

***The Trees That Divide Us:
How Visual Language Presents the Theme of Economic Disparity in “Trees”***

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Abstract

Trees by Ellis (2016) and illustrated by Howard (2016) reimagines the metaphor of an alien invasion in the form of a comic book series through its unique view of a post-apocalyptic narrative—ten years after they landed, these aliens did nothing, standing on the earth’s surface, like trees. This comic book is an introspection of the human condition years after a horrific event—the characters in this world have been dealing with this situation for a decade. This presented Ellis and Howard many issues to explore in the series such as economic disparity. Because the comic book genre is a unique medium, this also gave the creators a challenging task to not only explore these issues from a literary perspective, but from a visual perspective as well. This paper does a close reading of the various elements of comic book art such as paneling, framing and the use of color, and how writer Warren Ellis and illustrator Jason Howard used these to present the theme of economic disparity in *Trees*. By looking at these elements, this paper posits that complex social themes, such as the theme chosen in this paper, economic disparity, can be revealed through the combination of the literary and visual language that the comic book medium can offer.

Keywords: Comic Book, Visual Literacy, Visual Language, Economic Disparity

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Introduction

In our modern times, the written word, from poetry to advertising copy, and the visual image, from painting to photography, can be seen in conjunction with each other. This convergence has been at the forefront of our information, media-driven society. We see advertisements with images combined with text beside many major thoroughfares around the world. In social media, the popularity of apps such as Instagram juxtapose the 1:1 aspect ratio for images on top of text you can input for your posts. With a combination of image and text, you can convey a message on your social media platform.

We are now very lucky to be in the age of multimedia arts, where multiple arts forms are combined, not only for its artistic values, but for making life more convenient. Children are now digital natives and are equipped to understand that the comic book genre can be as complex and, in many ways, more immersive than traditional forms of literature. This speaks to the capacity of humans to express concepts through multiple modalities (Cohn, 2013).

Cohn (2013) describes the issues when dealing with visual narratives in his book, *The Visual Language of Comics*. He begins to describe the differences between graphic structures and the narrative structures. The graphic structure gives information to lines and shapes, as well as connects to a spatial structure that encodes the spatial components of these meanings. The narrative structure, on the other hand, orders information into a particular meaning.

This intuitive and multimodal thought process is at the heart of comics. By being able to take a look at not only the graphic structure of a comic and give meaning to these images, but by providing them context through its narrative structure by understanding its sequence, we are able to understand, with more complexity, the underlying themes being explored by comics writers and artists. Cohn further elaborates this.

It is significant to note that these structures are separate: while event structure is the knowledge of meaning, narrative structure organizes this meaning into expressible form. Altogether, these different components mutually interact with each other in the process of comprehending a sequence of images.

Trees by Ellis (2016), illustrated by Howard (2016), and published by Image Comics, is a positively reviewed science fiction comic book series that deals with a silent alien invasion that stands on various surfaces of the earth, like trees. These gargantuan “trees” do not move and seemingly have no account for humanity and society. But upon their impact they created devastation with long term consequences such as pollution and flooding. With its unique science fiction proposition, the story revolves then not around the alien trees, per se, but around the people that live near or around these alien structures. As a science fiction title, the narrative begins a decade after the invasion, and takes us to different locations around the world both urban and rural, from Manhattan to Mogadishu, Sicily to Svalbard, where the protagonists investigate these “trees.” *Trees* also scrutinizes various social and cultural themes that its various characters experience because of this invasion such as gender, artistic expression, fascism and economic disparity, to name a few.

Scope, Limitations, and Objectives

Due to the constraints of this paper, this study will focus on various aspects of visual language found in the graphic novel and comic medium and how this affect and move the

narrative forward in a more meaningful way. Thus, although the focus of the study is on its literary benefits, the illustrations and their placements take precedence over this study as part of this broader literary study.

Furthermore, I wish to define the term *graphic novel* and *comic books*. Upon a cursory review of the two terms, a quick google search led me to the website masterclass.com. In technical terms, a graphic novel contains complete narratives, whether or not they are part of a larger series, but comic books contain serialized narratives, and it might be difficult to read a comic book issue if the previous comic book issue has not been read. (Is It a Comic Book or Graphic Novel? Learn the Difference Between Graphic Novels and Comics).

For the purposes of this paper, the term *comic book* will be used in reference to *Trees*. This is due to the fact that the nineteen issues of *Trees* were published serially in the span of six years, from 2014-2020 and that the narratives move throughout these issues. I recognize that this definition may be simple and there are deeper and more critical definitions for both terms. In fact, there are definitions both academic and non-academic, where the definitions of both terms overlap. However, for the purposes of this paper, only a simple definition is needed as the focus was to choose a term for constancy.

The first issue of *Trees* begins with a quick recap of the proposition that the world is put under. It reads,

“Ten years after they landed, all over the world as if there were no one here. And they did nothing and did not speak as if there were no one here and nothing under foot. Ten years since we learned that there is intelligent life in the universe but that they did not recognize us as intelligent or alive. They stand on the surface of the Earth like trees exerting their silent pressure on the world as if there were no-one here.” (Ellis, 2015)

Thus, the characters have dealt with living with this situation for a decade. This presented Ellis and Howard many issues to explore in the series such as police states, transgender identity, feminism, and economic disparity. And because the comic book genre is a unique medium, this also gave the creators a challenging task to not only explore these issues from a literary perspective, but from a visual perspective as well. This paper will look at the various elements of comic book art such as paneling, framing and the use of color, and how writer Warren Ellis and illustrator Jason Howard used these to present the theme of economic disparity in *Trees*.

The Visual Language of Trees

Paneling and Framing

Eisner (1985) explains that the fundamental function of comic art is to communicate ideas and stories by means of words and pictures that involve movement of images through space. In *Understanding Comics* by McCloud (1994), he called the phenomena of observing the parts but perceiving the whole as *closure*. Thus, the job of the comic book artist is to carefully choose what to include inside the page in the form of panels, in order to assist the reader into piecing together the narrative to form that closure. It is also the job of the artist to fill the gutter—the spaces between the panels—with color or background fillers, as the narrative requires. Closure, then, according to McCloud (1994), can be a powerful force within panels as well as between them, when artists choose to show only a small piece of the

picture. Furthermore, the choice of panel shape is also important in bringing the narrative or idea forward. As Eisner (1985) explains,

The frame's shape (or absence of one) can become a part of the story itself. It can be used to convey something of the dimension of sound and emotional climate in which the action occurs, as well as contributing to the atmosphere of the page as a whole.

In *Trees #1*, the panels and framing of the story contribute greatly to the theme this paper is exploring, that of economic disparity. The spread of pages 9 and 10 of the first issues introduces us to the second area where these alien trees have landed, New York City. In this spread, we see the juxtaposition of a location. On the left page, we see Vince and Del speaking to each other. Vince is running for mayor of New York City, while Del is his right-hand man. The page is dominated by Vince's office that boasts a view of the city that hosts two massive alien trees. We can assume that since Vince has an unobstructed view of the city, his office is in prime real estate that is not cheap. Thus, we can assume that Vince is well-off to be able to afford such office space. On page 10 however, we see three panels that show New York City up close. But, the illustrations on this page paint a different picture as compared to that of Vince's office. The third and bottom most panel is the most striking. It illustrates how other less fortunate New Yorkers live closer to the alien tree, compared to wealthy New Yorkers who see this tree from afar. A barrel is burning to show the lack of electricity for heating, while we see makeshift furniture everywhere. It is a venerable shanty town.

Paneling also plays a role in this dichotomy. On the left page, we have three panels in the bottom that show both Vince and Del. These panels are rectangular in shape but are positioned vertically. These mimic the *trees* in the background that are central to the story. Although these trees are silent, as the first few pages of the comic book explain, these trees exert a "silent pressure" on humanity. Thus, by the panel alone, we can assume that the political power and wealth, or a silent pressure, lies with the characters inside these three panels—the soon to be Mayor Elect Vince and his aide, Del. However, juxtaposed to the right of this, the three panels are also rectangular, but are horizontal. We see more of the actual city and the destruction caused by the *tree*. But since the panels are positioned horizontally, it looks as though a trunk has been cut, and is no longer whole, thereby providing a foreshadowing of what is to come—when Vince is elected as mayor, he will kill some people that call this area of New York home—the proverbial cutting of the roots.

The top panel of twelfth page of *Trees #2* provides us with further evidence that framing can show economic disparity. In the background, we see a building in the Roman architectural style. In the foreground, a fruit vendor has fallen to the ground, his wares all over the street and a fully armored person, presumably the guard of whoever is inside this building, aims his weapon at the vendor. But what is more striking is the wall or gate that divides this grand building and the poor vendor that has fallen. It is an object that physically keeps others away, thus providing more distance for the wealthy to the poor. This panel also bleeds throughout the page, with another smaller panel in front of it. As a result, the building that the wall protects seems to have more importance than the welfare of the fallen vendor.

What's the Color?

Van Ness (2010), in her critical study of the graphic novel *Watchmen*, writes,

Color, like any aspect of the panel, is most effective when the reader can determine a change or distinction between various panels. Think, for example, the change in Rorschach's word balloon shapes or between differing points-of-view and how these affect the reader's perception of particular subjects. If all of the colors are consistently bright and bold and never placed in contrast to more muted or subtle colors, any impact that they may have on the tone of the narrative is lost.

In *Trees*, color plays a vital role by determining scenes and locations, and in aiding the narrative as well. The bright yellow, pink and purple tones mimic Mogadishu, Somalia's warmer climate while the color palette changes to a blue-green and white palette when the scene shifts to Blindhail Station in Northwest Spitzbergen, Norway where the climate is cooler.

Color signals a change in class structure and presents us with a view of the economic disparity in Mogadishu, Somalia. In *Trees* #2, page twelve again depicts the roman style building covered in bright yellow sunlight to depict upper class society. As discussed earlier, this panel and framing presents the economic disparity of the location. If we look at the panel within the bottom panel on the same page, we are treated with a bird's eye view map of Mogadishu, Somalia. Not only does this small panel contrast well in color and brightness to the panel it is on top of, which helps direct our eyes to it, it is also the same color as the sunlight that drapes the building seen on the panel above. This then lends us to the assumption that the building on top must be an important building in this story arc. And as seen in the next few pages, this is indeed true, as the building is the office of the Somali president, Caleb Rahim, who incidentally is wearing yellow tinted sunglasses to add to this assumption.

In *Trees* #7, we see a scene in Cefalu, Italy, where a conversation between Eligia Gatti and Luca Bongiorno on pages five and six is happening. Both the left and right pages of this spread are dominated by the pair sitting by a cliff, overlooking three *trees*, one of which is right in the middle of Cefalu. The color tone of the cliff where Luca and Eligia are predominantly a reddish hue, but the town of Cefalu is covered in green. This is no coincidence as Luca begins to explain his knowledge of the trees. He explains,

People who could leave Tree landing sites did. As soon as they could. Those left under the shadows of their Trees are there because they couldn't go, for the most part. It costs money. Most cities under trees have a greatly reduced population compared to ten years ago. Police services reduced their numbers accordingly. Police cost money. Many cities under trees thereby become interzones of sorts. Shadow economies. Shadow politics. Nothing good grows in the shadow of a tree. This is one reason why your friends in the Great Work took root here. It's almost a pity they're so stupid and poor. (Ellis, 2015)

As Luca explains, it is the poor who have stayed under the shadows of these trees, and with the lack of police authority and a decreasing order, greed takes over. From the previous chapter, we find out that Tito, Eligia's boyfriend, is a gangster who makes money blackmailing the queer community into paying him protection money for his silence. Eligia is visibly upset about this as she leaves for a cigarette. This is the situation in Cefalu at present. Green, often associated with greed, is then a fitting color to drape around Cefalu. The red hue that paints Luca and Eligia, is also apt, as a foreshadowing of things to come. Luca ends the page by stating, "You may have to kill Tito the idiot yourself, after all" (Ellis, 2015).

Further into the same issue on page 13, the color red begins to reveal itself as complementary to death itself. As Luca and Eligia enjoy a bottle of red wine together, their conversation revolves around Cefalu and Luca's theory of the tree. However, at the end of the page, the last three panels present the turning point of this story arc. As Luca pours a glass of wine, he explains, "Of course, Italy's going to go to shit long before that happens. And the only people who'll survive that are the ones with their own support systems." The second to the last panel fills with red wine. Luca asks, "Start writing. I'm going to tell you some things about economics in Cefalu, Palermo, in general, and Italy as a whole. When are you going to kill Tito?" Then in the last panel, there is nothing but a complete red hue. Eligia replies, "Tomorrow night" (Ellis, 2015).

The red wine filling up the panel is a clear representation of the use of color in the story. As Eligia becomes increasingly tired and desperate to survive, seeing that the only way to do so is to kill Tito, the red here becomes a clear metaphor for the blood that will be spilt in the next few pages. Eligia explains her motives to Davide, "I want to live differently. I want to be comfortable and safe, and I don't want to work for a living. I never claimed to be a nice person. I'm just better than Tito." (Ellis, 2015) Davide realizes this as well when Eligia tells him, "You just wanted money and control and some respect. You don't have any of that right now." (Ellis, 2015). As Eligia and Davide ambush Tito on a cliff overlooking Cefalu, the last panel on page 19 brings the metaphor of red full circle. Tito crashes into the town with great force from a high distance, and only his splattering red blood is vibrant among the color muted buildings of Cefalu.

Conclusion

The examples above are but a few of the instances where the visual language of a comic book greatly aids in its narrative. Van Ness, (2010) explains that the meaning-making process is dialectical, words contribute to the meaning of the images and vice versa. Both function as text or context, and that function is determined by the reader's perception. She offers a deeper condition to McCloud (1994) on the potential of the genre; however, it relies on reader participation, a two-way communication between creator and reader.

How we define comics, and the graphic narrative form depends on how we as readers interpret the relationship between images and words at any given point in the narrative. The relationship (or lack thereof) between the two is not an inherent quality of the medium; no one answer is correct. What is an integral aspect of the medium is its reliance on the participation of the reader. Graphic narrative readers must actively read both images and words in order to take meaning from the text. (45)

Trees is able to grapple with various issues and themes competently, even employing both visual elements and literary elements to effectively convey the message and idea. Berger, (1972) urges us to see what we only look at, that looking is an act of choice. In the previous examples, I have explained how paneling, framing, and even the use of color greatly supplements the theme of economic disparity in *Trees*. By looking closely, we can see that the symbolism colors bring with it helps us determine social standing and inner emotions. The shapes of the panels give us a glimpse of the power struggle in the comics and aids us in understanding who is in charge, and who is not. This exercise in visual literacy is only one of the few ways to understand that the graphic novel and comic book medium greatly complements the way we understand and see things in modern society.

Appendix

Trees #1 1, p. 9-10



Trees #2, p. 12



Trees #7 p. 5-6



Trees #7, p. 13





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