What is Graphic about Graphic Novels?
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Is there a difference between a graphic novel and some of the apparently close cognates to the form such as illustrated books, comics, 'zines, artists' books, and livres d'artistes? Do precedents for graphic novels exist avant la lettre or are they a phenomenon produced uniquely in contemporary culture? If so, what distinguishes them within a field of other productions where text and image relations work to produce meaning? In graphic novels, the dual formalisms of literary and graphic expression articulate narrative in an integrated system that is extensive and immersive. They make use of characteristics of visual materiality that are enhanced by recent developments in print technology and other forms of mass visual culture. In scope and intensity, they are as far from their comic book predecessors as online games are from the role-playing scenes of *Clue* that occupied an earlier generation. Graphic novels synthesize the language of cinema, the sensibilities of contemporary literature, and the appeal of mass media in a format that calls attention to artistry and technique. Rather than operate in the one-off mode of fine art production, graphic novels are the realization of the vision of the democratic art form once trumpeted by champions of the artist's book, works of art that circulate widely and freely in consumer culture even as their sensibility keeps open a place for counterculture sensibilities within the mainstream.

We can approach graphic novels several ways, none of which are mutually exclusive. We can use a formal structural analysis, elaborating the elements and relations in graphic systems through a semiotic point of view. That allows us to relate the graphical features to elements of narrative such as story, plot, discourse, and enunciation while attending to their visual properties. We can frame graphic works through an understanding of technology and media of production that connect them to publication traditions and their separate social spheres of influence and activity. That allows us to distinguish graphic novels from illustrated books, fine art press publishing, mass culture artifacts, artist-initiated publications, or subculture expressions. Because in spite of the legacies on which they draw, graphic novels are a uniquely contemporary phenomena for reasons that combine technological opportunity and cultural disposition. We can engage

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cognitive studies approaches to reading and narrative, extending earlier perceptual theories of gestalt psychology that also inform graphic and diagrammatic information design, while borrowing art historical vocabulary for discussion of image composition, technique, idiomatic expression, and cultural values and ideology. The reader-subject of graphic novels has characteristics in common with literary readers, but also with the cinematic viewing subject. Rather than march my analysis through these neat categories, I will take a synthetic approach that focuses on the visual articulation of narrative and the specific character of graphic novels as these are integrated into a system of material and imaginative elements.

Throughout my discussion I will use two very-well known graphic novels as my points of contrast. Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A survivor's tale* (first published in 1973) and Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000). [i] Each are exemplary works that allow sustained reading across the various approaches suggested above and yet provide a striking contrast as aesthetic and cultural productions. *Maus* was a radical departure from the "comics" mode whose formal devices it appropriated, and *Jimmy Corrigan* pushed the graphic system into a sustained, idiosyncratic style that is elegant and articulate in ways that challenge some of the language-dependency of other graphic novels. Both Spiegelman and Ware are highly self-conscious artists whose relation to mass culture and art culture are finely balanced, and whose work challenges some of the divides that still plague us as a residue of earlier modernisms. Their work thus allows, even demands, a discussion of the ways the distance from other printed art forms, or visual narratives, is specific to graphic novels in our times—and to the ways this distance challenges assumptions about cultural hierarchies in the arts and mass media.

The codes that govern narrative enunciation in graphic novels borrow from older models of visual story-telling that date into classical antiquity. More immediately, they take up the conventions of comic books and "funnies", while also taking certain of their techniques from cinema. The basic challenge for any narrative form is to work out a relation between the literal presentation of information on the plane of discourse and the production of a story through a process of enunciation. We know that a lot of slippage occurs between the telling and the told. Not only is there not a one-to-one relation of signifier to signified in any sign system, (what were our lessons about the play of

différance if not a massive awakening to that recognition), but much of what occurs within the materiality of graphic works can not be simply perceived as a mechanical device for unfolding a story (if so, why go to so much effort in the production of a work like *Jimmy Corrigan*). After all, one of the striking features of graphic novels is their investment in the materially replete visual presentation on the page. The effect of immersion and absorption this creates for a reader goes beyond the account of a verbal or literary "story". I would argue that the graphic-ness of these works results in the production of that rich domain the Russian formalists referred to as the *fabula*, or life-world imagined as the scene of the tale. To get to this realization, we have to begin with an analysis of the mechanics of visual storytelling: narrative chunking, modes of enunciation, uses of visual means including basic framing devices such as gutters, panel sizes, scales, and relations, elements of visual syntax such as line quality, the rendering of text, and the production of color.

The conventions of graphic novels more or less follow those of early 20th century comic books, themselves extended versions of comic strips, but with some important distinctions. I will argue below that graphic novels are different in structure from earlier precedents, such as Trajan's column or William Hogarth's *Marriage a la Mode*, because of the sustained attention to the visual as the site of moment-to-moment activity on the level of the telling.[ii] Even early modern attempts at visual narration, such as Rudolphe Toepffer's famous inventions, have the look of scenes on a proscenium stage or within a panorama or vignette. The dramatic use of shifts in scale, perspective, point of view, or other graphic markers of cognitive frame changes, really have their precedent in film, not visual illustration in print media. The languages of montage developed in theory and practice by such pioneers as Dziga Vertov or Sergei Eisenstein, or the special effects inventions of the sci-fi visionaries of the Industrial Light and Magic era, provide the counterparts for Joe Sacco, Neil Gaimon, and Alan Moore. But graphic novels are distinctly contemporary by virtue of their themes and subjects as well as by their look, and the self-reflective ennui of Ware or Daniel Clowes is a far cry from the mordant social satire of Hogarth. Production, distribution, audience and reader expectations, as well as differences of cultural positioning all help give graphic novels their identity.

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Graphic novels as we know them would not be possible without changes in print technology that are relatively recent innovations. Low cost, high resolution, full-color production at the level required for the exquisite graphics of Ware's work are a far cry from the crude ben-day dot look of early comics. Smooth, clean, and rich, Ware's books are competitive in a mass market, selling for prices that make them part of a regular hardcover fiction niche, not a rarified art realm. Since the advent of modernism as a response to industrialization, and the creation of crucial distinctions between mass produced and hand-made objects, the worlds of mass culture and fine art have remained sharply demarcated. 1960s Conceptual artists' interest in multiples and pop art's parodic play with the iconography of mass culture notwithstanding, the separation these domains is reinforced by market values and the industries that depend upon their distinction (galleries vs. bookstores, museums vs. online distribution sites, etc.). While technology is not deterministic, the production issues that complicate conceptual ones mean that the inherent formal tendencies of different production media not only carry aesthetic associations, but cultural and ideological ones as well. At the production level, the technology of graphic media put certain constraints on how the text and image can relate to each other.

For instance, in the bulk of conventionally printed illustrated books produced between mid-15th and the early 20th centuries, fantastic, rich, and varied as these are, the text and image remain distinct elements at the material level. Illustrations are on one page or part of the page, text on another. The page "real estate" is allocated to a single function in each area of the surface. This is the result of technical limitations imposed by the predominance of letterpress technology, but it has other implications as well. Distinctions between image and text extend traditions of difference that mark words and images as different orders of things. Written words are assumed to represent language while images are presumed to represent things through different mechanisms of resemblance (icon, index, or symbol). The differences that keep words and images distinct are not only technological. Letterpress printing, by its rigorous distinction of image blocks and movable metal type, reinforces the conceptual differences that are a legacy of long-

standing philosophical beliefs and established practices. In western culture the differences of word and image are freighted with value judgments that map onto reductive binarisms of spirit and flesh, pure and sullied, truthful and deceptive that are too familiar to need a gloss here. The technological innovation that permits movable type to become the main means of textual production in the West inscribes that distinction of word and image in industrial processes until it comes to seem inevitable.

These drawn letterforms are part of the vocabulary of graphic novels and comics. The specific handwritings used to create text form their own arena of disciplinary expertise. In spite of the considerable variety of typefaces, however, the character of handwritten language in comics and graphic novels is associated with voice, authorial enunciation, and character, not with the conventions of printed text. In spite of the range and variety of typographic design, metal type is rarely used for its "voice". Graphic novels take this "voice" as a convention. The handwriting is usually consistent throughout (except for passages of expressive tone or emphasis), since it is another marker of narrative enunciation. The text is "spoken" by the artist, rather than subject to the mediation and standardization imposed by having it rendered in type.

Technologies that allow letterforms to be made with the same instruments and on the same surface as graphic images existed before movable type. Conventions for this integration appear in pre-print artifacts, of course. The flexibility of hand-drawing, illumination, or carving (if one wants to consider such a highly laborious technique a "flexible" one) allowed for fluid exchange between pictorial and verbal elements. When pen, brush, chisel, or other inscriptional implement is the main tool of production, nothing prevents the artist from creating a textual element in the same plane as a visual one. But reproducing these fluid surfaces posed other problems, and the technologies of production have often met their check when faced with translation into a reproductive one. Though copying of images, patterns, decorative devices, as well as texts, is a long-standing practice, the capacity to create exactly repeatable images has been held responsible for substantive changes in knowledge through its representation. William Ivins's work on the history of prints and visual communication links print and scientific knowledge in visual form, since standardized images could circulate to create consensus, or at least, shared references and models. Similarly, we can imagine that the models of

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visual narrative that become the basis of graphic storytelling are also ones that shift and change as technological means of production offer different modes of access. The degree of accuracy or verisimilitude in depiction of individuals or locations changed, for instance, as printmaker's skills and reader expectations shifted, and the history of visual representation can be mapped in the tension between generic types and specific instances within the tolerances and affordances of different talents and techniques.

But the fundamental technical problem of integrating any kind of production of word and image on the same surface, which had so radically demarcated these domains in letterpress printing, was only resolved with photographic methods of reproduction. These did not come into widespread use for automated print production until the 20th century, in spite of the many ingenious efforts at invention that took place decades earlier. When lithography was invented at the beginning of the 19th century, it already changed the graphic landscape. Immediately put at the service of commerce, its graphic capabilities as a reproductive technology allowed easy integration of letters and images drawn with the same implements on the same surface. Photomechanical offset production changed the rules of the game. Photography is not only a technology of production and reproduction, it serves as a meta-technology, one that can be used across media platforms. As a meta-technology, photomechanical offset could be used to reproduce work done in any medium by putting the watercolor, engraving, original drawing, or painting into a copy camera and creating a film image that could be transferred to a metal plate. Offset has its own characteristic lines, half-tone dots, and screen patterns, but these could be put at the service of presenting other modes of graphic expression. The commercial art industry quickly explored and exploited the capabilities of this new medium to create color prints and reproductions of works of art. The rotogravure and color capabilities of early 20th century newspapers brought the comics into being, even as photographic imagery began to proliferate in the pages of daily publications.

Artists, that is, commercial artists (fine artists remained attached to the unique artifact, while the work of illustrator and advertising artists was considered work for hire and often passed into print without the signature of the artist) became skilled at knowing what would produce well and what degrees of finish were required for the translation of their original art into images suitable for print reproduction. A glance at the camera ready

boards of a consummate graphic artist like John Heartfield reveals consummate judgment of just how much the camera would notice and forgive. Reproduction of what was known as "camera-ready" graphic art (usually drawn on cardboard with pasted up elements, white out, and inks) became cheaper and cheaper in the latter part of the 20th century. From stones to metal plates to digital front-end offset, the transformations in the printing industry have allowed artists an increasing range of options. Even a quarter of a century ago, the kind of color production essential to Ware's work would have been prohibitively expensive, and the shift from *Maus*'s black and white efficiency to *Jimmy Corrigan*'s sumptuous color palette is a sign of those changes. Compare the out of register dot pattern of daily newspaper images with the smooth, rich, tight colors in Ware's books. The difference is the high-end printing in which fine dot patterns are tightly registered and coverage is smooth and even. Ware produces his images by hand, not digitally, but the reproductive technology of contemporary print culture has moved beyond the cruder techniques of photomechanical means, in which 4-color separations were done in camera, each film stripped for a separate plate, and each color printed in sequential runs of the paper through the press. Digital front-end printing has introduced might higher levels of quality control for color matching and calibration as well as finely tuned registration.

But technological shifts and conceptual changes are not always in lock-step. Conceptualizing the capabilities of print technologies is neither mechanistic nor automatic. Part of the conceptualization involves a model of audience and reader, the public and its expectations about certain kinds of imagery and story telling. Most pre-print technologies for creating images (drawing, painting, carving, needlework, tapestry) were production methods, not reproductive ones (with the exception of seals). When printed images began to appear in the 15th century, they were often used over and over again. Images were treated as generic depictions of crimes or scandals, recycled in one broadside after another. Cultural expectations about resemblance and specificity had to develop. They did not pre-exist the coming of graphic images. As visual images became more common, the purposes they could serve as a sign system of shared experience and consensual information became more varied as did the models of story telling. As the categories of functionality expanded from generic reference to specific representation, and as techniques for carving blocks and plates became more refined, graphic images

developed a visual style and vocabulary of their own. Ivins referred to this as syntax, the graphic structure of marks and lines, in order to distinguish it from the semantics of the representational image or depiction.[iii]

That syntax is specific to each medium within graphic arts. Wood engravings, relief blocks, copperplate engraving, etching, and steel plate engraving each have their own characteristic marks. This is not a technologically deterministic observation, but a materially specific one – it is simply not possible to cut a relief woodblock to have the same kind of line as an intaglio plate. Ivins's influential approach provides a foundation for critical discussion of the basic notational quality of graphic print media.

The graphic syntax of Ware's designs reflects a flat, color-field quality that is the result of high production values. Though the images are produced with offset technology, the dot pattern is small, the ink coverage very even, and the effect is a seamless image of a world completely articulated in its own terms. It barely seems to reference another visual world, even though recognizable figures, scenes, and objects are part of its vocabulary, the color treatment creates a separate realm in which the story and its telling are distinct. By contrast, the descriptive syntax of Spiegelman's line corresponds to conventions of shorthand depiction for an actual world, even if it is rendered with a certain amount of fantastical and fictional license. Spiegelman uses rapidly drawn cross-hatching to create tonal values, as well as putting his lines to descriptive tasks, but the energy of handwriting and sketching give the drawings lively immediacy, vigor, and an urgency to communicate that becomes part of the urgency of the story.

The telling of the story involves narrative chunking, the division into units that is crucial to putting text and image, image and image, and other graphic elements into a legible sequence.[iv] Frame relations are the basic structure of articulation, the format that constitutes the foundation of meaning production in the graphic mode. Within the frames, pictorial content changes as the scenes of the story unfold. But the basic framing, the act of differentiating one unit of content from another, also uses graphic variables semantically. Obviously, many basic elements of graphic novels are shared by other narrative media (story and plot, scenes, characters, action and so on), or by other visual media (color, line, composition, style, production technique) or by other time-based and/or spatial media (duration, extension, development). But the organization of graphic

elements into an enunciative system on the surface of the page is what allows the unfolding of a story to take full advantage of visual means of narration. The basic elements of graphic enunciation, then, are framing and the use of fundamental variables (size, shape, color, tone or value, orientation, placement, and texture).[v] In addition, however, it is the relation among frames within the space of an opening and across a sequence of pages that provokes associations and connections for a reader. Relations do not register as entities even though they are substantive in constituting the narrative space. We have very little vocabulary for naming and describing graphic relations. This is a startling contrast with the rich nomenclature of poetic tropes or visual devices. Formalist approaches to the description of graphic elements tends to remain on the plane of discourse – but the relational dynamics operate in the space between discourse and reference, telling and told, what is literally present and what is invoked.

Ware and Spiegelman have strikingly different modes of enunciation, in spite of the basic storytelling devices they share. In Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan*, subtle changes (in value, repetition of figures and elements of the scene) are all deliberately mustered to the production of absorption. This feels like absorption into the story, the frame of reference. But actually, the reader is engaged in a continual movement between discourse and reference. Immersed and re-immersed in a scene, the reader experiences provocation on the level of the telling, its nuances and tiny shifts and changes register within the sensitized field of perception that in turn create a complex idea of the told. Ware draws out his scenes. His timelines are often held in suspense, so that the unfolding of the temporal sequence is drawn taut along a narrative line that expresses interior life, even if the flat colors and delineated rendering suggest a self-evident universe of scenes. Ware uses the spaces of his pages the way a composer or an abstract painter uses the field of the canvas or the duration of a piece. He establishes motifs and themes, and then develops them fully, introducing counterpoint elements, ruptures, rhymes, echoes, and breaks. But unlike an abstract painter (think of Mondrian's dynamic formality) Ware fills his graphics with representational content. They speak (if the use of a linguistic metaphor may be excused here in the service of an often mute graphic sensibility) *of* and *as* the world they show. In a very real, literal sense, they (the graphics) *are* that world, they do not just represent it. The graphic presence is as potent as the symbolic absences. This

tension between the presentational and the representational pushes back on the ideas of linguistic transparence as well as on the idea of self-evident visuality that traditionally separated realms of word and image as sign systems.

Spiegelman's *Maus* uses a more conventional approach to the scene-by-scene unfolding of action, and he does not dwell on his scenes with the same nuanced (and often excruciatingly focused) pace that Ware uses. Spiegelman is equally sophisticated in his ability to convince the reader that the world of the story is virtually constituted, rendered palpably present. The act of telling is not just as a sequence of events, but again a realm in which they are experienced. The difference is that Spiegelman's story drives his work. We are always on the way to the next event, to the dreadful events, to the horrific inevitabilities poised to unfold within the momentum of the tale. In Spiegelman's work, for all that it provides multi-faceted development of characters, scenes, and locales, we are always on the way, *getting there*. The *there* is a narrative closure, an end, a resolution. In Ware's work, we are often *being there*, caught in the moment-to-moment registration of lived experience. The means by which both of these artists achieve these effects are graphic as well as textual, and in the case of Ware, often relying exclusively on visual codes.

Maus uses panels as the basic chunking unit that breaks the visual narrative into segments according to conventions familiar from comic strips and books. Because these conventions are so familiar, the dramatic device of the black line that defines each panel with a powerful differentiating and structuring function can easily go unnoticed. If we pause in the reading, break our absorption to the tale, and look at the page structure, the force of the line and its function within narrative becomes clear. In *Maus* these conventions echo the devices of cinematic editing. The story unfolds with changes of venue and character in a way that borrows from montage effects of time-based media. (By contrast, these shifts of scale, time, and space would be awkward to achieve on a theatrical stage. The segmentation in *Maus*, the sequence of graphic events (literally, the images, drawn texts), is organized into several different registers, or levels of enunciation.

At first glance, for instance, the graphic organization of the work appears deceptively simple. Spiegelman seems to use the panel by panel sequence simply to

advance the narrative. We have a series of conversational exchanges between characters, or watch an action and hear a character's inner voice, and through a fairly efficient disposition of graphic means, the story appears to be told. But looking closer, we realize that even the simple seeming framing is always operating on two levels of narration. *Maus* has an embedded narrative (the story told to Spiegelman by his father), a frame narrative (Spiegelman describing and commenting on the story), and a discursive frame within which the narrative unfolds (the work as a whole). Any dialogue and action that are elements of the embedded story are depicted inside the panels. The visual and textual elements that are part of the framing narrative or commentary are usually positioned outside or across panels (discourse elements). When Spiegelman introduces these, he does not change the fundamental grid that governs his page structure. He merely reduces either panel in one direction, vertically or horizontally, to make room for the commentary that is outside the story frame. This means that the white spaces between the panels of the story become (literally) continuous with the area of the pages that support the framing narrative. The interstitial space that flows around the panel-to-panel division of the embedded story becomes an element of the frame narrative. We could say that the graphic hierarchy mimics the narrative hierarchy, but to do so would undercut the more important realization that the graphic organization *makes* that hierarchy. At the highest level of organization, the margins that surround the frame narrative articulate the discourse field in which the work is "spoken" or enunciated as a graphical work. So we have three basic levels of narrative organization created by the graphic hierarchy: page (discourse enunciation), story (comments and reflection), and the embedded narrative (shown and depicted in the panels).

This system articulates *Maus* throughout, with only two major exceptions—the depiction of the underground comic book artifact (shown held by the narrator's hand, thumb visible in the margin, which is black instead of white), and the moment in the Spiegelman's father's narrative when they arrive at Auschwitz. **[Figure 1 and Figure 2]** In the first instance, the comic book is coded graphically as distinct, differentiated from the pages of narrative. The framing conventions alter here as well. Narrow frames for exaggerated expressions of the main character alternate with larger frames in an affective display of graphic structure. The story telling figure cries, and the close-up frames show

his deadpan face as he struggles to express emotion. The rendering style is more cinematically complete in development of shadows, tonal values, spatial dimensions that in the main narrative of *Maus,* which tends towards storyboard-like efficiency and schematic, sufficient, depictions. The second example occurs at the end of the first volume of *Maus.* Significantly, at the moment of arrival at the concentration camp, the framing structure breaks. The told story is no longer contained within the neat system of the telling, but spills over onto the entire page. The basic system of conventions on which Spiegelman has relied for the story up to that point changes radically, given graphic expression to the seriousness of the turn of events – making the critical moment in the narrative through a major graphic move. The entire rest of the book has set up this moment and it registers dramatically as the single place where frame structures break down.

By contrast with the use of comic conventions used by Spiegelman, Chris Ware's creates complex and subtle grid structures that are articulated with considerable variation and attention to nuance. He alters the dimensions of the gutters between panels, for instance, making them narrower when a sequence of frames comprises a chunk of narrative, or larger when he wants the frames to remain distinct. While this might seem obvious, Ware has refined this technique to a carefully calibrated system. Virtually every page and opening in *Jimmy Corrigan* shows this alteration of frame proportions at work. For instance, in **Figure 3,** an opening establishing frame of the girl at the computer and closing image of the girl's back (her hand idly absorbed in an act of unselfconscious self-attention) literally bracket the eight panels between them. Those eight panels are each a quarter the size of the establishing frames, and by the way they show the unfolding conversation, they not only shift our focus into an intimate connection with the girl's voice in the receiver, but they each also allow for changes of scale, movement, and emotional tone. The final panel of the eight is a transition image, a close up of the girl after she has turned around and is on the way to assuming the standing posture she maintains in the final frame of the sequence. Though the temporal gap between that eighth frame does not match that between each of the other seven, it provides a reassuring bridge for continuity. The drawing of that final small panel echoes the posture detailed in the first panel on the lower left of this sub-grouping. These drawings, close-up and

schematic almost to the point of abstraction (a curved line, a black shape, the double line of a shirt cuff in one instance, missing in the second) would probably challenge legibility if they were not in context. We need the cognitive framework provided by the other views. But the manipulation of scale and detail signals that we are inside the graphic code of the narrative, able to extrapolate from its shorthand to the life world created by these elements.

Ware's formalized vocabulary also makes complex use of color. The values and hues of his palette give his pages considerable compositional subtlety, as in the example just mentioned, and in the panels that trace the girl driving in the sequence below. The change in background tone in the final panels also sets up a transition, pushing the time of day towards sunset, and the mood towards a deeper intensity. But even if this sequence were rendered in black and white, the framing devices would create these changes in the pacing of the narrative. Ware is not just telling a story, he is allowing the reader to dwell in the story, to participate in the experience of its unfolding in a framework that is itself an articulation of the emotional tenor of character's interior lives. Attention to the timing, distribution, rhymes, and echoes of colors, provides visual pleasure as well as semantic value. Story elements are linked by tones and shape that provides a graphic identity readily tracked across the pages. These are not extraneous markers but substantive elements of story structure created through graphic means. Links and associations among characters, scenes, events are made by commonality of color, tone, shape, or value and the overall movement through the graphic novel as a whole is articulated by shifts of tone that create mood and atmosphere. They do not depict moods, they are not representations, secondary surrogates for moods. These colors, shifts, links of tone and value create them as graphic effects. They *are* the story and the lifeworld, *suzjet* and *fabula*, played out in a a dynamic tension of presentation (graphic presence) and representation (symbolic absence) that does not privilege one over the other. We don't look through Ware's work to the story, we are in the story as we look at Ware's pages. (*Maus* is more story based, and less immersive, but some of the same arguments apply.)

Shifting our attention to color moves us beyond the initial discussion of framing and chunking, and into the discussion of the other elements of the graphic system. Graphic syntax registers through the quality of line, color, tonal value. These elements

carry symbolic value but also have inherent qualities that are indices of modes of production, bearing traces of hand, gesture, mechanical and photographic means, or digital techniques. Many graphic devices created meaningful relations without being representational. At the level of the surface organization, inscription, and articulation, they are semantic without being pictorial. Frames and proportions, divisions, and connections, do not refer to an absent symbolic value, they articulate that value. They constitute the told through the devices of the telling. At the representational level, we know how to read the imagery in *Maus*, and details of facial features of mice, pigs, and cats, their clothing, posture, and settings as pictorial depictions of absent, allegorized referents. But we also know that we can read the visual features in their own right. The line work, color, framing, and other graphic features that are literally what one sees on the surface of the page, printed and present, are substantive. The ways in which these elements articulate a full graphic system is inexhaustible, as the surprisingly innovative work of graphic novelists shows. Thus the ways graphic novels acquire their specificity as contemporary objects are directly related to technology and media, but point to aspects of graphic production that trouble some of the old divisions of fine and popular art.

Looking back before the invention of letterpress printing, we can find many examples of text and image integrated into the business of storytelling. Beginning in early antiquity with the many hieroglyphic inscriptions and paintings from Egyptian culture, and continuing into classical times with narrative wall paintings, inscribed monuments such as Trajan's column, the elaborate storytelling on vase paintings, and the tapestries and illuminations in the Medieval period all integrate words and images in pictorial space. In these images, as in early print works, we can examine the conventions for storytelling through graphic means and begin to tease out some of their specific properties. The vignette format of, for instance, Trajan's column or Bayeux, separates one event from another. These documents are premised on a naïve belief in historical events as an a priori, pre-existing tale. They purport to be representations of a pre-existing narrative of historical events depicted in snap shot instances, rather than constitutive acts of historical construction. The contrast between Assyrian wall reliefs with their direct depictions of battle and conquest and the self-consciously enframed narrative of Maus is not merely a matter of different historical moments, but of different

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orders of story telling strategy. Obviously these historical artifacts create a precedent for articulation of story within a graphic-type space. Illuminated manuscripts and powerful wall paintings also created immersive experiences that were meditative and compelling. still creates a precedent for the organization of the surface as a story telling space. But crucial conceptual differences register shifted attitudes towards authorship, mass culture, novels and narratives spoken by individuals, authors, and the enunciative apparatus of reader-writer-text in our time. Some early examples of graphic narrative present in the service of historical documentation, they are historical images of "what is" or "what was" or "what happened". Precedents for more imaginative or fictional world depictions from illuminated works held the eye and mind in a world apart, inaugurating a promise that graphic novels fulfill. But most illuminated works were commissioned by patrons whose use was private, intimate, and meditative Graphic novels operate in an industrial world of highly mediated and re-mediated stories, tales, and conceptions that circulate widely, creating their subculture networks in a mass market. No progress exists in the worlds of art, and graphic novels are not so much an improvement on earlier precedents as a changed order of things supported opportunistically by altered conditions of culture. Nonetheless, precents in visual narration provide some useful points of contrast.

The earliest years of printing witnessed the production of graphic story telling in sequential images. *Ars Moriendi* productions sprang into being in the 15th century, along with humorous tales of scandal and vice, historical accounts, and illustrated versions of classical tales. Visual narratives were produced using woodblocks in Asia for several hundred years before that. The difference between these antecedents and the current spate of graphic novels is a matter of scale and content, as well as shifts in the perception of the artistic and literary merits of a new genre. The images in graphic novels produce sustained storytelling and narration, character development, plot, motivation, and psychological activity as well as action. These characteristics distinguish them from traditional comics and justify the claim to calling them "novels" that resemble literary works. In *Maus* the story is developed through the visual scenes that depict characters and events. We get to know these characters as they move around rooms and landscapes, interact with each other, and generally play out their drama in accord with, as mentioned before, the techniques of cinema editing. By contrast, in a work like Marjane Satrapi's

Persepolis, the imagery serves to anchor our reading in a set of mnemonic devices.[vi] The images are barely denotative, with a minimal amount of expressive quality and very little detail. As a result, Satrapi's images are extremely provocative, and the reader quickly uses them as a means of filling in more than is visually present. Their schematic format helps diagram the action, moving it along. The reductive graphical character keeps it from being distracting, and the emphasis is on the story, but that emphasis is reinforced by the fact that the images are so minimal. This is not a throw-away, but a deliberate gesture with specific effects. A useful contrast to Satrapi's approach is Dan Clowes's alienated and angst-driven world in which detailed but repetitive imagery immerses the reader so that the extended graphical treatment keeps the reader/viewer engaged.[vii] As in the case of Ware's work, we stay with the images, dwelling in that graphically created world, trapped in its ennui as surely as we are moved through the drama in *Persepolis* by its shorthand mode.

In essence, then, one of the crucial differences between graphic novels and illustrated books is that sense of immersion. Illustrations are always more than a mere supplement to a reader's own imagined version of the scene or look of a character. They provide specificity of style, historical location, ideology and cultural beliefs through all of their visual elements. They instantiate mores, attitudes and values in their composition and rendering as much as in what they depict. The timing and pacing of illustrations, contribute story and plot elements, it does not merely repeat them. The placement of an image of a villain can foreshadow a development in the tale as readily as any hint dropped in the text. Illustrated books rarely use their pictorial means as a primary method of structuring narrative. But graphic novels narrate substantive and detailed human dilemmas and circumstances, often character driven and complexly psychological through visual means.

In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud illustrates clearly the distinctions between the literal presence of marks (the plane of discourse in structuralist terms) and the active production of meaning on the part of a human reader/viewer who makes an image and then a story out of those marks. [viii] He carefully demonstrates the difference between what one is "really seeing" (depiction) and what mental image and concept the mind is able to produce (representation). But his refrain constantly circles back to the

need for comics to make or provoke closure for the reader through varying approaches to the panel-to-panel relations that structure graphic story spaces. Because of this emphasis he tends to blur the distinction between what I referred to above as concept of the *fabula* (the life world created by the story) and the *suzjet* (the story as it unfolds). His vocabulary for describing the difference between the narrative tale and the act of enunciation is circumscribed by an assumption that the graphic work is present to tell the tale, rather than to be a scene of engagement in its own right.[ix]

In Ware's work, the many moment-to-moment transitions that mark small changes within a scene are used to create psychological depth and significance.[x] This repetition does not work towards closure, in Ware, but towards duration and sustained experience. He literally makes time through the re-use of images and continuities from frame to frame that anchor his stories in a kind of stillness that is dreamlike and sustained. Ware's graphic works emphasize the telling, and allow the reader/viewer to dwell, captivated by the features of the telling. Seductive engagement in the told,not narrative closure, is Ware's goal.

Lynd Ward and Frans Masereel created substantive pictorial novels in woodcut in the early part of the 20th century.[xi] Their works dealt with anxiety, existential angst and modern life, crises of faith, and psychological conditions. The panel by panel unfolding of those tales was dramatic and swift. Each scene was complete, but a story line developed through the movement of a character. Posture, facial expressions, shifts of frame all registered clearly, and they drew on realist pictorial conventions. The scope and personal substance of *Maus* intensified the way such graphic work could be thought about. It required that its readers take it seriously, as Ward and Masereel had. But *Maus* is not beautiful. The images are not fussy or precious in themselves, any more than those of Satrapi in *Persepolis*. They are *graphic*. Spiegelman uses high contrast, silhouettes, slight shifts of frame and scale, a limited set of lines and shapes, patterns and objects well but crudely drawn, in order to shape his frames. The characters have distinct identities in the mouse world, each one, but without caricature or elaborate physiognomy. Their differentiation works within the sequences in which they feature, against a striped wallpaper background, a windowpane, or curtain pattern, or a cross-hatched bit of tone. Spiegelman's graphic-ness is largely at the service of his tales, as he finds the right

balance between amount of text and image, through which to unfold the details of the story his father is recounting. This is a narrative, a story, and is compelled by the momentum and need to tell, to record, even as Spiegelman constantly deepens the series of events with elements of plot, the reflexions and reasonings that give significance.

While Spiegelman's narrative momentum carries him along, Ware is a subtle maker of spaces and nuances. The flatness of his color gives substance and opacity to his world. Ware's ability to convince us that his world exists is remarkable given the non-realistic quality of his drawings and designs. His work is all artifice, and the patterns of his pages, shifts in scale and arrangement, are dramatic demonstrations of an articulate graphic sensibility. He makes every element play with every other – not as something to be read through (as in the case of Spiegelman, for all his attention to the drawings is significant), but to be looked at and grasped through the set of plays and moves that circles, lines, shapes, shifts of arrangement make. But Ware never loses sight of his characters and their minor dilemmas. He monumentalizes the ordinary through the sheer beauty of the designs, while Spiegelman allows us access to the extraordinary through a familiar form and formats.

What differentiates these works from artists' books is not only the emphasis on communicative efficacy afforded by graphic means, but the fact that they were conceived within the sphere of mass production. In this regard, they follow literary publishing's strategies, not the protocols of fine art's limited editions and fetishized originals. But a work like *Jimmy Corrigan* is so complete in its design, its use of the book as an arena of development and sequence, graphic narration and visual telling, that it is arguably a work of art conceived for the book format – one that could not exist in any other form. Perhaps what differentiates these from artists' books is only the sphere in which they operate, the realm of mass produced cultural objects. But the original aspiration of the artists' book was to find such popular acclaim and following, to be a multiple that could make art accessible to a broad audience. In their curiously hybrid status, graphic novels achieve this aim, even as they refuse the characterization of fine art objects. They are works of aesthetic expression, a category more useful and broad in its cultural roles and models, since it allows for imaginative work to enter into contemporary life in full recognition of its specific character, but without imposing judgment or constraint on its possibilities.

Ware and Spiegelman, each in their own way, managed to make us rethink what we thought a novel was, was a book is and can be, and what the potential of graphic modes of articulation are. They also used this rethinking to push ideas about history and contemporary life, lived experience and personal memory, into a thoughtful expression in a mode that seemed improbably suited to the task. What better can we ask of works of art than that they disturb our habits of thought while offering us the chance to rethink the premises of our experience and models on which it is based.

What is graphic about graphic novels? What distinguishes them from other visual and pictorial artifacts and works? The full integration of the graphical elements into the production of the work. The constitutive use of the organization of surface and form. The attention to differentiation across frames and boundaries between story and lifewrold, *suzjet* and *fabula,* presentation and representation, as a mechanisms of meaning production. The articulation of elements of color, pattern, arrangement, contrast on the page and then the use of that articulation to make us believe we have glimpsed a world. The graphic novel constitutes a world through its means, and then leads us into thinking it has only reported on that world in an idiom appropriate to that experience. But it is *in* the idiom that the world is made, the features of the telling that make us believe the illusions of the told as a full-fledged symbolic world, worthy of the most substantive critical engagement of the same order as other artifacts that participate simultaneously in mass culture and aesthetic expression.

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[i] Spiegelman, Art, *Maus* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1973) and Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth* (NY: Pantheon Books, 2000).
[ii] See Hillary Chute, "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative," *PMLA,* March 2008, Volume 123, Number 2, 452-465, for similar points and a much broader discussion of current debates in the critical literature.
[iii] Ivins, William, *Prints and Visual Communication* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953) 51-71.
[iv] See Thierry Groensteen, *Système de la bande dessinée* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999) covers this territory with typical French semiotic thoroughness; see, for instance, "1.7 Les functions du cadre," 49-67. I confess to not having read this book in advance of working on this piece, and thank William Kuskin for steering me to it.
[v] Bertin, Jacques,*The Semiology of Graphics,* (Madison: University of Wusconsin Press, 1984) and Paul Mijksenaar, *Visual Function: An Introduction to Information Design* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997).

[vi] Satrapi, Marjane, *Persepolis* (NY: Pantheon Books, 2003).

[vii] Clowes, Daniel, *Ghost World* (Seatlle: Fantagraphics Books, 1993).

[viii] McCloud, Scott, *Understanding Comics* (NY: HarperPerennial, 1994).

[ix] McCloud, *ibid.*, 74.

[x] McCloud, *ibid*, 70.

[xi] Ward, Lynd, *God's Man* (NY: Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 1930) and Franz Masereel, *The City* (NY: Schocken Books, 1925).