruction medium for students, promoting the reading habit in even those students who have insofar been hesitant to lift a book.

This paper aims at providing a basic primer and a broad framework for students and graphic novel enthusiasts, to study the various facets of a graphic novel, for a more in depth understanding.

Keywords: Arthrology, Gridding, Quadrillage, SpatioTopia, Panel, Hyperframe, Gutter, Groensteen, Maus, Eisner

Groensteen denotes a *Panel* as the smallest unit into which a graphic novel or comic can be broken down into. Groensteen explains the medium of graphic novel in the form of a reverse Russian Nesting Doll. The smallest 'doll' is the panel, which then expands to combinations of greater heft and significance.



**The syntax of comics is based upon the following concepts of Spatio Topia.**

Groensteen defines a panel(*spatio*) as the first significant unit of understanding on the page of a comic book. The relationship of a panel with other panels (contiguous or otherwise), on the same or adjacent

pages and its interrelationship with panels spread across multiple pages across the entire graphic novel is studied through various parameters.

The parameters that broadly define the major aspects of the Panel on a given page/layout are Form, Area and Site. *Form* refers to the shape of the panel, *Area* refers to the area occupied by a panel on a particular page/layout and *Site* refers to the location of the panel on a particular page/layout

The placement of these panels in a given graphic novel plays a very important role in distinguishing a graphic novel, just as much as the level of detail and sharpness of the drawing.

These 3 parameters in turn affect how a panel interacts with other panels with similar or different values for the above mentioned parameters.

**Syntagm (Topia)** is defined as a linguistic unit consisting of a set of linguistic forms (phonemes, words, or phrases) that are in a sequential relationship to one another, a trioka made up of the panel presently being read, the panel before it and the panel immediately after the panel under perusal.

. In terms of a graphic novel, a syntagm refers to the *Topia* in *Spatio-Topia*.

This is because, while an image in a panel is static, it is the words and other discursive elements that are dynamic and narrate a story in a particular timeline. *The inter relationship between various fragments of texts in a panel, that take the story forward, creates a symbiotic relationship with the images in the panel to make the panel whole*

Arthrology refers to the relationships between panels and can take two forms:

Restrained (the sequential relationship between panels) occurs in simple left to right reading,

General (the interrelationships between all panels) differs from Restrained Arthrology in the sense that it studies the interrelationship between all panels irrespective of whether they are adjacent or juxtaposed or even on the same page.

Gridding (Quadrillage) may be defined as the way the different panels, syntagms, etc break up the space available on a page

Braiding (Tressage) refers to the supplementary relations between different panels; An example of this is multiple panels across the comic book having different images and text, but having a similar construct

Hyperframe refers to a single page that includes all the elements (frames) within that paged construct. Multiframe on the other hand is a more evolved concept and has multiple forms. The comic strip, the double page spread and even an entire graphic novel are different forms of the multiframe, albeit multistage multiframe systems for the proliferation of panel.

So a hyperframe can be considered as a special case of a multiframe and can be referred to as a simple multiframe.

As explained above, the hyperframe separates the useable area on a page (that can be used by panels, the most basic constructs), from the peripheral area or the margin. This peripheral area has traditionally lay outside the boundary/limit of the hyperframe. However, avantgarde researchers into this budding field, notably, Spanish essayist and Graphic Novelist Antonio Altarriba has gone on to suggest and concur that the *margin* of a graphic novel page may also include the blank spaces between different panels on the same page, thereby adding context and inter relationships between them.

So the margin frames the image(s) on a page and can go ahead and add context to them by taking over the blank spaces between different panels.

Margins are not necessarily blank spaces. They often contain the name of the novel, a title, page numbers, etc. They may also be decorated with texts and symbols/inscriptions, etc which have a bearing on the overall structuring of the frames and the presentation of the page itself

Margins can affect how we read, make sense of and appreciate the visual contents of a page through its varying parameters such as Size, Content and Autonomy.

Size refers to the Width of the margin (both outside the hyperframe and between different panels). Content is the text/inscriptions in the margin, its colour, etc. Autonomy determines the degree of autonomy of the margin. This in turn is determined through the aperture of the Hyperframe (whether the outline making up the hyperframe is continual or intermittent) and also the differences in the colours of the margin vis-a-vis the colour of the blank interpanel spaces (space between individual panels on a page)

We have earlier discussed panels and graphic novel syntax from a Spatio-Topical frame of reference (primarily its form, site and area). With a better understanding of Hyperframe, we can now we can now extrapolate our understanding Panels to the affinity that a panel shares with the hyperframe, both in terms of space (Spatio) and Syntagm (Topia).

Space refers to the actual area occupied by a panel as a proportion to the total area occupied by the hyperframe, either in the form of the same geometrical shape as the hyperframe or a different shape altogether, out of a large range of possibilities.

From the point of view of Topia (syntagm), the affinity between the panel and the hyperframe is established in terms of the panel's Cartesian coordinates within a page, which is referred to as **the Site**.

These coordinates determine the place of the panel in the scheme of things on a page and the order that panels are read in on a particular page (reading protocol). It is from the inferences drawn by the reader from these coordinates and various parts of the multiframe that pathways from one panel to the next are deduced, even though arrows are sometimes needed to guide the reader.

The site of a particular panel is determined by apportioning of both *space and time*, because the position of each panel denotes not just the space it occupies within a hyperframe, but also its position in the advancement of the story.

This is how the breakdown of the panel through restrained arthrology (sequential left to right reading) allows us to apportion temporal coordinates to a panel, through the denotation of the position of the panel in the overall story

The limited space available to graphic designers/comic artists in a panel entails that the creators have to be rather selective about the content and emotion they want to display as words on that page. Generally, only the sounds which take the narrative of the graphic novel forward are displayed.

One of the main ways of expressing such words on the page of a graphic novel is the "balloon", which are extensively used for expressing a character's dialogue and/or musings about other characters or objects that make up the universe of that Graphic Novel.

Belgian essayist and graphic novelist Thierry Smolderen describes word balloons as sound objects within an image. The word balloon in itself is a non diegetic construct, that is, it is not a part of the storyline itself. However, the contents of this word balloon are carriers of diegetic content as they contain information that is spoken by any of the characters in the novel and takes the storyline forward.

According to Groensteen, the Balloon and the Drawing can be represented on the same plane as they maintain mutual relationships of continuity and sharing in space and layout. The space occupied by the Balloon is usually taken from the drawing itself, so the Balloon can be considered as a frame within the image/drawing.

Rectangular or Square panels are the most common type of speech balloons

It is usually possible to differentiate between two types of balloons by shape as described below.

Word Balloons with Quadrangular Lines (Squares and/or Rectangles) economize space and are able to do so as they are naturally calibrated with the panel size itself, so it is scalable as the size of the panel

increases or decreases and automatically draws from the other interrelationships of the panel it is located in.

Due to this natural scalability, such balloons are usually more discreet than curved balloons and can closely encase the text.

Word Balloons with all other shapes including those with an elliptical or irregular line - These balloons bulge/extend on each side of the text and contain free space within a frame, which is otherwise visible only in the margins

Word Balloons in different colours/specific modifications have been used by Novelists such as Sienkiewicz to denote voices of different characters in the same panel or multiframe

Word Balloons may also be slightly modified at times by adding another outline, to denote the words of particular character unequivocally

The use of one type of balloon over the other depends on the strategy of the novelist.

While juxtaposed and linked frames have been studied through hyperframes and multiframe respectively, the apparatus used for the accommodation of a frame within one or more frames is referred to as *Incrustation* or *Inset*

The importance of *Inset* in graphic novels lies in the flexibility it affords the author in the management and apportioning of space within a comic book page.

The benefits of an *Inset* panel accrue to an *Inclusive* Panel as follows: In this case, the master/inclusive frame includes the inset frame. The inclusive frame in this case usually includes a large space or a background in which the main character(s) are shown at a reduced size. It helps establish the setting for where the related action vis-a-vis the main character(s) will occur.

The one or more inset frames that follow act like a “cinematic zoom”, wherein the reader is brought closer to the main character and possible word balloons within the INSET frame(s). The time relationship between multiple inset panels might get complicated, so it is rather common to find multiple inset frames within an inclusive frame in line with the background image used, to give direction to the story.

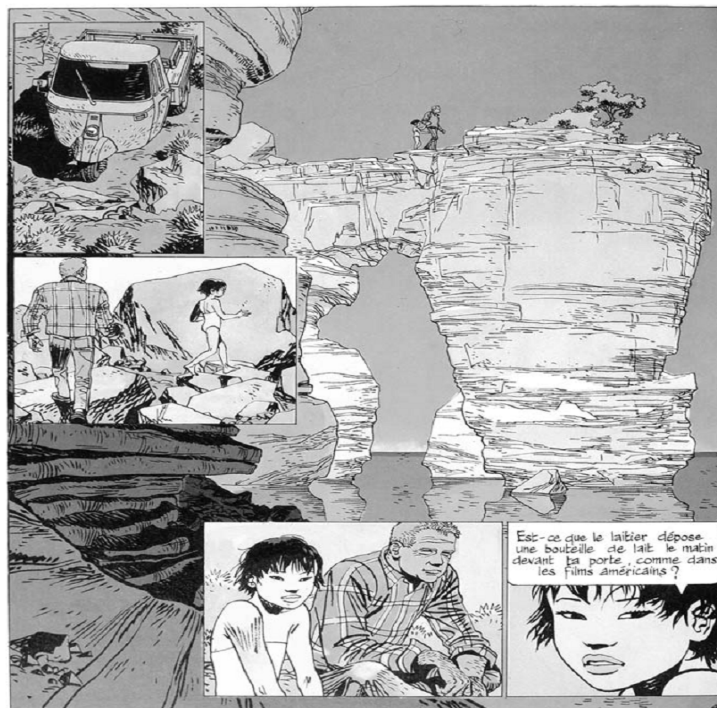


Fig. 9. From *Le Voyage en Italie*, volume 1 (1988), by Cosèy. © Éditions Dupuis.

In Graphic Novels, a Gutter simply refers to the space between the framed panels. They have been accorded great importance by comic book enthusiasts and graphic novel researchers alike, due to the literal and metaphorical space afforded by these spaces between panels for the reader's own flights of fancy and his/her visualizations that the rich graphic novel imagery evokes.

Gutters have been classified as follows based on how they help the story line progress with respect to prior and successive panels:

Moment-to-Moment Gutter are those instances where the reader experiences little or no time lag before experiencing successive panels and the events contained in them..

Action-to-Action Gutter are empty spaces that refer to those instances in particular where successive panels enable the readers the view a particular character (or set of characters) going through their respective transformations.

Subject-to-Subject Gutter refer to those cases, wherein the gutter lies between frames which help in the progression of the storyline more directly.

Scene-to-Scene Gutter encourage deductive reasoning in the reader by allowing him/her to deduce the unstated and/or the unwritten by reflecting on the empty space between two frames.

Aspect-to-Aspect encourage the reader to reflect on the varied emotions being felt by the characters enshrined in the respective frames

As new and established scholars in this field of visual media and graphic novel, such as Groensteen, Ferstl, etc continue to march along, expanding existing concepts and creating new ones, new opportunities to study the various aspects of the graphic novels, their inter relationships and also their link with other visual media, will continue to arise, providing avenues, hitherto unavailable to scholars and enthusiasts.

Such an increase in academic activity on the Graphic novel provides an acceptance of the contrasting features of literature and the graphic media (comic books), which in itself is of import as it recognizes the comic book as an independent media with its own set of terms, definitions, scholarship and erudition.

Just like other forms of adaptation of ideas, namely, Film (visual) and Literature (words), Graphic novel as a medium can achieve expressions not possible with the other two and vice versa. With respect to narratology, the terms and framework described above educates and inspires new entrants into the field to add to and build upon the existing corpus of information for carrying out more scientific adaptations of literary works into the graphic novel format and also to produce better original works.

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