The Visualization of Time
Eisenstein Cut, Graphic Novels, and Chris Ware

Research Brief by Design Made
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Topic: Research into the means of visual narration and the depiction multiple layers of content.
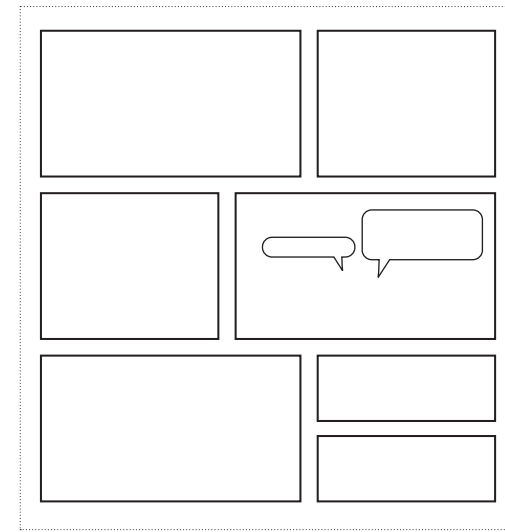
Premise: The graphic novels of Chris Ware present a unique way of storytelling that transcends motion cinematography and typical cell-based linear story telling. Besides being visually beautiful, his work is a masterful example for non-narrative, i.e. no words, communication of an event. His work includes an architectural in analysis of scene, codification through color and scale, and cinematic handling of sequence, content, and time.

Basic cinema structure

Common graphic novel structure

1
Cinema

The basic cinema structure consists of the moving single image. The above diagram shows the basic editing structure with the current shot—what the viewer is seeing at that point—in the center, to the left the image previously seen, and on the right the forthcoming image. Most cinema today follows this structure and uses a continuous visual narrative, what is referred to by Sergei Eisenstein as the Lebehov method. Eisenstein, the creator of montage, distinguishes his own method as that of conflict or collision. To understand this consider a simple scene of people in protest in a city street. The Lebehov method would consist of a continuous feed of images of the scene—possibly using cuts, close-ups, and different angles—as the situation unfolds. Essentially the scene is the viewed content. In the case of Eisenstein, he would interject shots of images not of the actual scene—such as the head being cut off a cow as he did in his film October. Eisenstein would also make heavy use of detailed close-up shots, such as a tightened fist, or a fist being raised in the air with force, and the faces of the people as they yell. In both methods the cinematographers are seeking to build the narrative and create an emotion response in the viewer, but Eisenstein's method would use more confrontation cuts and content to create his affect and tell his story. The shot, for Eisenstein becomes a critical element and he crafts the individual shot as well as how it fits within a sequence, or series of shots. Eisenstein's montage is a collective of images pieced together rather than only being a dissection of a scene by the camera.

2
Graphic Novel

The typical graphic novel structure consists of a series cells fit within the page format. For most graphic novelists the page is dissected into a series of rectangles (cells) of various sizes (as shown above). For the common comic the cells would all be the same size, but most graphic novels use varying cell sizes. This is to include details, emphasize a particular moment or scene, or to include more or less content in the cell. This variation allows the camera to essentially change size—allowing for a wide shot or focusing on a smaller piece of information.

The graphic novel is essentially the shots of a film arranged across a sheet. They typically tell a single story in linear manner.
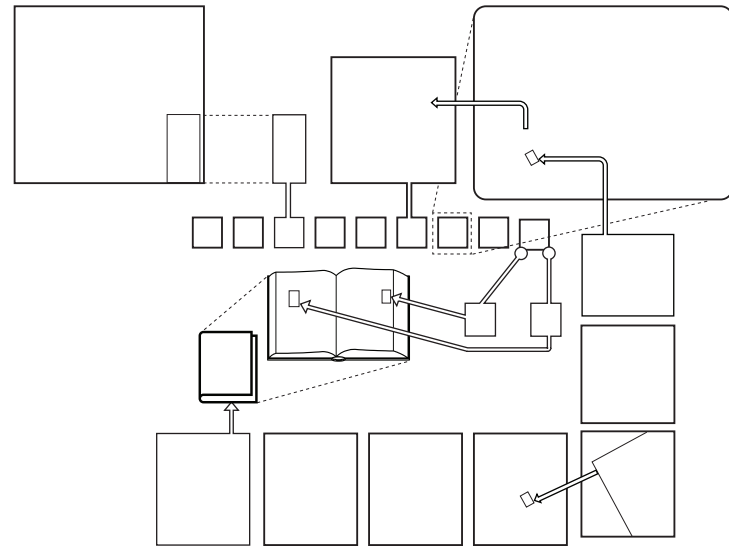
Sample of Chris Ware Structure

3
Chris Ware,
Dissected Shot

The graphic novels of Chris Ware are a new form of graphic novel and cinematic story-telling. Chris both uses and breaks the common structure. First off, he will run more than one story in parallel. This consists of breaking the page into essentially two graphic novels, but for Chris the stories will eventually intersect—they are typically following different people within the same context (a building or city). This is equivalent to dividing the single cinematic frame into two or more frames; and there a number of examples of this in motion cinema sometimes used for a transition—such as in vintage spy films—or for the duration of the film as in *Timecode*.

4
Chris Ware,
Time

More profoundly is the way in which Chris Ware completely breaks down the graphic novel and cinematic structures by using the white space, the margins between the cells as space to communciate as well as through architectural means of diagramming. Chris will break a flow and begin to dissect a scene, providing much greater context than can be contained within the cell, including the various threads of peoples lives within the cuerrent scene or that have been in or will come into the main story. He may extract a element from the scene, such a letter, and show the full specimen, or he will go back in time and provide historical context for a scene, moment, or artifact. He will also play with time, through either flash backs or slowing down time, or by using the scale of the cell. For example, he may pause on a single scene and then have a series of cell offshoots that run through different aspects of the scene. It could be providing more context on the live of a character, or focusing on an element/prop within the scene. These actions are similar to what we see in cinema— flashbacks, cuts to provide another perspective of the situation—but in cinema they continue in a linear progression and re confined to the shot, the screen. Chris has the full page available to him and forces the reader to decide in what order to view. A page by Chris is like a forensic board where one has all the information laid out before them.