

Question 1: From the MESSAGE, MEDIUM, CONTEXT research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

Can comics and graphic novels be valuable resources as educational material and for encouraging multi-literacy?

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This essay will begin explaining the origin and meaning of the term multi-literacies, and understanding why in education today, it is essential that educators develop multi-literacy pedagogical approaches in their practice. With this context in mind, a brief overview of graphic novel genres will be discussed and how, as a medium, they encapsulate many of the hallmarks needed to develop multi-literacy.

The focus of the essay will then look in detail at how two specific graphic novels can be considered important educational resources that facilitate the teaching of multi-literacy. The intention is to look specifically at important ethnographic texts that help us to reframe societies' construction of social identities, understanding particularly the viewpoint of 'the other', at the same time as being important historical documents. By looking at the multi-modal aspects of these two books, their cultural relevance will be discussed, evidencing the complexity and multi-literate aspects of these graphic novels, and how they could be employed teaching various themes and subjects.

Recently literacy educators have coined the term multiliteracies to focus on the ways in which literacy education will need to change in order to address the social diversity, technology and globalisation of our new and changing world.(Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, Gee, and Al, 1996, p. 60)

Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, Gee, Al, and five other educators and researchers, hailing from United States of America, Australia and the United Kingdom, met for a week in New London, USA in 1994 where they coined the term, multi-literacy. Each brought, "differences of national experience and differences of theoretical and political emphasis".(Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, Gee, and Al, 1996, p. 60).

They met to discuss the limitations of literacy pedagogy at that time, considered ill equipped to serve a societies' changing needs and to overcome a series of concerns such as,

What is appropriate education for women, for indigenous peoples, for immigrants who do not speak the national language, for speakers of non-standard dialects? What is appropriate for all in the context of the ever more critical factors of local diversity and global connectedness? (Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, Gee, and Al, 1996, p. 60)

With the need to balance these complex considerations in mind, the group formulated this new pedagogy.

A pedagogy of multiliteracies... focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone. These differ according to culture and context, and have specific cognitive, cultural, and social effects. In some cultural contexts ... the visual mode of representation may be much more powerful and closely related to language than "mere literacy" would ever be able to allow. (Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, Gee, and Al, 1996, p. 60)

The description above begins to identify hallmarks of appropriate educational material for this new pedagogy. As visual modes of representation are central to comics and graphic novels through their use of imagery, icons and symbols to communicate, clearly many attributes required for multi-literacy education are inherent in these multi-modal texts.

Many graphic novels were initially serialised comics, later compiled in book form. There are also graphic novels written intentionally as single edition novel narratives. These formats are seen in both Western comics and the Japanese Manga tradition. On a simplistic level, subject matter of comics and graphic novels can be divided into two main groups, those in the superhero genre and non-superhero genres. However, as the medium has evolved, the subject matter of non-Superhero comics has diversified immensely. In his online article, Minorities in Comics:Part 7, Lewis (2013) explains the reason for this diversification.

Many writers had to create their own comics because their lives weren't reflected in the comic books of their times.... the lack of strong female characters in comics led to the creation of independent, underground feminist comics. The same can be said for LGBT communities. Some minority communities... used comics to tell their side of history.

Popular themes in graphic novels and comic books today cover topics such as coming of age narratives, war and war journalism, auto-biographies, historical fiction, fantasy, faith, sexual identity, feminist narratives, and this list is constantly evolving. Even the super-hero genre in the Western tradition of comics and graphic novels has evolved in order to create fresh new narratives that maintain the interest of readers. Graphic novels such as, *Batman, The Dark Knight Returns*, (Miller, 1986) challenged and re-invented the stale formulaic structure of established characters like Batman. Wolk alludes to Miller's darker, more complex portrayal of this character in his book, *Reading Comics*: "Miller treated Batman as a sort of benign psychopath: a man driven by his parents' murder to dress up like a bat and fight crime." (Wolk, 2007, p.174)

As themes and genres of graphic novels have diversified, narratives from a range of cultural contexts have flourished. As, "Cultural and linguistic diversity are now central and critical issues", (Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, Gee, and Al, 1996, p.60), ethnographic texts from diverse cultural contexts play an all the more important role in implementing a multi-literacy pedagogy. Two highly acclaimed graphic novels extremely relevant to the cross-cultural focus of the pedagogy, can be seen in the work of *Maus*, written by Art Spiegelman and *Persepolis*, written by Marjane Satrapi. Both were originally released as two parts, but are now available as, *The Complete Maus* and *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood and the Story of a Return*. The analysis of these two graphic novels will help to appreciate the many attributes identifying

these as valuable educational resources for a multi-literacy pedagogy.



(Spiegelman, 1986, p. 20)

Maus is an account of the Holocaust as experienced by Spiegelman's father, Vladek Spiegelman. The structure of the story is laid out as a series of interviews, between Art and his father. Each story follows the same format throughout the book, beginning with an initial opening scene set in the present, showing Art's interactions with his father. The reader is then sent back in time, as Vladek recounts his experiences. Vladek's story begins relating the story of how he met Art's mother, as a young man in Poland, before the war.

In each story, Vladek recounts his experiences as they happened chronologically. He tells of his own father's desperate attempts to avoid him being conscripted into the Polish army, restricting his diet to salted herring for three months. We follow Vladek as a soldier, a prisoner of war, interned in Auschwitz concentration camp, being reunited with his wife, Anya, the loss of their first son Richieu, and their eventual emigration to America.

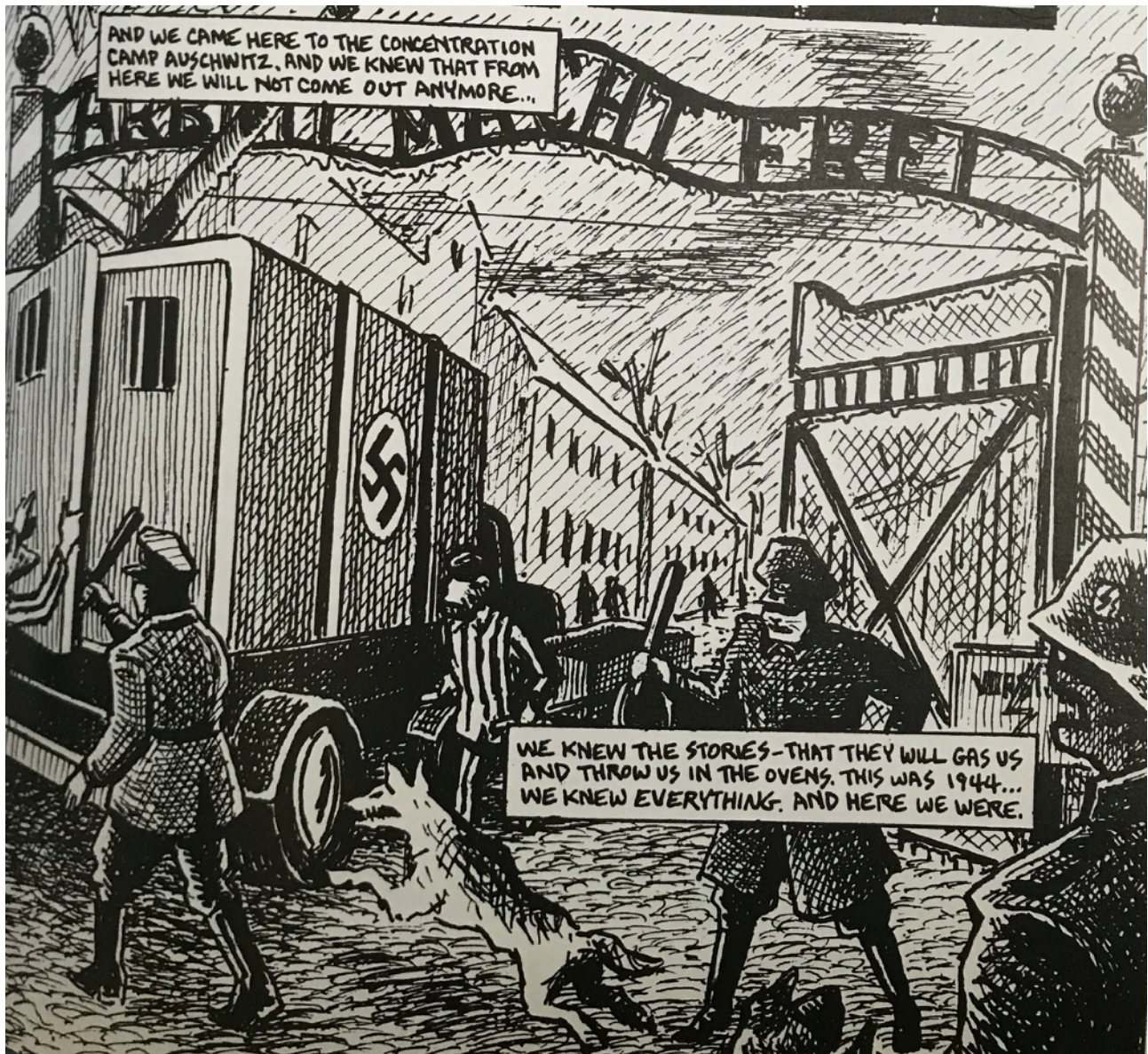


(Spiegelman, 1986, p.48)

Maus has many distinctive features that include Spiegelman's anthropomorphic portrayal of the characters. The Germans are shown as cats, the Jews as mice, and Poles are portrayed as Pigs. In Reading Comics, Wolk ascribes Spiegelman's use of these anthropomorphic portrayals as metaphors that are, "...shockingly powerful...- real cats don't just eat mice the way they do in cartoons; they torture them first". (Wolk, 2007, p.343)

Whilst the main plot of Maus is Vladek's story, interweaving through the graphic novel are several sub-plots. Spiegelman explores his relationship with his father, he exposes the horror of his mothers' suicide and Richieu's death, the brother that he never knew.

Visually, the pages of *Maus* are set out as a series of sequential monochrome panels, set on a white background. Spiegelman occasionally uses larger panels and full page spreads to illustrate detailed or impactful scenes, such as the arrival at Auschwitz. Here the viewer is positioned, about go through the infamously emblazoned, "Arbeit Macht Frei" gates.



(Spiegelman, 1986 p. 159)

Contrasting this dominant layout, in chapter five, on pages 102 to 105, we see a different layout. The design again is monochromatic, but here, panels are set on a black background, and the style distinctly different. The panels here are drawn in a style reminiscent of German Expressionist woodcuts, by artists such as Erich Heckel (MOMA).



(Spiegelman, 1986 p.105)



(Heckel, 1921)

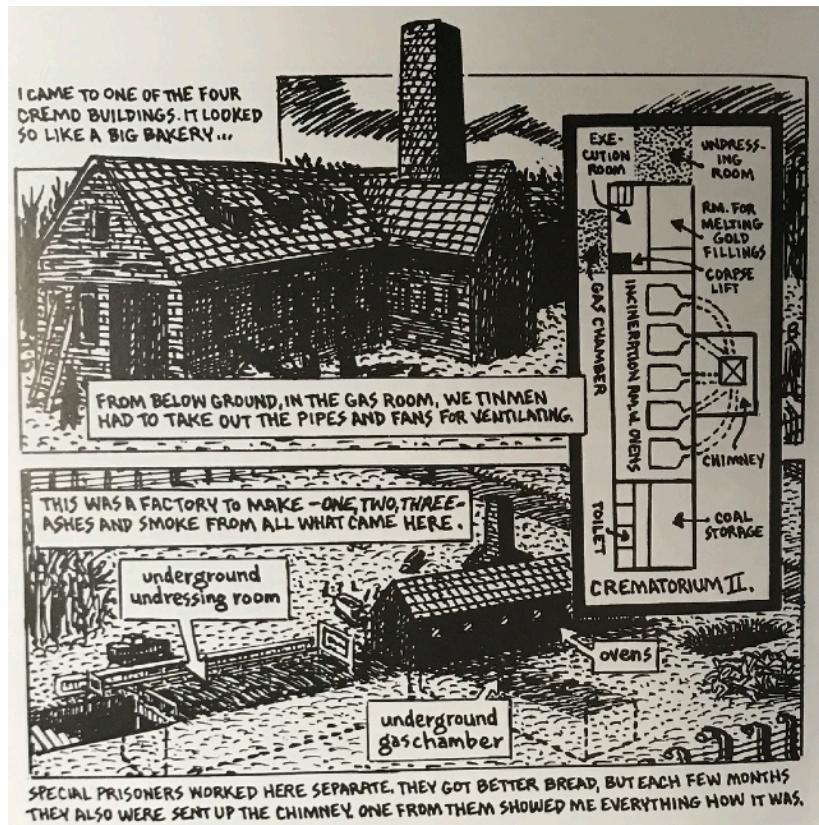
This change of format alerts the viewer that this is an adjunct comic book story, within the main narrative. The story's entitled, Prisoner on the Hell Planet, where Spiegelman tells the story of his mother's suicide from his viewpoint. The raw expressionist style he employs here emphasises horror and grief. It alludes to Spiegelman's mental health, newly released from a three month stay at a state mental hospital. Throughout the story Spiegelman portrays himself as a Jew in a concentration camp, shown wearing the instantly recognisable striped uniform.



(Jacket and trousers of inmate, Auschwitz KZ Lager, IWM Collection)

The harsh, bold qualities of the self portraits, emphasise the deterioration of his emotional state. This is further enhanced as the style of his self portraits gradually become more abstract, revealing his inner turmoil and guilt upon contemplating his last interaction with his mother.

Spiegelman's drawings of the anthropomorphic animal characters, are deceptively simple. Through his skilful portrayal of gesture and body-language they're given complexity and dimension. Other distinctive features can be seen in the inclusion of informative images such as diagrams and maps. These illustrate components of Vladek's story, such as a close-up drawing of a typhus spreading louse (p.251) or the floorpan of the gas chamber and incineration ovens at Auschwitz.



(Siegelman, 1986, p.230)

The only colour illustration, is that of the cover. Prefacing each chapter is a single panel illustration, located centrally on the page. Above this single panel illustration is shown the chapter number and title in a bold Art Deco style font, again redolent of the bold fonts seen in German Expressionist posters.



(Speigelman, 1986, p.199)



(Petau, 1923)

This monochromatic style, and use of bold lettering seen in Maus can also be seen in the second graphic novel to be discussed in this essay, - Persepolis (2000), by Marjane Satrapi. Persepolis is a graphic novel written as an autographic account of a young girl growing up in Tehran, Iran between 1970 and 1984. The reader is given a unique viewpoint, seen through the eyes of Marjane, allowing us to experience the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, through the lens of Satrapi and her family. Each chapter gives insight into how the revolution affected her family, daily life, schooling, friendships and her society. The Satrapi family, an intellectual, well informed group, were initially hopeful and supportive of the revolution; but as time went on they became more disillusioned and disheartened by the quick onset of fundamentalism within the regime.



(Satrapi, 2000, p.18)

Persepolis is an important graphic novel as it challenges the West's perceptions of "the other" (Zevallos, 2011), - referring to the Iranian people in this book. Westerners' perceptions of Iranians would undoubtedly have been formulated by political narratives propagated by Western media reporting on events at that time. These in turn would have been framed by the backdrop of the West's political machinations and economic ambitions for Iranian oil reserves.

Britain's relations with Iran over the last two centuries [can be] simplified to one of 'cunning' imperialism, sophisticated manipulation and control, principally of resources (especially oil), against which stands Iran's valiant determination to liberate itself. (Ansari, 2019)



(Satrapi, 2000, p.131, 133)

As can be seen from these images, the format of the book is similar in style to Maus, both in layout of the chapters and sequential story-telling panels; but also in Satrapi's employment of full-page spreads or larger panels illustrating dramatic events.

Satrapi's is a rare primary source account. Her introduction encapsulates the biased way that the West has viewed Iran. Since the revolution, "...this old and great civilisation has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism and terrorism." (Satrapi, 2002). She goes on to lay out her compelling motivation for writing this graphic novel,

As an Iranian woman who has lived more than half my life in Iran, I know that this image is far from the truth. This is why writing *Persepolis* was so important to me. I believe that an entire nation should not be judged by the wrong doings of a few extremists. I also don't want those Iranians who lost their lives ... to be forgotten. (Satrapi, 2002)

In *Persepolis* Satrapi portrays herself as just like 'us', - a teenager listening to music, wearing jeans, rebelling and pushing the boundaries of authority. However, in the strict regime of Iran at that time, rebelliousness would lead to dire consequences. Theokas (2003, quoted in Connors, 2019, p.2), chillingly concludes, "The *only difference* between a girl growing up in the USA and a girl growing up in Iran is that in Iran, rebellious behaviour we take for granted could lead to jail time—if not worse". (Connors, 2019) In the chapter entitled, Kim Wilde (Satrapi, 2000, pp.126-134), she details her brush with the Guardians of the Revolution, women monitoring public conduct in Iran, ensuring women were properly veiled at all times. For wearing a denim jacket, decorated with a Michael Jackson badge, trainers, and for not lowering her veil 'appropriately', a thirteen year old Satrapi is called a 'whore', and taken to the Guardians' headquarters. "At the committee, they didn't have to inform my parents. They could detain me for hours, or for days. I could be whipped. In short, anything could happen to me." (Satrapi, 2000, p.134). As harrowing as this experience must have been, Satrapi ends this chapter revealing her resilience and indomitable spirit. Once home, she portrays herself dancing around her bedroom to her black market tapes.



(Satrapi, 2000, p. 3)

Whilst some chapters describe her individuality, Satrapi uses repetition as a device to portray conformity with dress rules, sameness and loss of identity. In some illustrations, such as the one above, Satrapi's character becomes lost among her veiled classmates.

Her repetition of simplistic figures often emulates Persian relief carvings, such as the one below, from the British Museum. Repetition can also be seen as patterns and decorative elements. These vestiges of the visual traditions of her cultural heritage can be seen in illustrations such as those on page 77.



(Assyrian Gypsum wall panel relief, 660BC-650BC)



(Satrapi, 2000, p.77)

These discussions of Maus and Persepolis have revealed a range of considerations within these texts that educators could develop as classroom material and themes for exploration for the new pedagogy. Schwartz's article "Graphic Novels for Multiple Literacies", states the importance graphic novels play in the study of history, "Graphic novels offer subject matter students might otherwise never consider and help them imagine history"(Schwartz, 2002, p.263). This is true in the case of both Persepolis and Maus. Satrapi's is an altogether vulnerable and human voice contrasting the narratives of the dominant hierarchies that fostered prejudice towards Iranians, while Maus gives us an individual's testimony of the holocaust.



(Satrapi, 2000, p.255, 256)

In addition to the Persepolis' historical 'insider' viewpoint of Iraq's Islamic revolution, Satrapi explores values, and gives us her account of the war between Iraq and Iran (p.255, 256). Educators could consider this text from a sociological point of view. Students could consider how western clothing, music and icons come to signify rebelliousness for Satrapi and her contemporaries; as the dominant regime sought to repress these, viewing them as 'symbols of decadence'. Even among the adults we see a dichotomy between how people dress in public and in private, before and after the revolution. Satrapi focuses our attention on dress codes in many ways, as they become loaded with meaning within the regime, expressing an individual's fundamentalism or modernity (p.75). Students could also consider the similarities and differences between the values of the Iranian regime, and those in the West by looking at Satrapi's modes of self expression, comparing it with how youth in the west express themselves. Sociologically Satrapi also details the changes in the Iranian education schooling, showing how her bilingual, mixed sex schooling then became segregated, and bilingualism represented a symbol of capitalism, another rich source for comparison and discussion.



(Satrapi, 2000 p.75)

The illustrative styles seen in both books are full of visual references, emulating the cultural context and heritage of these narratives. The styles, although deceptively simple, are full of metaphors, informational drawings, and often communicate intense emotions and horrific events. Even on a visual, non verbal level there are many aspects that elicit discussion, appreciation, expanding understanding making these graphic novels valuable multi-literacy educational resources.



(Satrapi, 2000, p.6)

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