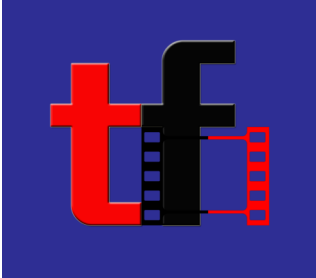


# MOVING VERSUS STILL IMAGES: ADAPTING GRAPHIC NOVELS INTO FEATURE FILMS



## ABSTRACT

The graphic novel is a major form in literary fiction burgeoning with a lot of potential due to the writer's sheer talent of being able to tell a story both pictorially and through the use of words. The graphic novel appropriates the comic in such a way that it is arranged in the form of frames, strips and gutters and is not so different from cinema which treats each distinct frame as *miseen scene* to replicate camera movements. The frozen units and frames in a graphic novel help the reader to engage in the reading process gradually, providing great attention to detail that appears both in language and in the visual depictions. While these frozen units are converted into moving images and figures the mystery that resided within the graphic novel which was the reader's responsibility or task to decipher and deconstruct has already been partially, completely or deficiently solved. The paper ultimately seeks to compare two different mediums of transmitting ideas and symbols and how one might be different from the other by means of translatability and its impact on the reader/viewer.

**Key words:** Graphic novel, adaptation, translatability, visual, aesthetics, images.

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A simple definition of a graphic novel is that it is a book length comic. As far as one's understanding goes graphic novels have evolved from comics and has successfully managed to procure popularity for its extended book length narratives, sequential art, exclusive stories with a complexity in plot and an

economy of language. While engaging with a graphic novel the reader is able to watch the scenes unfold, see what a character looks like, and experience the setting illustrated in the background. And in a graphic novel, these images are not additions to the story; they are part of the story. Each image in a graphic novel gives important information to the reader and pushes the plot forward. It is at this juncture that we need to address the matter of visual literacy. Visual literacy is the ability to interpret, and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image. Making meaning out of symbols and images is not given academic precedence in comparison to interpreting written texts or words. It is important for us to question as to how many of us read an image the same way which we read words. To “read an image” or “reading images” in itself sounds quite puzzling; only because we lack the training and the capacity to interpret an image the same way that we interpret words. Visual literacy in relation to moving images i.e., films, advertisements, videos or still images as in comics, graphic novels, hoardings etc. is disposed to an increase at the turn of the 21st century as dependability on digital media has seen an upward trend. Every image be it moving or still devises its own vocabulary that any spectator or audience or reader should be able to decode. Images become very powerful tools to depict or portray something that could have sociological, political, emotional and psychological indications and impacts. The reader’s role is to imbibe and comprehend the simultaneous surge of words and images that are in conjunction with each other. In one way or the other it is the exact same thing that happens while watching a film. And while adapting graphic novels into films, the adaptability becomes simpler as compared to adapting other written texts because the difficulty of converting words into images does not feature in this process as “the problems of visual story telling have already been solved”. Nevertheless, one would be laying emphasis on the difference in reading and comprehending both these visual mediums: moving and un-moving.

Graphic novels such as *Persepolis*, *V for Vendetta* and *300* have showcased an intensity in visual language and narrative imagination: it stimulates different readings and tries to catch the attention of different types of audiences. At the same time, it can propose sophisticated reflections that reveal at once the difficulties of telling stories in the current cultural context and yet the need to keep the art of storytelling alive. One would like to draw a peculiar analogy of the creation narrative in the genesis

where God breathed life into man while dealing with the translatability of these novels onto the screen. Similarly, the film adaptation makes the graphic novel come alive. The gutters or the blank spaces created in the graphic strips that separates one scene/panel from the other get filled by emotions, reactions and sentiments that leads to its disappearance in the film version. Translatability therefore becomes directly proportionate to perception. The graphic novel through its display of characters and sequencing solicits a sense of controlled vision. To paraphrase Michael Chaney's argument from *How to read a Graphic Novel?* the beginning chapter of *Persepolis* while Satrapi introduces herself, she displays her image as a 10-year-old kid and the sequence is followed by a group of young girls not looking very distinct from each other posing for a class photograph. Satrapi's own self is cut off in the picture and she says "you don't see me". But the question is, don't we see her? Or do we un-see what we have already seen. Therefore, Satrapi succeeds in ensuring that the reader only sees what the author wants them to see. However, this could not be achieved in the adaptation as translatability has its own limitations. The presence of a camera changes the manner of perception.

An accepted and positive audience reception towards any adaptation would depend on the loyalty of the film to its original work. In *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, Kamilla Elliott "conceives of fidelity (how loyal is the film to the novel) as an impossible dream". However, while dealing with graphic texts this dream is quite possible keeping in mind the same reason that the issues of visual story telling have already been solved in a graphic novel. Nevertheless, this kind of a slavish sort of faithfulness of any film adaptation to its source text could be seen as ingenuine and a work lacking in creativity and vehemence. The effective emergence of an array of meanings and metaphors through a nexus of the image and the word depicts the aesthetic relevance and significance of graphic narratives that are bound to a certain time and space. The aesthetics of a graphic novel encompasses itself right from the cover page to the colour scheme, to the meticulous detailing of vivid images and the way in which the storytelling takes place. Majority of adaptations sacrifice the material content in the written form of the text by taking a 'realistic' approach, in which plot takes precedent over form. In the film version of *Persepolis*, the form has been retained, and there is no loss of reality even though the images come in

the form of cartoonified portrayals. However, every adaptation assumes different degrees of fidelity. Zack Snyder's *300* would show utmost fidelity as the film seems to use the book as the script and most of the scenes appearing on screen seems to be a photocopied version of the pages in the verbal text. Every scene in the film only becomes more alive with the sounds and voices that are filled with a depth of emotions and sensation. James McTeigue's *V for Vendetta* however has been completely recontextualized and a lot many alterations have been made to suit that context or vice versa. Arching back on the idea of fidelity, the reception of any audience should hardly lie on the constancy of the film to the novel, it should rather lie on the loyalty that the film pays in conveying the theme or the central idea of the text including capturing the essence of the narrative.

One of the major differences between a moving and a still image lies within the response of the reader. Scott McCloud, author of *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* talks about how the reader becomes a conscious collaborator and that still images produce more of an aesthetic and prolonged response in the reader. However, it is important to notice that the cuts and edits in a film are somehow same as the gutters between panels. The sequential movement of panels/frames in either form from one scene to another demands the same amount of reading and interpreting. The difference lies within the medium itself. A film adaptation has already created itself through a source text but a graphic novel builds itself up through the response of the reader, their interactions with the symbols created within the text and the presence of the novel as an artwork. Both the moving and the still image, invokes within a reader a sense of enthrallment and restlessness and that is the beauty of any visual narrative. The reader aims to decode the *mise en scène* on one hand and the setting and placement of objects within a singular frame in the other. Both moving and un-moving images has its own limitations however does not restrict or limit the audiences' liberty to deconstruct even though it might deliberately curb the imagination to a certain extent.

For certain the adaptability of graphic novels and comics into films is quite effortless and has gained a wide level of popularity. Adaptability comes forth as a result of a multi layered interaction between the narrative and the reader. The presence of both forms of visual narratives necessitates for a close engagement by the audience or reader and enhances the understanding of images and the role it plays in

promoting representations and communication, more widely known as visual literacy. In a fast-changing world, overcome by visual media, graphics and technology, it becomes imperative to skilfully read and interpret images therefore, heightening cognitive reception, recognising visual manipulations and appreciating the aesthetic manifestations.

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