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Professor Dib

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Putting the “Comm” in Comics: A Communication-Theory-Informed Reading of Graphic
Narratives

The analysis of literature is traditionally reserved for critical theories common in English circles, such as poststructuralism, feminism, or Marxism. These approaches serve as lenses with which readers can interpret writing and even society. Such analyses provide excellent opportunities for learning and deconstruction, but what happens when a piece of literature demands more? What happens when an additional element—pictures—are mixed through the words we are so familiar with studying? In recent decades, a growing interest in studying graphic novels as a form of literature has given us the opportunity to find out. Due to their relationship with the reader, multimodality, and form, comics and graphic novels necessitate a reading practice that considers communication theory as well as critical theory.

Communication theory is concerned with the transmission of information. Of course, all literature is a form of communication, as it deals with information being transmitted from the author to the reader, whether it be through stories, poems, or essays. According to Stephen Littlejohn and Karen Foss’s *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, “Virtually every discipline concerned with the human being must study communication to some degree” (102). Despite this, scholars seldom use the word *communication* when dealing with literature. Perhaps this is because literature’s status as communication is inferred, or maybe it is easy to forget that on the

other side of each work of literature is a reader—a reader whose part in the transmission of information is often left unstudied.

The exception to this is reader-response theory, which refuses to ignore the reader's experience of a text. When Louise Rosenblatt, a highly influential literary theorist, first formulated the idea in the mid-1900s, she stated that "literature provides a special form of communication. . . . We are intimately involved in what we are recreating under the guidance of the text" (305). She further suggests that reading is a transaction, a two-way street. According to reader-response theory, a text that has not been read is incomplete simply because it has not been interpreted by a reader.

In "Exploring Literary Devices in Graphic Novels," Ashley K. Dallacqua affirms that Rosenblatt's reader-response theory carries over into graphic novels due to their unique relationship with the reader (368). When images are added to the literature equation, the reader's responsibility is heightened. Not only must the reader interpret the text, they must decipher the images. In these cases, the reader is not only allowed to assign but also responsible for assigning meaning to the writing, even more so than when images are not involved. Scott McCloud confirms this idea in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* by stating that with a graphic novel, "[w]hat you see is seldom what you get if all you are seeing is just ink and paper. In the end, what you get is what you give" (136–37). With the help of Rosenblatt's theory and its application, it can be determined that the analysis of graphic novels, more so than other types of literature, depends on not only the author's text but also the reader's response.

If, then, reading graphic novels is a transactional, two-way process, the act of reading a graphic novel can be interpreted as an act of communication and analyzed using communication theory. This idea is similar to and even depends on Hillary Chute's decision to "treat comics as a

medium—not a lowbrow genre” (452). A *medium* is defined simply as a mode of communication, making comics a medium that combines the use of both images and text to convey a message. In other words, multimodality is one characteristic that makes comics unique as a medium and communication method. While multimodality is not a common focus of many critical theories, it is heavily studied in communication theory—especially social communication theory. Social communication presents a set of assumptions: that communication behavior has pattern, that it is learned, context-bound, multimodal, and multifunctional (Littlejohn and Foss 901). We can apply social communication theory to comics in our analysis, building off of critical theory to build a fuller picture.

Take, for instance, Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, which employs the use of animal illustrations to depict different ethnicities and races, so the metaphor is not only assumed but also shown in each and every panel. Looking at the allegory through an ethnic studies lens, it could be argued that Spiegelman chose to represent Jews as mice so that the readers are confronted with the Nazi ideology that regarded Jews as inhuman. One spread of panels shows Art and Françoise debating which animal to depict her as in the novel, since she is French and also converted to Judaism. Françoise argues to Art that “if you’re a mouse, I ought to be a mouse too” (Spiegelman 11). The comic leaves the reader to infer why Art chose to draw her as a mouse—maybe she convinced him, or maybe he believed she was “Jewish enough.” Or perhaps the metaphor is not intended to hold up under intense scrutiny; after all, Art himself is often depicted as a human wearing a mouse mask, suggesting that some content is on some level abstracting the lived realities of the rest of the story.

What happens, then, when social communication theory is added to the equation in order to further explore multimodality, the interplay of the different representational modes of writing

and image? As the analysis stands right now, there is very little interpretation of the images in relationship to the text. Social communication theorists are interested not only in the content or words themselves but also in the way in which they are portrayed, whether they are accompanied by body language, tone, or context—social communication theory insists on the relevance of multiple channels of communication. Citing the work of Ray Birdwhistell, the primary social communication theorist, Littlejohn and Foss explain that because of the relevance of multiple channels of communication, it is impossible to convey no information through body position: “however a person stands, some information is provided to others, whether about health, age, gender or ethnic identity, frame of mind, or degree of involvement in the interaction” (901). In comics, those same concepts apply, except the second mode of communication is illustration, not body language. In *Maus*, the images show ethnic identity specifically without ever putting it explicitly into words. The reader is expected to take the context in relation to the image and make an inference based on their interpretation. The reader thus understands that the mice represent Jewish people, that the frogs represent French people, and so on. Furthermore, each image of Art and Françoise shows pointing, posture, and facial expressions that influence how we interpret their dialogue. Because multimodality is so central to comics, it is essential to give proper attention to the relationship between image and text.

Still, the point could be made that graphic novels are not the first books to be published with images or pictures included, and thus far, traditional analysis and interpretation has worked just fine. Why add an entire new discipline and its theories and further complicate literary analysis? Why focus on comics and graphic novels at all? Comics are often put under fire as juvenile, grouped together as a genre rather than a medium, or ignored altogether. Rosenblatt explains that “[w]e are justified in arguing the importance of literature, because of both *what* it

communicates and *how* it communicates” (310). As long as literature is still considered a form of communication, scholars must be allowed the freedom to study it like communication. Graphic novels open the door for further study that may even help bridge gaps between other types of analysis.

For example, how should a reader go about the task of analyzing a graphic novel where words are used sparsely or not at all? If graphic novels are allowed to be literature but required to include a minimal amount of dialogue, scholars risk limiting comics as a medium altogether. Jason Dittmer argues that “recent work on the geographies of reading has been dominated by textuality and has neglected the visual field” (222). Dittmer claims that comics should be dealt with as both a textual and visual form, with the understanding that the visual dimension can add an element of instability to the reading, because it is possible to imagine a comic without words but impossible to imagine a comic without images—it would, in that case, no longer be a comic. Communication theorist Ann Marie Seward Barry, in her book *Visual Intelligence: Perception, Image, and Manipulation in Visual Communication*, says, “When an image is combined with words as in a comic strip, the words become secondary but the language of images becomes primary” (78). Therefore, it is more than worthwhile to look at comics in a visual communication sense as well as a literary one.

One example of this is Thi Bui’s *The Best We Could Do*, a memoir that frequently utilizes pages and panels made up only of images. This, of course, is done intentionally to make an impact, to say something, especially when it comes to Bui’s personal experiences with displacement. The pages tell a story in their own way, despite using very minimal text. It would be a disservice to the memoir and its message to skip over it because it lacks dialogue, especially because Bui’s choice to not include dialogue is a structural choice. In this case, it is the graphic

novel's form that necessitates a reading that takes the images into account. The lack of words does not equal a lack of meaning—communication theorist Gregory Bateman proposed that it is impossible to communicate nothing, even in silence (Littlejohn and Foss 900). Bui's panels seem silent because they lack dialogue, but they do communicate. It is the silence that emphasizes a sense of loneliness, tiredness, and fear during Bui's journey to Pulau Besar.

Bui's memoir is just one example of form being an important aspect of communicative analysis in literature. All graphic novels use their own distinct forms, artistic or otherwise, to convey unique meaning, and focusing on the art in relation to the writing can be a rewarding experience. In "Multimodal Literacy: From Theories to Practices," Frank Serafini states:

Approaching a multimodal text as a visual object invites readers to consider its visual images and design features and to move beyond the traditional focus of text as a linguistic entity. In other words, we need to approach picturebooks as more than selections of written language; they are also visual and artistic objects, and therefore frequently assigned to other areas of curriculum. (415)

In this case, *The Best We Could Do* would count as a "picturebook," meeting the requirement of being composed of both visual and literary elements. Serafini explains that in order to make sense of these types of literature, readers must access interpretive practices normally associated with other disciplines, justifying our use of communication theory to derive meaning from graphic novel panels.

It is clear that a reader cannot read comics or graphic novels like they would any ordinary piece of literature. Graphic novels are not poems, although the audience must still read between the lines for a connotative meaning. Graphic novels are not simply diagrams, although the visual aspect is still important in decoding meaning. Graphic novels are not *just* novels, although their

content can still be analyzed and interpreted by a reader to more fully understand their meaning. Graphic novels require more from their readers—more engagement, more participation, and more attentiveness—because there are more factors that go into their interpretation. Instead of just words and paragraphs, readers of graphic novels must pay attention to form, color, gutters, speech bubbles, and sound effects. Rosenblatt's reader-response theory guides this principle, reminding us that the reader is deeply and intimately involved in the content they are recreating under the guidance of the text. In short, if traditional literature is a form of communication, graphic novels are a form of multimodal communication due to their combination of image and text. The combination of two modes may complicate our analysis, but it also opens the door for more debate and conversation about what comics can do for literature.

By utilizing communication theory in their analysis of graphic novels and comics, a reader can derive more meaning from the images in relation to the text and more fully understand the medium itself. Just as a graphic novel's audience is expected to fill the gaps between panels of a graphic novel in order to fully understand the story, scholars must fill the gaps between traditional methods of analysis with theories outside the literary discipline. Communication theory allows readers to fill those gaps, interpret comics as visual objects, and more fully understand their form and multimodality. The benefits will be more interest in graphic novels in scholarly circles, more opportunity for learning in the classroom, and hopefully, more graphic novels published in the future.

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