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Characteristic Styles and Development Trends in Modern Comic Illustration

Mgr Alamusi[1] Dr. Odpurev Gankhuyag[1] Dr. Erdenetulga Ganchuluun[1]
[1]Mongolian National University of Education, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

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Abstract

Communication through images can be considered the earliest form of non-verbal communication used by humankind. Modern scholars of rock and cave paintings continue to study and interpret these works, showing that they are not merely pictures but carry deep communicative meaning. Before writing emerged, images served as a primary tool for sharing ideas. From ancient times through the end of the 19th century, literacy rates were low, so visual communication remained widely used until recently. Even at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, short-form informational imagery continued to play an important role in communication. Comics, which developed in the 1950s in European countries such as France, as well as the United States, and Japan, evolved not only as entertainment but also as an influential form of modern visual culture that combines fine art and literature, which has had a significant impact on social psychology. The purpose of this research is to examine the unique style of modern comics and identify current development trends. To do so, the study applies art analysis, comparative image studies, and semiotics.

Keywords

Comic illustration; modern art; colors; design; semiology

1. Introduction

Originally appearing in newspaper and magazine columns in the late Middle Ages, the adventurous and often humorous illustrations gradually evolved into comic culture by the mid-twentieth century. They developed rapidly under the influence of modern pop art, surrealism, and postmodernism. In addition, the expansion of newspapers, magazines, film, and digital technology introduced new styles to the visual language of comics, expanding and developing through deeper meanings.

2. The Artistic Positioning and Evolution of Comic Illustration

2.1. Relationship with Commercial and Fine Art

One important quality that distinguishes comic illustrations from classical art is their connection to everyday commercial art. At the same time, they are expanding

into more realistic styles that can represent individual identities, which has become essential in an era defined by modern electronic use. (Groensteen 2007, p.162) [6].

2.2. Stylistic Approaches and Modern Forms

The distinctive style of comic illustration is expressed through the structure of the image, the use of color, the elements of movement, and the composition of text. Artists generally employ two main stylistic approaches: minimalist or realist. Today, digital comics, 3D, and motion comics have become increasingly popular.

3. Structural Framework: The Panel as Narrative Unit

3.1. Function and Compositional Levels

In comics, the panel functions as the basic unit that organizes time and space within the narrative. Its structure or compositional plan operates across three interconnected levels. They are the composition of the visual art, the transitions across the page, and the sequence of the storyline within a given text. (Cohn N, 2013, p.12). [2]

3.2. Basic Structural Features of a Panel

Each panel conveys the rhythm of time, movement of a character, and shifts of emotions through images, text, action, and spatial boundaries. Consequently, the shape, size, position, and spacing of panels or gutters determine the comic's visual rhythm and the level of the reader's attention.

The panel of a painting has the following basic structural features:

1. Sequential Structure: The transitions between panels and their interconnections organize the narrative's temporal flow.
2. Purpose and Composition: The shape, size, and internal arrangement of each panel change to reflect the emotion and rhythm of the scene.
3. Gutter: The empty space between panels engages the reader's imagination, representing the interactive nature of comics.
4. Relationship Between Text and Imagery: Dialogue, internal monologue, and commentary are closely linked to visual composition, enhancing the narrative's depth and meaning.

4. Color Scheme: Aesthetic and Narrative Functions

4.1. Fundamental Roles of Color

The color schemes in comic illustration is a fundamental aesthetic and visual tool for expressing a character's psychology, the atmosphere of a scene, and the intensity of the narrative. It shapes the composition of the image, conveys emotional power, supports symbolic meaning, and enhances psychological expression. The color scheme of comics not only has an aesthetic function but also influences key narrative dimensions, including theme, space, time, pacing, and the emotions of the protagonist.

(Eisner W, 1985, p.37). [4]

4.2. Key Directions in Color Application

The application of color scheme in comics manifests in the following key directions. The balance of cool and warm colors guides the reader's emotional response. For example, blue and gray often convey sadness, loneliness, or a sense of coldness, while red and yellow evoke energy, movement, and excitement.

The transitions of color, as well as light and shadow, convey the passage of time within the story, establishing a hierarchy between memories, dreams, and reality. Specific colors can also symbolize a character's psychology and behavior. For instance, the dominance of red and blue in superheroes often signifies strength and justice, while villains are frequently associated with darker tones and deep shadows. (McCloud S, 2006, p.41). [9]

4.3. Color in Relation to Artistic Style

The use of color in comics, in conjunction with the artist's vision:

- In realistic styles, natural light, shadows, and accurate color representation are emphasized.
- In minimalist and expressionist styles, color functions as a device for symbolism.

5. Motion Representation in Comics

Although a comic is composed of still images, the reader's imagination generates a sense of continuity in time, movement, and action. This phenomenon is the most distinctive feature of a comic's visual narrative. [3]

Motion representation relies on several fundamental elements, one being "motion lines." These lines indicate the direction, speed, and intensity of a character's movement. For example, a straight line trailing a running character conveys speed and force, while a spiral or wavy line suggests rotation or loss of balance. Known as motion lines or speed lines, they can be described as a visual code for representing motion.

5.1. Gesture and Pose

The position, movement, and posture of a comic character convey kinesthetic expression.

Exaggeration and foreshortening of a character's pose intensify the sense of motion. For example, depicting a character jumping from a low angle, such as a "worm's-eye view," creates both power and drama. [10]

5.2. Sequential Rhythm

Movement is not confined to a single image. However, rhythm, duration, and continuity of action are created through a sequence of images. Changes in the size and shape of frames indicate the speed and dynamics of movement. Large frames suggest slow motion, while small, multiple frames convey rapid action. This effect

has been described as “cinematic rhythm” or “a visual rhythm akin to film editing.” (Eisner 1985) [5]. Color and light shifts also play a key role in conveying movement. Fast motion is often emphasized through bright, contrasting colors, whereas soft colors and blurring are more common in slower action. [7]

5.3. Onomatopoeia and Sound Effects

Textual sound effects such as “BANG!,” “WHOOSH!,” and “CRASH!” enhance the sense of movement and spatial dynamics in a comic. They serve both typographic and phonetic purposes, creating a visual and verbal connection (Lee & Yoon 2021, Chute 2010). [1]

6. Conclusion

Comics are developing as a vital branch of the communicative language of modern visual arts, serving as a bridge connecting traditional art and the digital environment. Further research is needed to explore the emerging visual language shaped by artificial intelligence and interactive user participation. [8]

Modern comic illustration is a syncretic art form that fuses visual art and literature and is a comprehensive compositional system, integrating visual narrative, form, color, and movement. The compositional structure of a comic serves as the basic unit for organizing the spatial and temporal dimensions of a story. It directs the reader’s attention and shapes the rhythm of the narrative. The gaps between panels, or gutters, are particularly significant, as they rely on the reader’s imagination to maintain the continuity of movement and action.

Color scheme is central to the aesthetics and ideas of comics, conveying character psychology, scene atmosphere, narrative intensity, and spatial depth. It is closely linked to character behavior, plot development, and cultural symbolism, while also expressing movement and emotion.

Elements of motion form the foundation for creating a sense of dynamism in the static images of comics. Compositional tools such as motion lines, character poses, sequential rhythm of panels, light and color transitions, and visual representations of sound work together to convey the sequence, speed, and intensity of action.

Comic illustration has thus developed into an independent artistic language of visual storytelling, integrating time, space, movement, color, and meaning. It serves not only as a medium of entertainment but also as a profound form of cultural, psychological, and artistic expression, and occupies an important place in contemporary art studies.

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