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MULTIMODALITY OF ANIMATED WEBCOMICS

Victoria A. Yefymenko, v.yefymenko@knu.ua

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-8135-4983

Doctor of Sciences in Linguistics, Associate Professor,
Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv

A characteristic feature of contemporary comics is their transmediality, in which practices of storytelling expand from print to digital media. Animated webcomics belong to such a type of transmedia adaptation, combining the key features of print comics with animation. This paper focuses on multimodal aspects of animated webcomics, namely, the animated webcomic Watchmen, based on the Watchmen comic book series by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons. Transition to a digital medium results in enhancements to the comics medium, such as videos and sound. Multimodal discourse analysis of the animated webcomic centres on cross-modal cohesion and text-image relations. Cross-modal cohesion is traced by identifying how the protagonist is presented and tracked, then by constructing identity chains for characters, objects and settings. These chains containing visual, verbal and aural elements demonstrate how different modes interact to make the narrative coherent. Text-image relations in Watchmen include equal and unequal status relations, as well as logico-semantic relations of exemplification, enhancement and extension. The interaction of different modes results in an integrated, multimodal narrative of animated comics. Further investigation of animated webcomics may include issues such as the extent of animation in comics, interactivity, immersion and their influence on narrative unfolding.

Keywords: *comics, animated webcomics, digital comics, transmediality, multimodality, cross-modal cohesion, text-image relations.*

МУЛЬТИМОДАЛЬНІСТЬ АНІМОВАНИХ ВЕБКОМІКСІВ

Вікторія Антонівна Єфименко, v.yefymenko@knu.ua

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-8135-4983

д-р філол. наук, доцент,
Київський національний університет імені Тараса Шевченка

Характерною рисою сучасних коміксів є їх трансмедіальність, коли практики сторітелінгу поширюються з друкованих на цифрові медіа. До таких трансмедіальних адаптацій належать анімовані вебкомікси, які поєднують ключові риси друкованих коміксів з анімацією. Ця стаття присвячена мультимодальним аспектам анімованих вебкоміксів, зокрема анімованого вебкоміксу «Вартові», створеному на основі серії коміксів «Вартові» Алана Мура й Дейва Гіббонса. Перехід до цифрового медіума приніс коміксам такі нові елементи, як відео та звук. Мультимодальний дискурсивний аналіз анімованих вебкоміксів включає дослідження крос-модальної когезії та взаємодії між текстом й ілюстрацією. Крос-модальна когезія відстежується шляхом ідентифікації способів презентації та трекінгу персонажів, а також побудови ідентифікаційних ланцюжків персонажів, об'єктів і місця дії. Ці ланцюжки, що складаються з візуальних, вербальних й звукових елементів, демонструють взаємодію різних модусів у когерентному наративі. Взаємовідношення між текстом й ілюстрацією у «Вартових» розглядаються на рівні статусу (рівного та нерівного), а також на логіко-семантичному рівні (екземпліфікація, розширення та продовження). У результаті взаємодії різних модусів утворюється інтегрований мультимодальний наратив анімованих вебкоміксів. Подальші дослідження анімованих вебкоміксів можуть включати такі питання, як частка анімації в коміксах, інтерактивність, занурення та їх вплив на розгортання оповіді.

Ключові слова: комікси, анімовані вебкомікси, цифрові комікси, трансмедіальність, мультимодальність, крос-модальна когезія, взаємовідношення між текстом та ілюстрацією

1. Introduction

Digital technology has introduced a number of changes into the medium of comics [Miller 2019]. Digital comics that appeared in the 1990s constitute today a multiple and shifting form [Martin 2017, p. 2]. They retained some characteristics of

print comic books, but at the same time acquired new features. For instance, Josip Batinic [2016, p. 80] identifies three ‘enhancements’ to the medium of comics, namely, webcomics enhanced through the use of the infinite canvas, those enhanced with videos and/or sound and webcomics enhanced with interactive and ludic elements. Animated or motion comics belong to the second of the above-mentioned groups, as they include sound effects, music and animation. At the same time, webcomics cannot completely be separated from the printed medium which preceded them. Besides, comics belonging to different media (e.g. print comics and webcomics) have much in common [Miller 2019; Yefymenko 2021].

There are different approaches to the creation of webcomics [Kleefeld 2020]. Some authors prefer a cinematic approach that focuses on the moving image and does away with such ‘classic’ comic elements as panels and gutters. Others tend to retain some aspects of print comics language, such as speech balloons or multiple panels within the screen-based format. Some motion comics use such iconic symbols as motion lines and soundtrack symbols together with animation and sound effects “to justify their identification as comics” [Blazer 2020, p. 8].

Scholars disagree as for the possible extent of animation and animated storytelling [Aggleton 2018] in comics. For instance, Thierry Groensteen [Groensteen 2013, p. 71] believes that limiting animations and sounds in comics allows for a more comfortable reading experience; others, such as Daniel Goodbrey [Goodbrey 2020] argue that, on the contrary, the use of animation should be maximized. The usage of sounds in digital comics, including recited text, sound effects, and background music, is also a disputable question: either sound lessens the reading experience, or enhances it. There are areas of overlap and hybrid forms of comics, such as motion comics [Smith 2015] and game comics [Goodbrey 2020] that may pose problems to the researchers.

This paper aims to conduct a multimodal discourse analysis of animated comics. It presupposes several tasks: to outline the methodological approaches to the analysis of multimodality in webcomics; to track how multimodal cohesion is created in animated webcomics; to reveal various types of relations between visual and verbal modes. First, we shall consider the theoretical framework of the comics theory, focusing on multimodal interaction between different modes. Then we will proceed to analyse the animated webcomic *Watchmen* [Hughes 2009].

2. Theoretical background

One of the latest tendencies in linguistics is a wide application of multimodal approaches to discourses in which two or more semiotic modes interact to create meaning, such as films, picture books, illustrated books, comics, digital narratives, etc. Multimodal meaning is not an addition to meanings coming from different semiotic resources, but the result of their combination [Bezemer and Jewitt 2018]. Different approaches within multimodal studies bring different aspects of multimodality into focus. This paper focuses on such aspects as multimodal cohesion and text-image relations.

The concept of cohesion was developed originally for embracing the system of linguistic means to refer to “relations of meaning that exist within the text” [Halliday and Hasan 1976, p. 4]. Chiao-I Tseng [Tseng 2013] transmedially extended the concept of cohesion for audiovisual media and later together with John Bateman [Tseng and Bateman, 2018] developed the cohesion system specifically for comics and graphic novels. This system addresses the presentation and tracking of key narrative elements, such as characters, objects and settings. Presentation and tracking may be realised monomodally (if only one mode – visual, verbal or aural – is used) or cross-modally (if at least two modes are used). Besides, there are two types of identity revelation: immediate and gradual (when parts of a visual figure are revealed, or a pronoun instead of a name is used in the verbal text, or a speech balloon of an invisible character is depicted). As for tracking of characters, objects and settings, if they are not unique, i.e. culturally known people, places and things presented visually and verbally, there are options of explicit and implicit reappearance [Tseng and Bateman, 2018].

The theory of cross-modal cohesion includes the construction of identity chains. This method was developed by Chiao-I Tseng for the analysis of films. A scene from a film has to be divided into separate shots containing the characters’ words and the visual image. Based on this information, identity chains are constructed. Components of identity chains may belong to different modes (verbal, visual or aural) and their interaction creates a cross-modal cohesion [Tseng 2013, p. 120].

The relations between the text and the image as two different semiotic modes represent another aspect of multimodality in comics. There are various typologies of text-image relations, in our analysis we will use the classification by Radan Martinec and Andrew Salway [Salway 2005], who extend Roland Barthes’ [Barthes 1964]

taxonomy of status relations and combine them with Michael Halliday's [Halliday 1994] logico-semantic relations. Equal status relations signify that an entire text is related to an entire image and are further divided into two subtypes: independent (when a text and an image do not merge and exist as parallel meaning systems) and complementary (when both a text and an image contribute to the meaning), while unequal status relations exist, when part of a text relates to an image or vice versa. Logico-semantic relations of expansion include elaboration (adding further information or exemplification), enhancement (specifying circumstantial information connected with time, place, and manner) and extension (adding new, semantically related information and offering alternative ways of story unfolding) [Martinec and Salway 2005, p. 358].

3. Analysis of the cohesion system and text-image relations

The *Watchmen* comic book series by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons [Gibbons 2005], which suggests a critical reworking of the superhero genre, has received international acclaim and was recognized in *Time's* List of the 100 Best Novels as one of the best English language novels published since 1923. It is about a group of superheroes investigating the mysterious death of their friend the Comedian. This paper analyses not the original print comic, but the animated webcomic, based on it, which is an example of transmediality. Transmediality, i.e. exceeding the boundaries of the printed page and transforming to digital narratives, is a characteristic feature of contemporary comics. Transition to a digital medium gives a number of advantages, such as using different display modes, greater interactivity, deeper immersion in the fictional world. As Groensteen [Groensteen 2013, p. 75] puts it, "digital comics are intrinsically hybrid, cross-fertilizing the comics system with elements borrowed from animated cartoons, video games, computer technology (mouse, keyboard), and web navigation". All these elements are combined into a cohesive whole, which will be the first step of our analysis.

3.1. The cohesion system in *Watchmen*

The cross-media cohesion framework extends the linguistic cohesion system [Halliday and Hasan, 1976], as it operates across the modes. We shall start our analysis with looking into how Rorschach, one of the comic's protagonists, is presented and tracked.











	Daniel	Rorschach	beans	smiley face	kitchen	image
1.	[v] 'Daniel' ↓	[v] ↓	[v] ↓		[v] ↓	
2.	[v] ↓	[v] 'myself' ↓	[v] 'beans' ↓		[v] ↓	
3.	[v] 'you' ↓	[v] ↓	[v] ↓		[v] ↓	
4.	[v] ↓	[v] 'Rorschach' ↓			[v] ↓	
5.	[v] 'I' ↓	[v] ↓	[v] ↓		[v] ↓	
6.	[v] ↓	[v] 'you' ↓			[v] ↓	
7.	[v] ↓	[v] ↓			[v] ↓	
8.	[v] ↓			[v] 'this' ↓	[v] ↓	
9.	[v] ↓	[v] ↓	'bean juice' ↓	[v] 'it', 'stain' ↓	[v] ↓	
10.	[v] ↓	[v] ↓	'bean juice' ↓	[v] ↓	[v] ↓	

Fig. 1. Identity chains in *Watchmen* [Hughes 2009]

The comic begins with the mention of Rorschach's journal, when the text in a caption ("Rorschach's journal. October 12th, 1985." [Hughes 2009]) is voiced by the narrator. The specificity of this comic is that all the words that appear in speech bubbles are also pronounced aloud. So, Rorschach's presentation is specific (because

he is one of the main characters), cross-modal (realised by verbal and aural modes) and with immediate revelation of identities (because his name is mentioned at once). As for his further tracking, at first he is mentioned in his journal (“*This city is afraid of me. I have seen its true face. I’ll look down and whisper ‘no’.*” [Hughess 2009]), and later two policemen investigating the death of the Comedian mention his name (“*What about Rorschach? He’s crazier than a snake’s armpit. If he gets involved ...*” [Hughess 2009]). All these instances are examples of cross-modal explicit reappearance with a clear reference to the character by using his name or a personal pronoun. And only at this stage the reader comes across Rorschach’s visual depiction: at first his shadow, then his arm and after that his face with a mask, which he considers to be his true face. It is an example of monomodal (realised by a visual mode) implicit reappearance (partial reappearance of a visual figure).

The cohesion system in comics envisages the construction of cohesive chains. For instance, the scene of the meeting between Rorschach and Daniel (known as Nite Owl 2) contains the following identity chains: of the main characters (Rorschach and Daniel), of the elements with symbolic meaning – beans, eaten by Rorschach and the smiley face – a recurring image in the story, as well as of the kitchen in Daniel’s apartment, where the whole scene takes place (see Fig. 1).

Daniel’s and Rorschach’s identity chains are presented cross-modally by visual, verbal and aural means. These chains have the largest number of linking elements: their visual images in Fig.1 are given in square brackets, and verbal-aural ones are taken into inverted commas. The identity chains of beans and a smiley face are also represented cross-modally, though the smiley face chain is the shortest, as it consists of just three elements. The only monomodal chain is that of the kitchen (a location chain), because all its elements are represented by visual means alone. The identity chains containing visual, verbal and aural elements exemplify the interaction of different modes in the process of making the narrative coherent. Such multimodal cohesion connects various parts of animated comics into one whole.

3.2. Text-image relations in *Watchmen*

The relations between verbal and visual modes play a significant role in multimodal texts, and *Watchmen* is no exception. Our analysis of text-image relations in terms of status has demonstrated that in the webcomics under study unequal status relations prevail over equal status ones and either an image is subordinate to a text or vice versa, a text is subordinate to an image. An example of equal complimentary relations is given in Fig. 2, where the owner of the bar greets Rorschach:

While examining the correlations between a text and an image in the webcomics under analysis from the perspective of lexico-semantic relations, we can identify instances of elaboration (namely, exemplification), enhancement and extension. For instance, the fragment we used earlier while constructing identity chains (see Fig. 1) contains a dialogue between Rorschach and Daniel: “*Take a look at this ... Uhh...what is it?*” [Hughess 2009]. The respective image contains a depiction of a smiley face. It is the case of exemplification, as such cohesive devices as the demonstrative pronoun ‘*this*’ and the personal pronoun ‘*it*’ may be decoded only by referring to the image, which means that the text in this example is subordinate to the image.

The enhancement relations provide circumstantial information concerning time, place, manner, etc. Thus, the text from Rorschach’s journal supplies information about the time of the narrative, the first entry being dated October 12, 1985. The text in the example below (see Fig. 4) includes the first mention of the name of the city (New York), where Rorschach is writing his diary, sitting on the roof of one of the buildings, thus marking the setting of Chapter One:



Fig. 4. Enhancement text-image relations [Hughess 2009]

Extension is a type of relations between an image and a text, when new, semantically related information is added. One of the webcomic episodes highlights a photo hanging on the wall in Mason’s apartment (he is the first Nite Owl in *Watchmen*) and his words in a speech bubble about meeting the Screaming Scull, one of the former supervillains, which have no direct connection to the respective

image (see Fig. 5). But the readers should recollect having seen the same picture in the apartment of a man who was apparently killed. So the image provides some new information about the connection between the killed man (later on it will be revealed that it was the Comedian) and the main characters of the comics.



Fig. 5. Extension text-image relations [Hughes 2009]

These are just a few examples of various text-image relations existing in *Watchmen*, showcasing the multimodal meaning making in animated comics.

4. Conclusions

Comics as a very dynamic and fast-growing medium continue to attract attention of scholars in different areas. Multimodal meaning in animated webcomics emerges due to different semiotic resources, each of them offering its own potential and specifics. Different approaches within multimodal studies bring different aspects of multimodality into focus. In this paper we have focused on two aspects of multimodality in animated comics: cross-modal cohesion and text-image relations, demonstrating the interaction of visual, verbal and aural modes in the process of meaning making. Given the rapidly growing areas of multimodal research, we believe that the potential of such methods of multimodal analysis is very high.

Taking into account the ever-changing nature of animated comics, further developments need to be undertaken to focus on such aspects of animated storytelling as comparison of animated comics and animated cartoons, interactivity and its

influence on the cross-modal cohesion, the degree of immersion, triggered by various comics elements, the ways of comics navigation. Hybrid forms of comics, such as game comics, which combine characteristics of a comic and a game, can also be of interest for studies in multimodality.

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