Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Literature, Language, and Culture Development
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.33906

A Study on the Narrative Form and Visual Style of Graphic Novels—Taking Graphic Novels Of Mice and Men and Here as Examples

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Abstract. Graphic novel is a composite narrative medium in which words and images work together to construct meaning. It has both visual literariness and visual artistry. Its core lies in generating reading experience different from pure text narrative through the interaction of "discourse" and "image". Based on this, this paper takes *Of Mice and Men and Here* as research objects, and analyzes the formal organization and style presentation mechanisms of the two works in graphic narrative construction from two dimensions: narrative form and visual style. The study finds that *Of Mice and Men* mainly takes character relationships and event progression as the main narrative line, and strengthens the emotional tension and atmosphere expression of literary narrative through scene scheduling, picture rhythm and visual style. *Here* forms a narrative mode dominated by spatial structure and visual organization through time superposition, page segmentation and visual repetition in a fixed space. Thus, narrative form and visual style in graphic novels are not separate levels, but an expression system that works together around the core narrative concept of the work. They cooperate with each other to construct a graphic narrative mechanism centered on story experience and reading perception, and form their own unique aesthetic experience. The study on the relationship between narrative form and visual style of graphic novels helps to further understand the narrative strategies and visual expression logic of graphic novels.

Keywords: graphic novel, narrative form, visual style, graphic narrative

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, creators represented by Art Spiegelman have promoted the international development of graphic novels, enabling this medium with both literary narrative and visual art characteristics to gradually gain an independent cultural and academic position. In recent years, with the expansion of the translation and publication of graphic novels, "graphic novel" has gradually become a relatively clear publication category in China and has entered the vision of academic research from the reading market. Compared with literary works or general comic books, graphic novels are literary works based on visual reading materials. Therefore, they do not simply rely on words to tell stories, nor are images attached explanations of text content. Instead, they form a visual literary form with composite narrative characteristics through the relationship between images,

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words and each other. As Shi Zhongyi defined literariness, "imagery thinking and literary fantasy, ambiguity and obscurity are the most basic characteristics of literariness." [1]

From the perspective of media mechanism, the core of graphic novels is not to simply "visualize" existing text content, but to construct a literary narrative system dominated by image narrative with the collaborative meaning generation of images and texts. Therefore, the meaning generation in graphic novels does not depend on a stable master-slave correspondence between images and texts, but is reflected in multiple aspects such as the organization of image-text relationship, the construction of narrative structure, the scheduling of visual rhythm and the organization of style system. In other words, the narrative of graphic novels is not only about "what is told", but also about "how to make the narrative valid through formal organization and visual presentation. In this sense, narrative form and visual style in graphic novels are not separate aspects, but important mechanisms that jointly participate in the construction of image narrative.

However, the existing discussions on graphic novels mostly focus on their media attributes, publication and communication or general analysis of image-text relationship. There is still a lack of more targeted case studies on how graphic novels construct stories through specific image narrative forms and make visual style directly participate in meaning generation as a narrative mechanism. Based on this, this paper selects *Of Mice and Men and Here* as research objects, compares the different ways of the two works in image-text relationship, space-time organization, narrative rhythm and visual system construction from two dimensions of narrative form and visual style, and then discusses how graphic novels generate their unique narrative logic, meaning mechanism and aesthetic expression through the collaboration of narrative form and visual style.

2. Definition of narrative form and visual style in graphic novels

David Bordwell emphasized in Film Art: Form and Style that "narrative is a formal system" [2], and "film form in a broad sense is the overall structure perceived by the audience when watching a film, that is, the overall relational system of various elements in the film." He also pointed out that "stylistic elements include camera movement, color block arrangement in composition, music matching, and other designs" [2]. He stressed that "film form is a system—that is, a group of interrelated and interdependent elements are combined together, so there must be certain principles within the system to help them establish relationships with each other." [2] Although this discussion comes from the context of film studies, it also provides methodological inspiration for graphic novels.

A graphic novel is a composite narrative medium in which words and images construct meaning together. Its narrative is not based on the one-way telling of stories by words or the simple explanation of text by images, but is formed in a unique formal mechanism through the interaction of images and texts. The "narrative form" mentioned in this paper mainly refers to the way graphic novels organize stories and advance narratives. In short, it is the "framework of narrative", specifically including narrative structure, space-time organization, image-text relationship and other aspects. "Visual style" is a visual language system composed of specific visual elements, including modeling, color, composition, light and shadow, etc. It not only shapes the overall visual tone of the work, but more importantly, it participates in narrative functions, character understanding and the generation of narrative meaning. In other words, in graphic novels, narrative form determines how the work organizes the narrative, and visual style further determines how the narrative is seen, perceived and given meaning. The two are not separated from each other, but together constitute the narrative mechanism of graphic novels through collaboration.

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3. Narrative form and visual style of *Of Mice and Men*

3.1. The nonlinear narrative form of *Of Mice and Men*

The original work *Of Mice and Men* is a novel published by John Steinbeck in 1937, and its narrative itself has obvious characteristics of a "play-novel". The novel unfolds in acts and scenes like a dramatic script, with relatively concentrated characters and limited scene changes. The narrative focus always revolves around the changes in the relationships between the main characters and the continuously developing dramatic conflicts. Therefore, the original work presents a distinct linear feature in structure.

Compared with the original work, the graphic novel *Of Mice and Men* adapted and created by Rébecca Dautremer retains the basic structure of six scenes while reorganizing the original linear narrative. First, it does not merely paraphrase the original text in sequence. Instead, it redistributes the original narrative structure by adding wordless images at the beginning or end of scenes, inserting life fragments not directly depicted in the original work, and adjusting the appearance order of some information. In this way, the atmosphere of the times, the characters' situations and the obscured information that were indirectly referred to by words in the original work are partially transformed into visual fragments in advance, making the narrative more fragmented, supplementary and nonlinear. In other words, Dautremer deliberately strengthens the post-structuralist narrative mode, embeds diversity and deconstruction into it, uses various painting tools to create diverse and fragmented visual information. Meanwhile, instead of simply reproducing the original plot, she splits, dislocates and reconnects the text information originally closed within scenes through the intervention of images, allowing multiple narrative levels to coexist. Therefore, the novel no longer takes a stable, coherent and single-line narrative structure as its only goal. On the basis of retaining the basic framework of the original work, it intentionally retains the dislocation of information, the jump-cut of time and the openness of meaning, transforming the original continuous narrative chain into visual fragments that readers can reassemble. Second, the invisible visual element of "poster" is organized as an important narrative form element in the graphic novel (as shown in Figure 3). Thus it not only becomes a visual form of narrative form, but also breaks the coherent and stable narrative structure and establishes a diverse and complex narrative rhythm. As emphasized by post-structuralist narratology, "seek to retain the contradictory levels in narrative works, preserve their complexity, and reject the impulse to reduce narrative works to a kind of stable meaning and coherent design" [3]. Therefore, it can be said that its postmodern nonlinear narrative form is the most important formal construction method of this graphic novel.

3.2. The diverse visual style system of *Of Mice and Men*

Corresponding to the reorganization of narrative form, the visual style of the graphic novel *Of Mice and Men* also constitutes a style system that actively participates in narration. Various drawing techniques are important features of its image narrative, but these techniques are not only for presenting different visual effects, but also embed the strategies of image narrative. First, it is the intuitive depiction of the imagistic narration of character attributes. The two protagonists in the original novel have distinct characteristics: George is smart and sophisticated, while Lennie is a character with intellectual disabilities and great physical strength. In the graphic novel, Dautremer uses the form of children's drawings or cartoons to strengthen Lennie's innocent personality. At the same time, the old and yellowish tone ensures the overall tragic narrative tone (as shown in Figure 4). Second, she uses meticulous depiction to portray the broken and realistic situations, and delicate

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and rich details strengthen the traces of life in that era. Meanwhile, frame-by-line sketches focus on depicting the performance of the characters. In addition, this book forms a diverse visual presentation logic through different drawing methods, line textures, tone levels and picture compositions. The depiction of characters often has the innocence of children's drawings or cartoons to highlight their simple, fragile and unbalanced state; while the treatment of farms, dormitories and surrounding realistic environments relies more on a depressed, aged and delicate picture texture to maintain the overall tragic atmosphere and the sense of oppression of the times. In terms of composition, the work repeatedly uses close-ups, back views, montage connections, large areas of blank space and other composition methods, so that the pictures not only undertake the function of explaining the plot, but also continuously participate in the creation of emotions, the suggestion of characters' psychology and the transmission of symbolic meanings (as shown in Figure 1).

Therefore, from the perspective of visual style, it also forms "the increase of stylistic norms and the return of symbolism". Instead of emphasizing a single and complete stylistic norm, it "breaks the norm by encouraging the diversification of styles and methods" [4]. It does not pursue a single and complete stylistic norm, but breaks the unified surface of linear narrative through the diversification of styles and the strengthening of symbolic visual elements, making the images themselves part of the narrative organization. In this sense, this book reconstructs the visual expression of the original work through the juxtaposition of various drawing techniques, the repeated appearance of symbolic visual symbols and the alternate use of different picture tones.

Figure 1. Depiction of "Mouse" in different styles in the graphic novel *Of Mice and Men*

4. Narrative form and visual style of *Here*

4.1. The image space-oriented narrative form of *Here*

In 2016, Richard McGuire created the graphic novel *Here*. The narrative form of this graphic novel can be summarized in one sentence: "image space-oriented narration". The whole book only depicts an ordinary living room in New Jersey, and each page shows scenes in the room at different times and spaces. Readers can perceive the depth of the abstract concept of "time" through intuitive visual reading by watching the fragmented time sequence of millions of years presented in this space. It is almost entirely based on image reading, and its narrative form is nonlinear, fragmented and closer to stream-of-consciousness time development: readers do not enter the story along a single plot chain, but feel the narration in constantly switching, overlapping and jumping visual fragments.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.33906

The most prominent feature of the narrative form of this book is that it sets "space" rather than "events" as the basic framework of narration. Different from promoting narration through character actions, plot development and progressive conflicts, *Here* is fixed at the same viewing position, takes the living room as the center of visual observation, and then forms a narrative mode with space as the axis and time evolution as the content through the superposition and segmentation of different years and historical moments. In other words, the basic narrative unit of this work is no longer a continuous event chain, but time fragments that are disconnected but related to each other in the same space. What readers face is not "what happens next", but "what has happened in this space at different times and how they respond to each other". Thus, time is no longer a linearly advancing background, but a narrative object that is visualized, juxtaposed and repeatedly folded (as shown in Figure 2).

The construction of this spatial narration largely depends on the way of picture organization itself. The work largely adopts a "picture-in-picture" nested structure: in a page as the main background, several small frames of different periods are embedded, so that multiple time layers are juxtaposed in the same visual field. Fragments of different eras interweave, block and echo each other on the same page, forming a reading experience that is both synchronous and asynchronous. Such a form breaks the logic of traditional narration promoted by one-way time sequence, so that time is no longer understood as a flow from front to back, but presented as a visual structure that can be viewed simultaneously, compared repeatedly and actively connected by readers. In this sense, the narrative form of *Here* is not only nonlinear, but also a formal innovation that organizes time with space and reconstructs narrative relations with visual structure. It shifts narration from "how events develop" to "how time appears", and also changes readers from following plots to actively participating in the splicing and construction of meaning.

4.2. The calm and alienated visual tone of *Here*

If the narrative form of *Here* establishes its basic characteristics of spatialization, fragmentation and nonlinearity, its visual style further strengthens this narrative mechanism. Different from *Of Mice and Men*, which strengthens character emotions and literary atmosphere through diverse styles, the visual style of *Here* emphasizes restraint, flatness, stability and a sense of order. Its pictures do not pursue strong dramatic rendering, but maintain the continuous identifiability of the same space with a relatively calm and stable visual tone. Elements such as walls, floors, furniture, windows and fireplaces in the room appear repeatedly, making the space itself a visual constant; while characters, objects and colors form differences in the changes of different eras. In other words, the visual style of *Here* is deliberately designed to make the tension between "unchanging space" and "changing time" clearly perceived.

At the same time, such a style system is not only a formal package after the narrative is completed, but also one of the prerequisites for the narrative to be established. It transforms time into a perceptible visual experience through stable spatial recognition, restrained formal repetition and subtle differences. Meanwhile, it uses picture-in-picture nesting, overlapping borders and visual hierarchy arrangements to make the page itself a place where narration occurs: time is not explained by words, but directly seen through the juxtaposition between pictures. More importantly, the visual style of *Here* gives its narration an obvious "non-event-centered" feature. Traditional narration often relies on key events, character fates or climax of conflicts to form reading motivation, while *Here* weakens the central position of single events. Characters in many pictures just pass by for a moment, some scenes are covered by another time fragment before they unfold, and some contents even do not form a complete story, but only momentary traces of history, life and daily existence.

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This calm and alienated style shifts the narrative focus from dramatic events to the sense of time, history and existence itself. What readers gain in reading is not the ending of a complete story, but the simultaneous perception of countless life fragments in the same space, as well as the experience of how "here" accommodates countless past and future.

Therefore, the uniqueness of *Here* lies in that it highly unifies narrative form and visual style into a "space-time" graphic narrative mechanism. From the perspective of narrative form, it takes a fixed space as the framework, replaces linear plot advancement with fragmented time juxtaposition, and makes "visualization of time" the core of narration; from the perspective of visual style, it maintains spatial continuity with stable perspective, repeated composition and restrained visual changes, and directly juxtaposes different moments in front of readers through multiple nesting within the page. For this reason, *Here* does not use images to assist in telling a story, but makes space, time and viewing behavior constitute narration together through the structural organization of images themselves. Here, images are no longer just a carrier of narrative content, but become the narrative mechanism itself. This way of directly generating narration through visual structure also makes *Here* one of the most representative spatial narrative texts in graphic novels.

Figure 2. Depiction of the same space at different time periods in the graphic novel *Here*

5. Summary: comparison and reflection on two graphic narrative modes

Rudolf Arnheim once mentioned that "the selection and application of visual concepts is actually a kind of 'problem-solving activity'." [5] Through the analysis of *Of Mice and Men and Here*, it can be found that the narrative of graphic novels is not a process of simply "visualizing" existing literary content, but constructs a graphic narrative mechanism with unique media attributes through the collaborative organization of narrative form and visual style. On the basis of retaining the basic dramatic structure of the original work, *Of Mice and Men* recodes the original linear narrative through image insertion, sequence reorganization, strengthening of symbolic elements and diverse style processing. *Here* takes a fixed space as the visual fulcrum, and transforms space itself into a structural device for narration through time superposition, page nesting and a stable and restrained visual style. Although there are significant differences between the two in narrative focus, image-text relationship and style organization, such differences show that there is no single fixed narrative paradigm within graphic novels, but diverse graphic narrative paths.

First, from the perspective of narrative form, the two works respectively reflect two different organizational logics. *Of Mice and Men* is closer to a graphic narrative mode centered on character relationships and event progression. Its adaptation focuses on expanding the relatively clear

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dramatic linear structure of the original work through the supplement, dislocation and reorganization of visual fragments, making the narrative more open and hierarchical while maintaining the main line advancement. *Here* does not rely on continuous events to promote narration, but forms narration through time juxtaposition, jump-cut and overlap in a fixed space, making "how time appears" replace "how events develop" as the core issue of the work. Thus, the narrative form of graphic novels may be based on plot progression, or may directly generate narration through visual structure, which is an important manifestation of its media expressiveness. As W.J.T. Mitchell emphasized, "the relationship between words and images reflects our relationship between symbols and the world, signs and their meanings in the fields of representation, signification and communication." [6]

Second, from the perspective of visual style, style in graphic novels not only undertakes the function of aesthetic decoration, but also directly participates in the generation of narrative meaning. In *Of Mice and Men*, the diverse drawing methods, aged tones, extensive use of close-ups and back views, as well as the repeated appearance of visual elements such as "mouse" and "poster", make the style system not only strengthen character emotions and the atmosphere of the times, but also participate in the construction of tragic meaning and symbolic levels. The visual style of *Here* shows another feature: it maintains the continuous identifiability of space through stable perspective, repeated composition, restrained tones and page nesting, and indicates time evolution and historical accumulation in subtle differences. That is to say, in the former, visual style mostly undertakes the role of strengthening narrative emotions and literary symbols; in the latter, visual style itself constitutes an important part of narrative structure. Both show that visual style is not an auxiliary layer of graphic novels, but an inseparable part of the internal narrative mechanism.

Overall, the comparison between *Of Mice and Men and Here* shows that the core value of graphic novels lies not only in expanding the expressive forms of literary works, but also in opening up a composite narrative space between the suggestiveness of language and the appearance of images through the collaboration of narrative form and visual style. "The perceptual pattern of a work of art is not arbitrary; it is not a pure form composed of shapes and colors, but an accurate interpreter of a certain idea." [7] The former shows how graphic novels reconstruct visually on the basis of literary narration, while the latter further shows how images directly generate narration through structural organization. It is in the exploration of constantly breaking through existing boundaries in form and style that graphic novels show their media potential and literary significance different from traditional novels, comics and general image-text readings.

Fund project

Personal Academic Promotion Program of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts: (26XSB27)

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