2011

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Genre is a system of classification that defines the audience of a given work. It is the criteria consumers use to select new works. Amy Devitt, in her article on genre theory writes, "Based on our identification of genre, we make assumptions not only about the form, but also the text's purposes, its subject matter, its writer, and its expected reader" (Devitt 575). Genre can be a powerful thing when it comes to understanding and classifying various works in any medium. However, because of genre it becomes possible for audiences to look at graphic literature and see only the superhero. This would then prevent audiences who are not interested in that type of story from picking up a graphic novel. While superhero features are a large component of audience perception of comic books they are not the only examples of graphic literature in existence. For this study, I've classified graphic literature as any work that, through a combination of art and narrative, conveys a message simpler than words or tells some sort of story. That said, editorial cartoons, mythical images on Greek pottery, and even instruction manuals are all forms of graphic literature as well as the graphic novel. However, in spite of the almost limitless versatility and growing success of the graphic novel in the mainstream market, studies of graphic literature still are not prominent in academic curricula. The purpose of this study is to identify what place, if any, graphic literature should have in the academic curriculum. If nothing more can be gained from graphic literature than ideas for children's Halloween costumes, academic curricula will have no use for it. On the other hand, if graphic literature is better able to connect with the learning styles of certain students, it has to be utilized more than it is today.

Graphic literature has always been a highly stigmatized form. Critics and educators used to complain that comic books were juvenile trash that corrupted the minds of the kids reading them. As Paul Lopes, a sociologist from Colgate University, states, "For many critics the 'transgressive' mix of image and text in comic books undermined the supposedly superior quality of print culture as well as the unique qualities of visual culture" (Lopes 404). For some reason, combining image and text, two endeavors that when separated find their own academic departments, yields a product that is somehow less valuable.

Perhaps one of the most notable criticisms against graphic literature comes from psychiatrist Frederic Wertham. In 1953, Wertham published Seduction of the Innocent, a book attacking the comic books of the early fifties. In it, he listed several reasons why he believed comic books should have been taken off the newsstands. One problem he had with comic books was the supposed adverse effect it had on literacy in children: "A very large proportion of children who cannot read well habitually read comic books. They are not really readers, but gaze mostly at the pictures, picking up a word here and there. Among the worst readers is a very high percentage of comic-book addicts who spend very much time 'reading' comic books. They are bookworms without books" (qtd. in Jacobs, "Marveling" 186).

Although there have been many critics of graphic literature like Wertham, the form has survived and evolved. Works like Spiegelman's Maus and Satrapi's Persepolis have introduced personal biography to the form. Underground comic labels steadily put out new and experimental works. Established journalist Joe Sacco has even found success with major publishing companies with his use of graphic literature in his journalism. Almost in spite of Wertham's criticism, graphic novels are now available on the shelves of libraries, major book stores and even high school classrooms as a way of getting more students excited about reading. It is clear a lot has changed since the fifties as stated by Dale Jacobs in his 2007 article on the benefits of graphic literature to literacy:

When I was growing up in the 1970s, I never saw comics in school or in the public library unless they were being read surreptitiously behind the cover of a novel or other officially sanctioned book. Over the last decade, however, there has been a movement to claim a value for comics in the literacy education of children. Comics have made their way into schools mainly as a scaffold for later learning that is perceived to be more difficult, in terms of both the literate practices and content involved. (Jacobs, "More than Words" 20)

With this shift in attitude, it is no surprise that graphic literature is slowly making its way into college curricula. Still, considering the popularity of graphic literature in the mainstream market, this process should be happening faster than it is. Generally, as new disciplines arise they begin as classes and then work their way into specialized programs such as those offered in technical and graduate studies. Graphic literature is experiencing something like that. Programs such as those offered by the Kubert School of Cartoon and Graphic Art and the Savannah College of Art and Design are geared toward not only studying but creating new works of graphic literature. However, there aren't many schools that offer this sort of program quite yet.

As for undergraduate opportunities for studying graphic literature, there are about as few opportunities as there are at the graduate level. The reason for the rarity of these programs is that graphic literature, as a blend of art and text, can be somewhat difficult to place in a curriculum. Academic disciplines are genres in that there are specific classifications for them. Since graphic literature is a form that is a mix of art and narrative, it seems to have difficulty landing in one department. Take, for example, the University of Michigan which recently offered two courses on graphic literature. The first was a high level course on graphic narrative which was offered in the art department in fall of 2010. In winter of 2011 this class disappeared only for a similar course to appear in the English department. This shift from one program to another keeps art students from taking this course unless they are double majoring in English. According to Grand Valley State University

Professor of Art Brett Colley, "We have some artists in the art department who are gifted writers, and I'm sure you have some writers in the writing department that are gifted artists, but we don't have that on a regular basis. We don't have collaboration. It would be hard to situate. When you do that you're just privileging one or the other" (Colley). In academia, it is quite difficult to teach students graphic literature because, historically, collaboration between departments is somewhat difficult to conduct. As it stands now, the only way for students to fully study both aspects of graphic literature is to hold a double major and even then they won't be given the opportunity to combine their experiences. So the question becomes this: if there is no collaboration between departments, and if graphic literature has a high enough demand, should it be given its own academic department?

Before answering this question, let's first see how it is currently used in departments other than English, writing or art. Certain professors have found value in using graphic literature to supplement other course materials. Professor Kelley J. Hall of the College of William and Mary and Professor Betsy Lucal of Indiana University, South Bend, co-authors of an article on teaching superhero comics in sociology classes, argue that "Given the visibility of comic book characters in American culture, it is surprising that more sociologists have not looked to comic books as another resource for teaching" (60). They specifically use superhero comic books to explore sociological issues such as gender, race and justice. Their reasoning for using comic books is that they are accessible to students and promote a different sort of creativity than standard sociology books would alone.

Hall and Lucal are not alone in this endeavor. Professor Sebastian Maisel from Grand Valley State University teaches a Middle East Studies course in which he uses works such as Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis and Joe Sacco's Palestine. Each semester Professor Maisel uses two different graphic novels as well as textbooks and articles from academic journals and news media: "I personally consider graphic novels a valuable asset to my classes. They give a personal visual

input to an otherwise broader theoretical topic and if you read too many academic texts and scholarly articles from my perspective as an anthropologist you lose your sense of reality" (Maisel). Along with Hall and Lucal, Professor Maisel believes that adding graphic literature to his course allows him to engage student learning in new ways.

In order to determine just how effective such a tactic is, I conducted a survey in one of Professor Maisel's MES 201 classes. Students were asked questions geared toward establishing their level of familiarity with the form as well as how effective they found it within the context of his course. Of the fifteen students surveyed, twelve admitted having no experience with any form of graphic narrative prior to taking Professor Maisel's course. However, even though the vast majority of this group was completely new to the idea of graphic narratives, fourteen students still found Persepolis to be as or more effective than standard narratives which means for these students, graphic literature is an easily accessible form. If these results prove to be typical of all of academia, then they could potentially indicate that, at least from the student point of view, there are engaging aspects of graphic literature that aid in learning even for those who have yet to experience it.

The survey went on to ask follow up questions about why students felt the way they did about Persepolis. Students found Persepolis to be more interesting, more compelling, and easier to understand than traditional narratives. While this does say something about accessibility, it is not a strong enough argument to say that reading graphic literature is easier without coming up with reasons to support that conclusion. Nor is it the goal of any professor to select materials simply because they are less challenging. For graphic literature to occupy a useful space in academic curricula there must be more compelling reasons to suggest that it is useful for students and professors.

In another part of the survey students were asked to define the term graphic literature. In answering this question, two students identified graphic literature as pictures with words while another two called it words with pictures. Though it

may seem semantic, these are actually two completely different responses. Defining graphic literature as pictures with words implies that the primary message comes from the images and that the text is only there as a supplement to that information; however, defining graphic literature as words with pictures implies the opposite. This difference of opinion probably comes from how students interact with the text. Students who first look at the pictures might see these as the primary information simply because it is what they processed first. The same is true for those who read the words first. The students still put the entire work together but may put a larger emphasis on what was processed first.

In order to gain more insight into this matter, I took another less formal survey of friends familiar with graphic literature but this time I asked only one question: "Do you consider graphic literature words with pictures or pictures with words?" In answering this question those surveyed were instructed to consider how they read graphic works and whether they looked at text or images first. As expected from a group that actively reads graphic literature, most of the responses were prefaced with, "I really think it's both but if I had to choose…" followed by a reluctant answer. I tallied the results and found that this particular group was split almost right down the middle. Those who called graphic literature pictures with words claimed that it's impossible to look at the text first simply because the images take up so much of the page. Those who argued the contrary claimed that in complex stories it's impossible to get enough information from the images alone. This contrast in response has led me to believe that there are different kinds of readers and that this might have something to do with how graphic literature can potentially be an asset to certain courses.

It seems that part of what causes readers to put more emphasis on either the text or image may come from how graphic literature is processed at the cognitive level. Professor Douglas Marschalek from the University of Wisconsin-Madison wrote an article, "A Review of Basic Cognitive Processes and Their Relevance to Understanding Responses to Works of Art," about how the brain learns to process art. In it he gives brief summations of a number of different psychologists' views on how visual stimuli is broken up and processed. The general consensus seems to be that while auditory processing is for the most part serial in nature, visual processing is more parallel, taking multiple aspects into account to determine meaning: "In parallel processing, numerous types of information can be processed simultaneously. Also Treisman indicates that attention can shift from one channel to another as information is processed. The latter research indicates that information is processed through a series of processing mechanisms. Each mechanism sorts and selects information prior to higher order cognitive processing" (Marschalek 24). Applying Marschalek's theory specifically to graphic literature, it would appear that words and text are separated but processed at the same time with the focus switching back and forth between the two. The brain then selects what is most important to the overall message and takes that into higher order processing.

Marschalek cites more theories that delve further into how the brain chooses what it believes to be the most important information. One such theory comes from Daniel Kahneman who suggests that much of what goes into visual processing comes from selective attention: "Following the formation of grouped units, some units receive more attention than others" (Marschalek 25). At this point in the processing of the graphic narrative, readers have already separated the text from the image and put both into separate categories in their minds. What Kahneman suggests is that before readers go on to select what is most meaningful or important to them, they subconsciously put more emphasis on one or the other. In other words, if readers examined the same graphic novel and analyzed the most important information, some readers would have more dialogue in their minds while others would have more sequential imagery. Although these different learning styles, for the most part, go unnoticed by students and professors, they are important to the way we interact with information.

In order to provide more specific evidence to support the ideas in Marschalek's article, Academic Coach Wendy Marty from Grand Valley State University allowed me to reproduce a test she created to determine whether her students learn better through text or images. The test is relatively simple. Students are given a piece of simple graphic literature, something with an easy shape and a few short sentences, and instructed to examine it for fifteen seconds and reproduce what they see. Once the time is up, they are to turn the page over so that they can no longer see the ad and then draw and write as much as they can remember. They are told that the test is not a measurement of how well they can draw but simply to see what they most remember. Once the test is completed, Ms. Marty looks at the results and places the student into one of three categories: heavy image, heavy text or balanced.

I had the opportunity, under Ms. Marty's guidance, to give this same test to a group of ten college students. We gave the students an old perfume ad as the image to be reproduced:

Fig. 1. An old advertisement for Chanel Perfume. The source image students were to study and replicate from memory.

There were several reasons for choosing this picture. First, it contains a large, fairly simple shape. Since the test isn't so much about perfectly recreating a piece of artwork, it's best to have something with standard shapes so that even people who do not draw well will have a better chance of being able to reproduce the images they remember. As for the text aspect of this image, it has a few words in different places that do not necessarily all fit together as a traditional narrative would with each idea contributing to the next. A brief sentence in traditional narrative format might be easy to remember, but this layout forces students to look in different places for different words and remember as many of them as they can. In this ad, none of the words are difficult to remember except perhaps the name of the perfume. So, with the simple words and pictures, this advertisement should be fairly manageable.

Still, as Ms. Marty and I predicted, in the group tested, we found an even spread of all three categories: heavy image, heavy text and balanced. Here are some examples.

Fig. 2. A heavy image test result

When analyzing these samples it's important to consider the parts of the ad the test taker forgot as well as remembered. For example, this one clearly falls into the heavy image category because the student remembered the image well and was able to reproduce it in three dimensions but was not able to remember anything about the words other than the "No. 5." This student did, however, feel the need to add text to the image because he or she knew the original had text. Unable to remember what the words were he or she probably wrote down something the perfume bottle brought to mind even though the word "perfect" appears nowhere on the original ad. So for this person, the words merely served as a placeholder that did not add any meaning to the image. He or she knew it was a picture of a perfume bottle and that is all that really mattered.
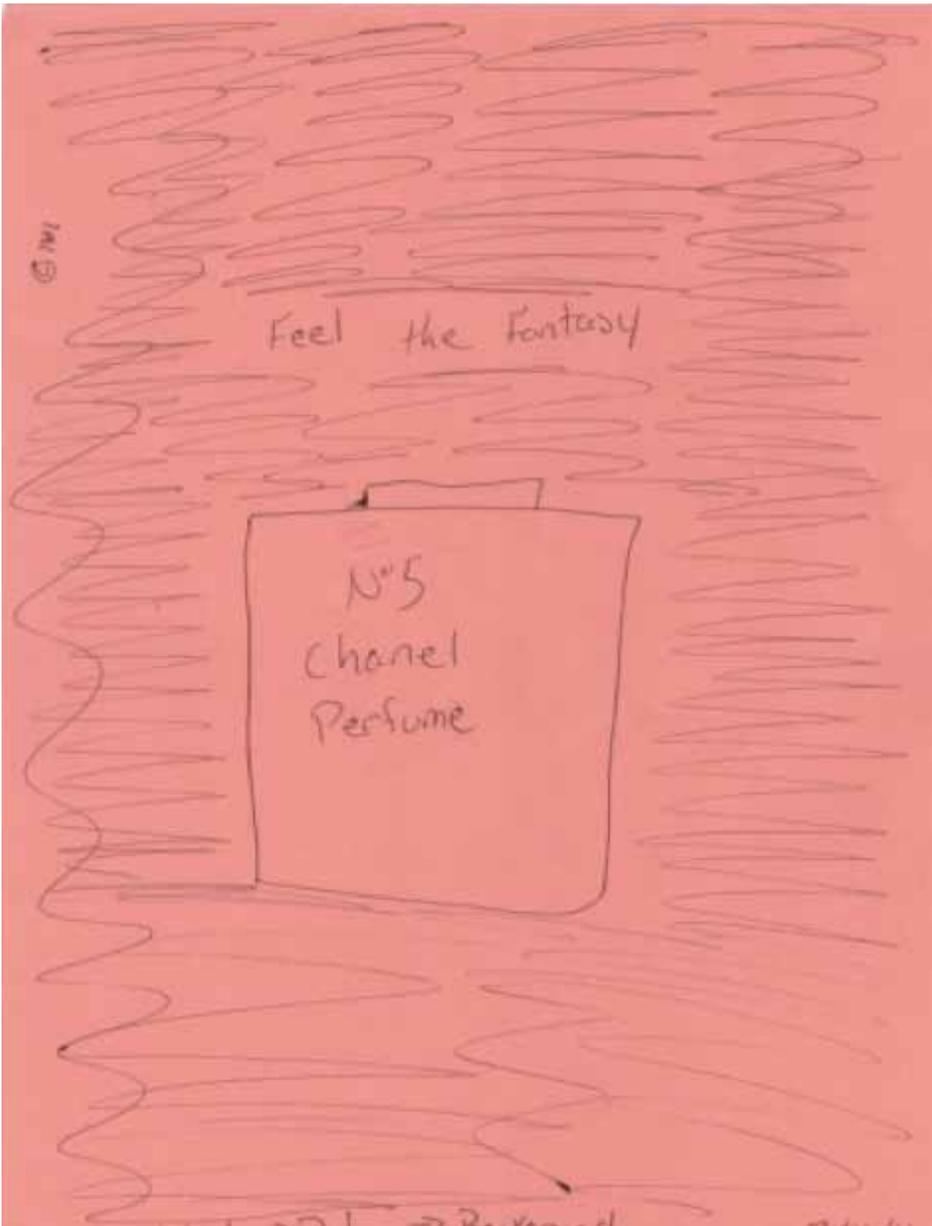
Fig. 3. A heavy text test result.

This next test falls into the heavy text category. While the test taker struggled to produce a solid picture, he or she remembered all of the words including some of the copyright information hidden in the top left corner. It seems though that this person had a bit of trouble remembering the shape of the bottle. It is likely that this person first wrote out all the words and where they belonged on the paper and then knew that the "No.5 Chanel Perfume" portion was in a box separate from "Feel the Fantasy." This would explain why there isn't a nozzle in this person's perfume bottle.

Fig. 4. A balanced test result.

The final test is more challenging but it's an example of someone with balanced focus. Looking first at the bottle, it's fairly well done but the test taker drew the top of the bottle slightly smaller and forgot to include the hole the spray comes from. As for the words, he or she remembered the name of the brand but forgot a few key words including the noun "fantasy" in the slogan and the word "perfume" on the bottle. This indicates that this person saw the picture and text as a whole when analyzing it so when given a limited amount of time, he or she remembered a fair amount about both aspects but also forgot certain aspects of the ad as well.

These tests have shown that there can be significant differences in the way student's process information. If colleges are truly geared toward providing the best possible learning experience for students, they need to account for this. Academic curricula have always been controlled by the professors who choose whatever materials they find most useful to their classes regardless of form or genre. These tests indicate that in addition to focusing on subject matter, professors need to engage students by incorporating as many modes of learning as possible. This is where graphic literature can be especially useful.

Dale Jacobs offers a new way of thinking about graphic literature in his discussion of multimodal literacy which he defines as, "The ability to create meaning with and from texts that operate in print form and in some combination of visual, audio, and spatial forms as well" (Jacobs, "Marveling" 181). Aside from graphic novels, there is a wide variety of multimodal texts available in various settings. Common examples include: magazine articles, instruction manuals, and sometimes even textbooks. The goal of a multimodal text is to help the reader synthesize visual and textual information to create a message stronger than words or pictures could alone. Multimodal texts are designed when there is a strong need for specificity on a certain topic. Magazine articles use multimodality to give the audience an image that connects to the text in order to establish the character and mood of the article. Instruction manuals and textbooks use it in order to provide as much information as possible so that upon reading, the audience is more knowledgeable about a topic or more able to perform a task.

The beauty of multimodal texts is that they compensate for the difference in processing of image and text among different readers. The New London Group, a group of ten academic scholars from the US, UK and Australia devoted to studying the shift in literacy pedagogy, has developed a theory explaining how multimodal texts specifically are processed that takes into account the personal experience of the reader. In their research they state that different readers will ultimately approach texts in different ways. We've already seen differences in the way readers approach graphic literature through the survey results in Professor Maisel's class and the test results from Wendy Marty's experiment. What the New London Group suggests is that how a reader responds to a text depends on what the reader has experienced before that text. With this new information, it is possible to draw further conclusions on what potential use graphic literature may have in academic curricula.

The New London Group refers to the process of drawing meaning from texts in terms of design, laying down

three important components of gathering meaning in multimodal texts: available designs, designing, and the redesigned. Available designs refer to the experiences readers bring to what is on the page. More specifically, they entail orders of discourse: "Within orders of discourse there are particular Design conventions - Available Designs - that take the form of discourses, styles, genres, dialects, and voices, to name a few key variables. A discourse is a configuration of knowledge and its habitual forms of expression, which represents a particular set of interests" (New London Group). Available designs are the experience each reader has to work with when it comes to tackling a text and as such are incredibly vital to the next step, designing.

Designing is the process of taking the available designs and the actual reading material and putting them together. This is where readers begin to form meaning out of the text: "They also draw upon their experience of other Available Designs as a resource for making new meanings from the texts they encounter" (New London Group). After designing, readers are left with the re-designed. This is the product of their new experience through the reading of the text and the available designs they started with. Since not everyone has the same available designs, not everyone will read the same way. This is what accounts for so many different interpretations of the same book, song or film. If everyone read everything the same way, there would be no need for literature courses.

In order to better understand this concept, take a look at the following example from Y: The Last Man written by Brian K. Vaughn: In this scene the three astronauts have realized that their equipment has malfunctioned and that their emergency landing might not go as well as they would hope. This page specifically is about the astronauts coming to terms with their possible demise. Thanks to the multimodal nature of this piece, most of the people who read this page come to a similar understanding of the plot. However, they may not necessarily come to this understanding in the same manner and as a result may draw different conclusions depending on their available designs. A reader with more textual

Fig. 5. An excerpt from Y: The Last Man
Source: Y: The Last Man The Deluxe Edition Book Two Page 53.

experience might see from the dialogue that the characters are praying and use the process of designing to determine that they're afraid of something. Another who has more of an art focus might instead look at the pictures reading the somber faces in the first three panels as indicative of a serious situation. He or she then might see how they are holding hands in the final panel as a sign of love or support for one another. So for the text reader, the fear becomes important whereas the art reader

might find the support to be the main focus. While these two different readers may ultimately come to two different conclusions, they still share the same understanding that these astronauts might not make it out alive.

The New London Group goes on to argue that as a society we're gradually adjusting to multimodal literacy in magazines, advertisements, instruction manuals and various other media. Not only that, but with the rise of technology, we're slowly being led to a more multimodal manner of not only reading but thinking and composing as well. We can readily interact with the internet by searching through pages of information for specific items or uploading our pictures and thoughts to social media sites. Even our smart phones and digital readers require users to physically move words around with our fingers. Because of the way students interact with information is changing, academia should incorporate these new modes of thinking into courses in order to better prepare this new generation of scholars. Given the multimodal nature of graphic literature, it can be a key component in this process.

Think about it this way. Comics are often treated the same as children's books: a sort of gateway drug into "real" literature. Take, for example, the words of Professor John Lowe from the Savannah College of Art and Design: "I started reading comics, and then I got into other types of fiction and literature. I stopped reading comics a little later, but I don't think I would have made the leap if it weren't for comics" (qtd. in "Using Comics"). Of course, Lowe is not the only one to think this way. There are other teachers who, contrary to the early warnings of Fredric Wertham, advocate the use of comic books to get students more interested in reading. Originally, it was my belief that this argument was a problem for graphic literature and that it suggested that at some point or another we should evolve beyond the form. I now see that is not the case. Jacobs says it well: "By examining comics as multimodal texts and reading comics as an exercise of multiliteracies or multimodal literacies, we can shed light not only on the literate practices that surround comics in particular but also on the literate practices that surround all multimodal texts and the ways in which engagement with such texts can and should affect our pedagogies" (Jacobs, "Marveling" 183).

Graphic literature does not need its own academic department. In fact, it would be a disservice to academic curricula to try to limit it to one area when it can prove useful outside of that. If schools use graphic literature as a part of other courses they can better teach to those who might be more visual thinkers and keep up with the genre of multimodal media. Graphic novels can be incredibly useful as basic texts to help build up multimodal literacy, or they can be used as they are in Professor Maisel's course as a different perspective on relevant issues. Ultimately, as evidenced by the New London Group and the studies conducted with Ms Marty, some readers will find the experience of reading a graphic novel less useful than others. Still, it should be the goal of academic curricula to effectively reach as many types of students as possible and that simply cannot be done without taking different modes of thinking into consideration. Once this happens, professors may even begin to notice an increase in the level of understanding and the quality of student work.

Graphic literature is a form just as versatile as film or traditional literature, but in order for it to fully make its way into academic curricula, professors and administrators have to look past the stigmas of the genre. Every genre has not only a target audience, but a purpose as well. When authors or artists decide to work within a specific form it's because they find that form to be the best for conveying their message. If that is the case, it also stands to reason that some readers will simply learn more from some genres than others. So if the goal of the university is really to provide the strongest possible learning environment for all students, graphic literature shouldn't ever be dismissed simply because of its genre.

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