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Crikey!!!

Biff! Bamm!!
Section 4: Zap! Comics and Other Media

4.1 Defining Webcomics and Graphic Novels

Anna Zanfei

A definition is never complete nor exhaustive; on the contrary, it is always tentative. The definitions given in this paper are based on a linguistic study of the terms “graphic novel” and “webcomics” and their use. It also deals with the real application of their related products and goes further into the analysis of these two compound nouns. A multimodal approach is also used in order to uncover the multiple essence of the compositional structure and use of these innovative formats.

The Webcomic Format

The term “webcomic” is a compound noun derived from the abbreviation of the locution “world wide web” and of the locution “comic magazine.” The general meaning of webcomic is that of comics delivered through the Internet. Various definitions of the term webcomic that are found in the Internet are paraphrases of its all-embracing meaning, such as, for example the following:

With the Internet’s easy access to an audience, webcomics run the gamut from traditional cartoon strips to graphic novels and beyond. [...] Other webcomics are presented in the same manner as traditional comic books, manga, and graphic novels. [http://wikipedia.com]

I think that this definition, strictly linked to the morphological formation of the compound noun, should be re-considered in the light of what is actually found in websites dedicated to specific webcomics. First of all, it should be taken into consideration that comics delivered through the Internet are organized according to some compositional patterns which are systematically found in most webcomic sites. In most webcomic sites information is multimodal and it gathers in various clusters characterized by a common topic or meaning. Moreover these clusters are arranged in the webpage according to a systematic patterned layout. This pattern shapes the visual composition of the webpage which is visually structured along the dimension of center and margin of the screen. Thus, the central composition of webcomics, usually features a “table” in the center of the page. This table is the last issue of one of the comic short stories or the last issued comic strip of a daily gag based comic. At the margins of the webpage there are usually informative clusters, dedicated to the artistic

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as well as the commercial context of the comic itself, as well as clusters dedicated to interactive activities containing links to the fan blog, to the author's e-mail, and to the merchandising pages. Other clusters in the page display the sponsor's advertising space, while still others gather links connected to the description of the characters of the comic. Also, in the webcomic site, it is not unusual to find the presence of hyperlinks to other Internet comics.

In comparison to printed comics, the displayed contents of a webcomic site are very similar to those found in comic magazines, even though the interactive property of the webpage makes it different from the printed version, because the user is actually exploring a virtual, three-dimensional, hyperspace. Moreover, the opportunity of directly accessing user services, such as entering into a community of fans of the comic, or publicly criticizing the author's choices, is costless and immediate.

The most important link in a webcomic site is the one that virtually takes the user to the archive of the webcomic. Archives collect the author's previous works around the same comic series. This is a distinctive feature of the webcomic compared to a printed comic magazine, other features being the hyperlinks that allow the user to directly explore the previous versions of the comic in other websites and its public social impact through the blog entries.

The Webcomic Archive, when actually present in a webcomic site, has a great appeal to the Internet user because it gives support to the intertextual nature of the comics as well as its meanings based on redundancy and repetition. This is especially true for gag stories and comic strips, where the style of humor is better understood through the extensive reading of the collection. On the other hand, a written profile of the characters helps novice users to immediately become familiar to their attitude and roles.

A collection of the comics available in the archive of a webcomic site is both a challenge for the author and a resource for the textual coherence of the comic. Indeed a public, directly accessible, collection proves to be a healthy constraint for the author himself, and a useful reference for avoiding potential inconsistencies within storylines, as well as in the behavior and attitudes of the comic characters, considering that previous issues are always available to the user.

In the webcomic site, there are also short graphic novels which are structured in an interactive cluster. This "hyper cluster" deploys the various tables that compose the entire story in a slideshow format, through which the user can move forward or backward by virtually acting either on buttons or arrows. So what webcomic readers can actually see on their computer screen is a slot placed in central position in which a single table of the entire graphic novel is deployed. This means that an interactive behavior is required on the part of the user at least for reading the entire story. This kind of interaction is quite different from that required by the printed format of the comic. Moreover, the printed comic reading path proceeds through a double page, while in the
webcomic, the storyline develops in a series of tables that form a cluster which has a virtual depth. Therefore, the visual orientation typical of the physicality of printed page is lost in favor of a screeny vision, which is closer to the TV screen view. This characterizing trait is due to the screeny properties of the webpage which can be reorganized completely under the action of the user. Therefore, the author of webcomics should take into consideration that every single table is an input that stimulates the reader to go on with the story: the webcomic implements a kinetic modality and a different way of reading the comic.

The webcomic is often a self-production and therefore it is characterized by the author’s experimentations which can involve: 1. multimedia techniques (mastered through practice) and, as a consequence the experimentation of new and different formats; the development of spin-off stories; 2. the appearance and disappearance of some of the characters of the story; 3. the evolution of a personal style of drawing and coloring procedures; 4. the evolution of the entire website or webcomic.

In conclusion, textual coherence and consistency in actual webcomics is, first of all, based on the single table delivery format, as well as the collection archive. As Alistair Graham, a British author of the webcomic **HOUSD**, says about his webcomic:

**HOUSD** was originally presented in the gag-a-day format, with continuity of the story a subsidiary concern. Since **HOUSD** was a daily comic, I can appreciate how hard it was to keep up with flow of stories. Now that the comic has ended, it is obviously far easier to follow (http://www.afterstrife.com/index.php).

Secondly, the organization of the entire website is also a matter of consistency, and it should be focused on the Internet navigation as a discovery process. For example, **AfterStrife**, another British webcomic by Ali Graham, exploits the discovery property of the website by supplying a callout that helps the navigation and explains how the various materials contained in the archives are documents of the evolution of the webcomic. Graham, indeed says:

People like to digest comics in different ways. I’ve attempted to make it even easier by offering you the reader plenty of ways to read **HOUSD** [...] . It took a while for me to find my stride and settle on an original feel for the comic. So if you’re interested in seeing where **HOUSD** spawned from, then you better start at the beginning (http://www.afterstrife.com/index.php).

So Graham is inviting the Internet reader to consider the webcomic site as an experimental space. Finally the webcomic site is also to be considered as an advertising space for self-published printed versions, especially using distribution methods based on Internet selling procedures.

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The Graphic Novel

In considering the graphic novel (GN), perhaps the most famous is Maus by Art Spiegelman, while A Contract with God by Will Eisner is one of the first comics that was subtitled as a GN. In the UK the graphic novel is well represented with successful examples, such as V for Vendetta, From Hell, and Gemma Bovery. In these three British GNs, it is clear that the complexity of the plot, the use of intertextuality, as well as their social, political, historical contextualization, are not inferior to classical novels. Of course, they are multimodally different from the written novel and, moreover, they are far more recent products. The difference between the GN and the classical novel is of course in the textual composition, which is shaped by the co-deployment of various semiotic modalities delivered through both visual and verbal texts. Among the semiotic modalities, that are playing a part in the meaning making process in composing and reading a comic, there are body posture, gestures, and gaze.

Textual coherence in GNs is based on the information structure and its organization. So visual information is organized on the basis of a horizontal structure which presents information as given and new. In this view, the sequence of the panels presents a new element in one panel which is repeated in the next, becoming the given element of that panel. However, in the first page of the prologue of the GN From Hell by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell, the panel sequence is organized in more cinematic sequence. Indeed, the sequence of panels simulate the movement of the participants (characters), toward the reader and the external viewer, on the basis of a change of structure in his optic array. This effect is achieved in a very simple way: every panel shows the same characters through a new, progressively closer, perspective, creating in this way the illusion of movement.

The first page of the prologue of Alan Moore’s From Hell is a classical presentation of two of the key characters of the story. But this presentation is clearly understood only through the co-deployment of verbal and visual modalities. The last three panels show the man in black who is acting in a very cold way on the dead body of a seagull which is lying on a sandy beach. The walking stick of the man in black, as well as his gaze, form a vector that connects him to the seagull, but at the same time, they form a frame that separates him from the man in grey suit. In this way, he is also keeping distance from the contents of the excitedly spoken political ideals of his friend. Here, gesture is used as a semiotic modality and is an index of the emotive personality of the man and of the excited tone of his speech. On the other hand, the man in black with his actions and his words is presented in contrast to him, as a cold and practical man who is less concerned with the idealistic claims of the man in grey suit and more aware of the real misery of the people in poverty even, if in a very unmoved way.

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Posy Simmonds, in her graphic novel *Gemma Bovery*, highlights the distinction of the various clusters of the multimodal composition of the page so that the textual coherence of the whole page is based on thematic principles. Indeed, the page (table) looks like a virtual collage which is made of drawings, different kinds of written documents, and dialogues in comic strip format. Moreover, every single page (table) looks like a newly re-organized webpage. Actually, the reading path of this printed page is very similar the reading paths offered by a webpage where interactive users partially or entirely reorganize it when creating their personal reading path.

The reading path of page 26 of the GN *Gemma Bovery* starts from top of the page, where a verbal recount functions as an orientation for the meanings of the whole page. The verbal recount is done by a former friend of Charlie and Gemma. In this introduction of the page, he is telling about some of the facts concerning the visiting of the two children of Charlie’s previous marriage. The narrative piece is integrated with a depiction of two moments of Charlie’s children coming home with their father and playing with him. The visual analytical structure of the drawings extends hypothetically the meanings of the verbal text just as it happens in web pages where a link takes the user to an actual example of what is mentioned in the text. Following the vertical order of the page, the next cluster is an extract from Gemma’s diary introduced by the deictic verbal phrase “Gemma writes:” which directly points to the diary entry. The content [of the diary entry] foregrounds the emotional state of Gemma and her being upset about the notes that Charlie’s former-wife is sending them because they contain endless lists of orders about the children. The next cluster is subdivided into left and right. On the left of the page, there is the document of one of the upsetting notes, and on the right, the dialogue between Gemma and Charlie developed in a comic strip format. Here a thematic intertextual tie connects a real document, one of the notes, to the diary entry that makes reference to it. The comic strip is a paratactic juxtaposition that shows the contrast between Gemma’s monologue against the obsessions of Charlie’s former wife and the notes that reveal them. The link is then again based on thematic intertextuality that further develops into a critical comment. The last cluster is a drawing which is again a further unexpected ironic development of the topic that concludes Gemma’s monologue.

Perspective in *Gemma Bovery* is a factor that affects the meaning making of the page. For example, at page 26 of this graphic novel, Charlie’s children are portrayed, using an oblique angle which supplies an objective point of view, while Gemma’s portrait has a frontal angle which implies a subjective attitude towards that specific participant. This is the main participant of the action with whom the reader should be identified.

In this graphic novel, typographical fonts and layout are visual elements that make the various written documents easily recognizable. The language of the various documents is also very similar to the real one. Memos and notes
usually are brief, non-permanent texts, fully related to the context of situation; however, in this case, notes and memos make an extensive use of imperatives, and the amount of information exceeds the appropriate use of them. The diary extracts have a typical spoken-written language in which articles and pronouns are often ellipted and where colloquial expressions abound. In the comic strip dialogue, Gemma’s gaze (toward Charlie) is modulated by the expressions of her face. The gaze and the expression of the face are semiotic modalities that index her irritated disposition and suggest how to interpret the “tone” of her endless speech.

In the comics that I have analyzed in this paper, language and images are independently organized and structured messages. However, it is their co-deployment and interplay that actually make the whole meaning of the composition of the page. The multimodal approach that I have applied to the analysis of these comics has shown how various semiotic resources really are working in making a complex meaning out of the compacted information that is unfolded by the reader of a well structured comic.

In conclusion, in graphic novels as well as in webcomics, there is a place for experimentations on the part of the authors as it is the case of Posy Simmond’s use of documents, in the construction of reading paths, as well as in the use of visual structures and verbal texts. The result is complex and this is due to planning and editing that give consistency to systematic patterns that the reader discovers throughout the whole story. The graphic novel is therefore the dimension where high quality, well documented, innovative products can be produced, while the webcomic is an online comic magazine which exploits the properties of the screen, the discovery processes of the web, and becomes a space for gaining feedback from an international audience.

Finally, it should be noted that many comic authors of graphic novels claim their dislike for the term graphic novel. Nonetheless, their hard work is and will remain one of the most powerful examples of what should be intended with the term graphic novel. Of course, the contents and the detailed precision related to real events is one distinctive feature of graphic novels such as *Maus* and *From Hell*. This last is another complex story in which cultural-based intertextuality and relation to historical facts are major factors, as well as the graphic abstraction and the coherent structuring of visual compositional resources that give depth to every single table.

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*JIOCA, Spring 2008*

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