

Semiotically Deconstructing American Comics: **A Century Old Visual Narrative**

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Introduction:

The aim of this paper is to view American comics through the lens of semiotics [[47]]. The sections outside of the introduction and the conclusion will be used to analyze specific aspects of American comics and how they relate to the field.

The second section of the paper will be used to explain how narrative [[30]] structure in comics to drive the plot and make a coherent story. Paradigmatic [[35]] and syntagmatic [[62]] structure ((3,9)) will be a large part of this section to analyze how the content and order in which it is shown to the viewer are carefully planned out to craft a text [[63]].

The third section will pick up where the second section left off. I will be examining how comic stories and myths [[29]] from ancient cultures have very similar narrative [[30]] structure ((2,3)). Although, instead of just examining structure, the symbols [[58]] that the two create will be looked at with greater detail.

The fourth section will discuss the blend between discursive [[12]] and representational [[41]] symbols ((1,3,12)) found in comics. The section will explain what the two types of symbols are and explain the qualities that allow for this to happen.

The fifth section of the paper is an analysis of what Jakobson's six functions of communication ((3,6,7)) are, but more importantly, how they are used in comics to convey different meanings and build towards a cohesive story. The emotive [[13]], conative [[3]], referential [[43]], poetic [[38]], phatic [[37]], and metalingual [[27]] functions of communication are heavily used in comics; without them the stories would be an empty husk of what they were supposed to be.

The sixth section of the paper explains how comics use image schemas [[4]] and conceptual metaphors [[21]]. Icons [[20]], signs [[51]] that derive their meaning from resemblance, are one of the main ways of emulating the senses that looking at a piece of paper normally couldn't ((3,8,11)). Although there is no motion in comics, it is relevant to mention the role that kinesics [[25]], haptics [[15]], and oculusis [[32]] play on conveying emotion through

activating our image schemas; most characters are human or humanoid, we instinctively understand how to interpret these signs. All of this is achieved through specific art styles; a code [[2]] was created that allows the viewers to understand what on its own may seem like random scribbles.

The seventh section continues on the track with conceptual metaphors [[21]] from the previous section ((3,8)). This section however looks at how comics themselves can be metaphors for real world issues. The semiosphere [[48]] that is created through comics becomes larger than itself at times. This leads to comics that exemplify hyperreality [[19]], by blurring the line between reality and fiction ((4,5)).

The eighth section looks at character development and the importance of context [[7]]. The aim of this section will be to look at characters through a diachronic [[11]] lens ((9,10)). Characters have become solidified; they are unique and certain behaviors and demeanors are expected of them. The goal here is to point out the value that connotation [[6]] has on character ((3)) development and reception. Denotation [[9]] of the events is important, but only by reconciling with the history of the character is it possible to have a true appreciation of not only the story, but the character as well.

The ninth section will cover the concepts of firstness [[14]], secondness [[46]], and thirdness [[64]] ((3)). I will be attempting to explain how when they come together semiosis ((2,8)) [[49]] occurs. Over a period of time, it has created a massive semiosphere [[48]] that millions of people are a part of.

The tenth section will be the conclusion of the paper. This section will aim to pull everything together and provide a coherent and cohesive ending to this paper.

Narrative Structure in Comics

I want to write about visual narratives and their structures in comics. **I plan to focus on** the paradigmatic and syntagmatic elements as well as the structural economy, specifically, how the art styles and use of dialogue create a cohesive and captivating experience **I would like my reader to** understand how paradigmatic structure, syntagmatic structure, and structural economy are used to create comic stories.

1. I will write about how paradigmatic structure is utilized in dialogue
2. I will write about how paradigmatic structure is utilized in illustrations
3. I will write about how syntagmatic structure is utilized in dialogue
4. I will write about how syntagmatic structure is utilized in illustrations
5. I will write about how the use of both dialogue and illustrations utilizes structural economy

Comics: Modern Day Pantheons

I want to write about how comic book characters, specifically superheroes, parallel mythological figures. Mythological figures were often symbols for desirable or admirable traits. **I plan to focus on** how ancient myths follow a similar narrative structure to comics. I also want to explain how the characters go beyond their stories and represent things symbolically. **I would like my reader to** recognize and appreciate the similarities between the two.

1. I will discuss the typical narrative structure of myths
2. I will discuss the typical narrative structure of comics
3. I will compare the two structures
4. I will explain what symbols are
5. I will look at some of the symbols in mythology
6. I will look at some of the symbols in comics
7. I will compare mythological and comic symbols

The Unique Blend of Discursive and Representational Symbols in Comics

I want to write about how comic use a unique blend between discursive and representational symbols to achieve a cohesive narrative. **I plan to focus on** how most forms of art (paintings, musical compositions, sculptures, etc.) are representational symbols. Comic panels are representational too, when being looked at alone they tend to make sense; although the context of the story is not obvious when separated from the whole. The whole plot can only be understood when all the constituent panels are viewed together. **I would like my reader to** consider how the blend of discursive and representational is unique.

1. I will explain what discursive and representational symbols are
2. I will argue that comic panels and pages can be understood representationally
3. I will discuss how the greater meaning can only be understood discursively
4. I will discuss how comics are a unique text through their blending of the two

Jakobson's Functions of Communication in Comics

I want to write about how Jakobson's six functions of communications are used in comics. **I plan to focus on** first, explaining what the functions are and how they are used in comics to great effect. **I would like my reader to** have an appreciation of the different types of communication that the authors and illustrators use and why they do so.

1. I will write about what the emotive function is and how it is used in comics
2. I will write about what the conative function is and how it is used in comics
3. I will write about what the referential function is and how it is used in comics
4. I will write about what the poetic function is and how it is used in comics
5. I will write about what the phatic function is and how it is used in comics
6. I will write about what the metalingual function is and how it is used in comics

Image Schemas and Conceptual Metaphors in Comics

I want to write about how image schemas are formed and in turn used to create conceptual metaphors. Comics have to convey complex meaning without motion or audio to go along with it. The work around for this is to have special art styles to, in essence, fill in the blanks that are left when only perceiving through still visuals. **I plan to focus on** the many art styles and tricks that are used to emulate the other senses through image schemas and conceptual metaphors. Icons are also a large part of how the image schemas are formed. **I would like my reader to** take a deeper look at the art and grow an appreciation for the ability to emulate and encapsulate the other senses through sight alone.

1. I will explain what image schemas, conceptual metaphors, and icons are
2. I will show how comics use onomatopoeic language and art to convey sound
3. I will show how comics use kinesics, oculesics, and haptics to convey emotion or mental state without the need for motion
4. I will outline how the juxtaposition as well as the size of panels and dialogue in comics are used to create atmosphere and mood

Social Commentary in Comics

I want to write about how comics themselves can be conceptual metaphors that make social commentary. **I will focus on** how many extremely popular comics and comic book characters have blurred the lines between reality and fiction to make social commentaries. **I would like my reader to** see how it is very common for comics to be conceptual metaphors for real world problems.

1. I will follow up on the previous section to explain comics not only contain conceptual metaphors, but can also be conceptual metaphors
2. I will discuss how the X-Men is a metaphor for the civil rights movement of the 1960s
3. I will discuss what the concept of hyperreality is
4. I will give some examples of comics blurring the line between reality and fiction
5. I will tie in how comics create their own semiosphere with situations that bleed into or tie back to real world issues

Character Development in Comics

I want to write about how character development is done so successfully through only the use of pictures and text bubbles. **I plan to focus on** connotation as well as denotation in the realm of comics. The context of the situations and in turn, the connotation arises is where the character development comes from. Viewing things from a diachronic perspective is also a key reason the character development is so successful. **I would like my reader to** have an appreciation of the characters; where they came from, what they became, and what happened in the middle.

1. I will explain what connotation and denotation is
2. I will explain the context (origin) of a few characters
3. I will explain the context (current state) of the same characters
4. I will show that the character's achievements and character arcs (diachronic view) is what makes them loveable
5. I will prove that the connotations drawn from the history of the character are much more important than the denotations when examining a specific event

How Comics Derived Their Meanings and Became Popular

I want to write about how firstness, secondness, and thirdness in comics come together in a way that makes the comics meaningful and enjoyable. **I will focus on** how the art exemplifies firstness, the individual characters exemplify secondness, and the larger story arcs exemplify thirdness. Through pairing all of these aspects together semiosis occurs. **I would like my reader to** have an appreciation of the semiosphere that is created in comics. The elements of firstness, secondness, and thirdness coming together to make a cohesive whole that millions of people enjoy every day.

1. I will explain firstness, secondness, and thirdness
2. I will explain how the stunning and highly detailed art exemplifies firstness
3. I will explain how the characters exemplify secondness
4. I will explain how the overarching story arcs exemplify thirdness
5. I will argue that these three elements coming together creates meaning in a powerful way

Conclusion

In this paper the aim was to deconstruct comics through the lens of semiotics and the many concept that reside within it. The idea was to put American comic under the microscope

and understand what exactly they are and how they derive the meaning that they do. Briefly going over them again:

- Taking a look at how comics are structured; paradigmatically and syntagmatically. The other point worth mentioning with regards to structure is the structural economy that comics use to effectively tell a story.
- Understanding the root of where comics came from and what they are today. Looking at ancient myths and the structure that they followed shows a mirror image of what modern comics are. The symbols that are ever-present in both myths and comics is another thing that closely ties them together
- Admiring how discursive symbols as well as representational symbols are blended together in the case of comics. They can be understood because they are just pictures on a page, but a better understanding can only come from a discursive understanding
- Jakobson's six functions of communication are very important to understand as comics are quite adept as using these functions to generate meaning. The pictures as well as the dialogue are used as these functions to great success.
- How image schemas are created and used by authors and illustrators to convey meaning that otherwise couldn't be achieved. The conceptual metaphors and image schemas allow a visual stimulus to emulate the other senses.
- Comics often blur the lines between reality and fiction. Many comics are conceptual metaphors themselves. Important social commentaries can be made through comics.
- The context and history of characters is what allows them to be as likeable as they are. The connotation that long term fans have is more important than the denotation of the actual event. True appreciation for comics and characters comes from a diachronic view of them
- Comics use elements of firstness, secondness, and thirdness to generate meaning. The semiosphere that has been created from comics is massive and comes from having a long history of meaningful texts

These were just some of the vast options to choose from when it comes to viewing things through a semiotics perspective. There are many other things that could have been broken down about comics and the things that were broken down could have been in much greater depth. The real goal of this paper was to realize that there are many subjects that can be looked at from many different perspectives. Things that seem dull may be vastly more intricate than given credit for.