IS IT LITERATURE? IS IT A COMIC?
NO! ITS GRAPHIC NOVEL!

"Graphic Novel" is a format rather than a genre. Graphic novels can be fiction, non-fiction, history, fantasy, or anything in-between. What defines a graphic novel? A graphic novel uses juxtaposed pictorial images in a deliberate sequence to convey a story and produce an aesthetic response in the reader. That is, they present a plot primarily through the use of graphics (paintings, drawings, etchings, etc.) with dialogue and narration used as an auxiliary to the images instead of their usual primary role.

Graphic novels are similar to comic books because they use sequential art to tell a story. Unlike the episodic nature of comic books, graphic novels are generally stand-alone stories with more complex plots. Although collections of short stories that have been previously published as individual comic books are also considered graphic novels. The trademark conventions of graphic novels are vibrant artwork with stark picture detail and color, descriptive language, and relatively simple syntax or limited use of text to tell or retell stories.

Like traditional novels there are endless ways to categorize different graphic novels. There are as many genres and sub-genres as in traditional fiction and non-fiction. The following are only a few of the most predominant categories.

- **Superhero Story:** Superhero graphic novels have taken the most popular form of comics and turned what were once brief episodic adventures into epic sagas. Superhero comics are dominated by a few mainstream publishers Marvel, DC, and Darkhorse. E.g. *Batman: Dark Knight Returns, Watchmen.*
- **Personal Narratives ("Perzines"):** are autobiographical stories written from the author's personal experiences, opinions, and observations. E.g. *Blankets*, *Fun Home.*
- **Manga:** The Japanese word for "comic" but in the US is used to descript Japanese style comics. Manga is read from top to bottom and right to left as this is the traditional Japanese reading pattern. E.g. *Akira, Full Metal Alchemist.*
- **Non-fiction:** are similar to perzines in that they are written from the author's personal experience, but the author is generally using their own experience to touch upon a greater social issue. E.g. *Maus*, *Persepolis.*

Features, Codes and Conventions of Graphic Novels

- **Panel** – refers to the framed image. A sequence of panels can show character(s) /action moving through time or they can show character(s)/action at one point in time. The nature of panel borders (smooth, jagged, bold or none) can also provide meaning. Sometimes panels do not have borders, creating a unique effect where the subject seems to stand outside the storyline.

- **Splash** – Splash is a kind of panel that spans the width of the page. If it runs off the page entirely, it is known as a 'bleed'.
- **Gutter** – This refers to the space between panels. They can represent changes of character, scene, time and point of view. As the reader moves across the gutter he/she must relate one panel to the next, imagine what happens between the panels or 'fill in the blanks', a process known as 'closure'.
- **Transitions** - There are six types of transitions that artists use in comic books, all of which have a different effect on the reader. Transitions refer to the process of closure (where the reader mentally 'fills in the gaps') in the gutter, between panels.

1. Moment to moment

2. Scene to scene

3. Action to action

4. Aspect to aspect

5. Subject to subject

6. Non-sequitur

- **Text** – text can provide narration, speech, thoughts or sounds (through onomatopoeia (e.g. zzz, shhhh!, ringgggg, thump or THUMP, *#@*!). The size, shape, font, capitalization and colour all convey meaning.
- **Voice over** – Narrators have the possibility to speak directly to the reader through a voice over. Usually this is done with a hard line separating the narrator's speech at the top or bottom of a panel from the image within the panel.

- **Speech bubble** – These are frames around the characters' language, a kind of 'direct speech', where the characters speak for themselves. If these appear as clouds, they represent the character's thoughts. If they appear in jagged lines, the character is shouting.
- **Emanata** – This term refers to the teardrops, sweat drops, question marks, or motion lines that artists draw besides characters' faces to portray emotion.
- **Motion lines** – or zip lines, the lines around bodies and objects that convey speed, length and direction of action.
- **Foreground** – Where is the subject or the point of focus for the reader. If the subject seems closer to the reader, in the front of the scene depicted, it stands in the 'foreground'.
- **Midground** – If the subject stands in the middle of the scene that is depicted, then there it is in the midground. Placing a subject off-centre can also be used to create visual tension.
- **Background** – The objects in the background (not usually the subject) help add contextual information for the reader.
- **Distance and angle** – If the panel were a photograph, where would the camera stand in relation to its subject? Is it a long shot, medium shot or close up? At what angle is the camera pitched? Is it a bird's eye view, a high angle, eye-level, or low angle? All of this will have an effect on the reader's understanding of the subject.
- **Style** - The artist's drawing style can be discussed using several terms. Scott McCloud, in *Understanding Comics*, shows that there are four 'scales' of style: complex to simple, realistic to iconic, objective to subjective, specific to universal.
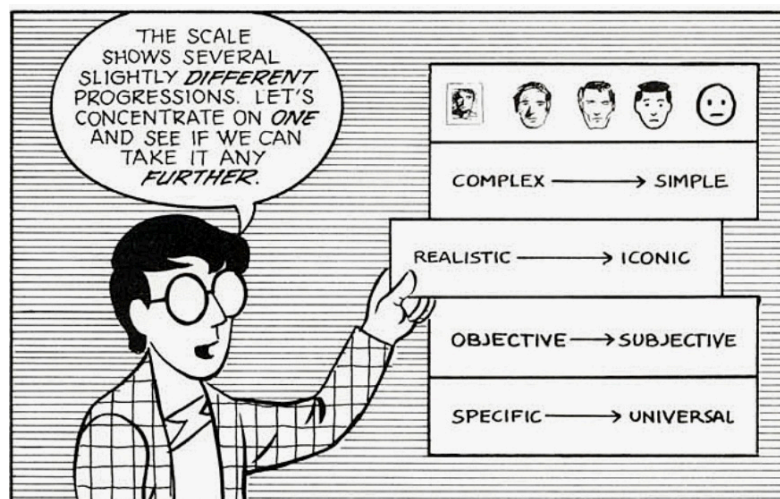
The continuum from realistic to cartoony images represents increasing levels of **iconic abstraction**; removing (abstracting) an image from its retinal source, but still retaining its basic meaning.

- **Colour** – The colours that an author uses will affect the reader's experience as well.
- **Graphic weight** – This term is used to discuss the amount of contrast in an image. Are blacks offset with whites? Are there many shades of grey in between? With regards to colour images, one can look for the degree to which colours are vivid or opaque.
- **Time** – Graphic novels and comic books do not have to tell a story in a linear way. Besides the use of transitions between panels artists can explore multiple moments in one panel, like a collage.

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