

Aspects of the horror genre in graphic novels

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Abstract: The horror genre has undergone considerable evolution throughout history due to cultural and technological innovations, taking on a multitude of forms in literature, cinema and graphic novels. A defining aspect of horror stories, distinct from simple monster stories (such as myths), is the emotional response of positive human characters to these monsters. In fairy tales, for example, they represent normality, whereas in *horror* they are considered abnormal creatures. The concept of *art-horror* is introduced by Noël Carroll in his book *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of The Heart*. He considers the emotion that these works are meant to provoke in the audience. Therefore, he defines the *horror* genre, in part, by specifying art-horror, that is, works meant to provoke the emotion of horror¹. The *horror* graphic novel represents a fascinating synthesis between sequential art and horror literature, providing a narrative and visual platform through which humanity's deepest fears are explored. Through the combination of text and image, this medium manages to create a unique immersive experience, where narrative and visuals work together to generate suspense, tension and fear. The particularities of the *horror* genre, such as the frightening atmosphere, the grotesque and suspense, are amplified in the comic book medium through the use of illustrations and recognizable graphic symbols, which constitute the language of sequential art. In this article, I aim to identify and analyze the ways in which horror narrative unfolds in the graphic novel, exploring the complexity of this narrative medium.

Keywords: horror genre; art-horror; graphic novel; sequential art; visual narrative; emotion of horror; grotesque and suspense.

1. Introduction

The narrative structure of the graphic novel

The graphic novel uses the same form of sequential art as the classic comic book², but it engages the reader on multiple levels of interpretation. To understand how the narrative unfolds in a graphic novel, it is necessary to define the elements of its structure. The first has a straightforward title and is self-explanatory—the medium, meaning the work itself, the print or digital version

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¹ Noël Carroll (1990). *The Philosophy of Horror*, Routledge, New York, pp. 15-16.

² Fred Van Lente and Ryan Dunlavey (2016). *Comic Book History of Comics*, IDW Publishing, San Diego.

with all its components³. The appearance of the graphic novel, the cover, the structure and the layout of the pages contain a lot of information and the reader's presence determines how it is perceived.

The page is an essential framing device, known as a hyperframe, which establishes a complex relationship with the other panels and hyperframes around it⁴. In order to render and fix the dynamics of certain visual representations, such as characters or objects in the flow of the story, the narrative is divided into successive fragments, called panels or frames. These differ from cinematic frames, being more a part of a creative process than a technical unit of measurement⁵. Harvey defines frames as images arranged in series that delimit temporal sequences in the graphic novel. The process of dividing a narrative into such images (a process that necessarily involves both omission and inclusion) can be called *breakdown*, a term derived from *breakdowns*, an expression used in the field to refer to preliminary sketches made during the planning of a comic strip story⁶.

The reverse process, that of reading through these images and deducing connections between them, has been called *closure*, a term borrowed from Gestalt psychology by McCloud⁷. Closure takes place in the empty space between panels – the *gutter*. The gutter is where the human imagination connects separate images into a single idea⁸. In *horror* graphic novels, the gutter can be used to introduce mystery and amplify suspense. Graphic novels use closure differently from other forms of expression and communication. In this medium, the audience becomes an important and conscious collaborator in triggering the narrative. Even if nothing is between the panels, experience tells the reader that something must be happening there.

In fact, *breakdown* and *closure* are complementary terms, both describing the relationship between sequence and series. The author's task is to evoke an imaginary sequence by creating a breakdown of a visual series, while the reader's task is to translate the series provided into a narrative sequence, achieving closure⁹.

3 A. David Lewis (2010). *The Shape of Comic Book Reading*, Boston University Press, Boston, pp. 71-81.

4 Thierry Groensteen (2007). *The Systems of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, Kindle edition.

5 Will Eisner (2022). *Comics and Sequential Art*, trans. M. Zaslavsky, Mann, Ivanov and Ferber, Moscow, p. 43.

6 R. C. Harvey (1994). *The Art of the Funnies: An Aesthetic History*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, pp. 14-15.

7 Charles Hatfield (2009). *An Art of Tensions*, in *A Comics Studies Reader*, edited by Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, pp. 256-257.

8 Scott McCloud (1994). *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Harper Perennial, New York, p. 66.

9 Charles Hatfield (2009). *op. cit.*

Frames play an essential role in rendering temporality and movement. By using them, artists can suggest the flow of time, but also the spatial location of events, emotional states, or ideas conveyed. Thus, the frame becomes a complex tool that simultaneously manages the elements of the visual alphabet and the reader's perceptions¹⁰. In the *horror* genre, the sequence of panels can amplify tension and prepare the reader for the terrifying moment. The entire page thus becomes a space for narrative manipulation, in which the artist can structure the visual order to guide the gaze and maintain suspense.

The tension between word and image is one of the distinctive features of this graphic narrative form¹¹. This results from the juxtaposition of symbols that function diegetically and those that function non-diegetically, that is, the mixture of symbols that “show” and those that “tell”. The symbols that “show” represent figures and objects from the fictional world of the narrative, constructing a universe recognizable to the reader, while the symbols that “tell” function as a meta-narrative commentary or provide a visual “soundtrack”, contributing to the overall atmosphere. Typically, diegetic symbols are represented by figurative drawings and non-diegetic symbols consist of text, speech bubbles and familiar icons (such as arrows, dotted lines, or other graphic symbols). However, the *horror* graphic novel offers significant opportunities to push this dynamic further, integrating figurative drawings as elements of “dialogue” and blurring the distinction between text and image. This creates a unique synergy between visual and verbal codes, expanding the graphic language of the genre. This collaboration and clash of different codes of meaning, whether they include written text or not, contributes to the narrative and stylistic complexity of the *horror* graphic novel. Importantly, the use of these visual and textual devices requires an informed reader, capable of deciphering and interpreting the multiple layers of meaning in the work¹².

Plot and Suspense

The main structure of the plot in a horror work, also known as “The Complex Discovery Plot”, is explained by Noël Carroll, who points out four basic elements: the debut, the discovery, the confirmation and the confrontation¹³.

The debut is the crucial moment when the monster is revealed to the audience, stirring up intrigue and anticipation. *Horror* narratives that follow this pattern can begin either as a *thriller*, immediately revealing the monster's identity

¹⁰ Will Eisner (2022). *op. cit.*, p. 43.

¹¹ F. R. Ankersmit (2001). *Historical Representation: Cultural Memory in the Present*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, p. 39.

¹² Charles Hatfield (2009). *An Art of Tensions*, in *A Comics Studies Reader*, Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (Eds.), University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, p. 256.

¹³ Noël Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

to the audience, or as a mystery, presenting only the evil traces of its presence (death, destruction, strange behavior of the characters, etc.). In this case, the audience, like the characters, must gather clues to find out who or what is behind the terrifying events. The debut, in the sense of introducing the monster, can be immediate or gradual. Thus, it may be necessary for the viewer to witness several of the evil consequences or crimes of the negative character(s) in order to discover the true nature of the entity hiding in the shadows of events. Many horror works use a gradual approach to revealing the debut, allowing the audience to reconstruct events before the characters. The characters' identification of the monster is thus introduced gradually, after the audience has had the opportunity to gather information and develop preliminary hypotheses¹⁴.

The next stage, which Carroll calls “discovery”, marks the moment when an individual or group of characters becomes aware of the monster’s existence and begins to collect evidence to convince others. This stage can be triggered either by an unexpected revelation or by the conclusions of a careful investigation. Unlike the debut, which highlights the monsters first manifestations, discovery represents the point at which the characters obtain rational certainty that the identified monstrosity is the cause of recent problems¹⁵.

Confirmation is essential to validate the monster’s existence in the face of skeptics. This process involves presenting additional evidence to convince the other parties of the danger it poses. Thus, confirmation consists of the character(s) efforts to demonstrate the presence of danger, while confrontation represents the climax of the story, in which the discoverers directly confront the monsters and try to defeat them¹⁶.

The narrative structures of the plot allow for various variations, but the order of the phases must be respected, as Carroll points out. For example, if a story begins with the discovery phase, it can only be followed by confirmation or confrontation, but never by the debut. The reasoning behind this rule is that the phases are arranged in a logical, linear sequence, even if some of them can be omitted without compromising narrative coherence¹⁷.

One of the most powerful aesthetic tools of the *horror* genre is suspense, found in horror works regardless of their period or type. Tension and captivation through various artistic means keep the audience connected to the work of art through the slow but frightening revelation of events.

¹⁴ Noël Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 101.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 101-103.

¹⁷ Sophie Anne Caroline Herbergs (2013). *Horror Gore and Horror Tales: An Investigation of Noël Carroll's Narrative Logic of Horror and the Role of Spectacle in the Narrative*, Utrecht University Student Theses Repository, accessed on April 13, 2024, <https://studenttheses.uu.nl/handle/20.500.12932/13540>.

Suspense is a crucial element in the narrative structure of horror. Narratives of this kind, which Noël Carroll has called “erotetic narratives” adopt a simplistic question-and-answer model. In the case of horror, the question is often asked at the beginning of the story and the answer is revealed along the way. It is an emotional state that persists until the possible alternative outcomes are clarified. The audience is captivated by the desire to find out what happens next, even if the subject is a monster that, theoretically speaking, should not exist. Curiosity and fascination, according to Carroll, are the fundamental attraction of horror and satisfaction is achieved by revealing previously unknown aspects of the monstrous phenomenon¹⁸.

Tomie, Junji Ito

Junji Ito is considered one of the most important authors of *horror* graphic novels. His stories are notable for their grotesque aesthetics and bizarre scenarios, which unfold in abnormal settings. His famous series include “Tomie” (1987-2000), “Uzumaki” (1998-1999) and “Gyo” (2001-2002)¹⁹. The artist justifies the dark nature of his works by transforming mundane elements of everyday life into terrifying images, combining the grotesque with the beautiful in an extreme way. However, his goal is not to create an atmosphere of horror, but to highlight the unusual aspects he discovers in everyday reality. In an interview, the artist emphasized that he seeks to convey the subtle feeling that “something is not right” rather than induce a direct sense of terror²⁰.

Body horror is the main component of Junji Ito's work. Graphic depictions of mutilation, alteration and other frightening metamorphoses, in addition to inducing fear, generate a profound reflection on human vulnerability and imperfection. The metamorphosis of the body is a crucial aspect of his artistic expression. The artist's style remains unique in the diversity and complexity of bodily representations in the contemporary environment.

“Tomie” is a *horror* manga series, published in 1987, depicting supernatural events. As the protagonist, Tomie, a beautiful young woman, exudes a deceptive charm, having the power to seduce men to death. Killed by her victims several times, she regenerates and replicates continuously throughout the series. The manga explores the theme of obsession and evil seduction, illustrating how Tomie manages to corrupt and destroy those who encounter her. The plot is presented through a series of interconnected stories, in which various characters discover Tomie's frightening nature and try, unsuccessfully, to escape her evil influence. “Tomie” is distinguished by its lack of a clear and logical resolution, with the characters condemned to face the horror of the unknown and

¹⁸ Noël Carroll, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-144.

¹⁹ Yu-en Su (1999). *Contagious Horror and Fear in Junji Ito's Uzumaki Series (Uzumaki: Spiral into Horror)*, National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, 1999, p. 2

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

the inevitability of the protagonist's supernatural power, thus intensifying the feeling of fear and tension among readers. Based on Noël Carroll's theory, I will analyze the elements of the plot through which the narrative is constructed.

In the first chapter, Tomie inexplicably comes back to life after we learn from the narrator's words and the characters' dialogues (her classmates, teachers and law enforcement officers) how she was brutally murdered (Figure 1). This return marks the beginning of the monster's perception and creates anticipation. After this initial revelation, the discovery phase unfolds gradually as various heroes realize Tomie's existence and abnormal nature.



Fig. 1 Junji Ito, *Tomie*, 1987-2000, graphic novel, source: <https://tomie-manga.com/>

A good example of this is when a group of students try to reveal the truth about Tomie to their classmates, using photographs and testimonies (Figure 2). One of the major confrontations in the graphic novel is when the characters try to eliminate Tomie permanently by cutting her body into pieces, striving to destroy each part to prevent her regeneration, but without success, thus amplifying the terror and suspense.

As a manga character, Tomie challenges the Japanese concept of *kawaii* (cute). The *kawaii* culture presented in the fictional world of comics and anime establishes an unrealistic portrayal of women (with large breasts, big eyes, a small waist and long legs). Whether they are expected to look or behave in a *kawaii* manner, innocence is sexualized, while vulnerability is considered a defining feminine trait²¹. Although there are imperfections in the femme fatale character, Tomie's archetype becomes an important one in the representation of

²¹ Kathryn Hemman (2018). *Dangerous Women and Dangerous Stories: Gendered Narration*, in Kirino Natsuo's *Grotesque and Real World*, in *Rethinking Japanese Feminisms*, Julia C. Bullock, Ayako Kano and James Welker (Eds.), University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, p. 173.

women as dominant figures. Therefore, Tomie successfully exemplifies traits rarely found in Japanese society. She stands out from the usual patterns, representing the opposite of the *kawaii* character, being neither innocent nor cute. Through his heroine, Junji Ito has managed to transcend the expected patterns for an ordinary Japanese woman through her strong features and deceptive beauty ²².



Fig. 2 Junji Ito, *Tomie*, 1987-2000, graphic novel, source: <https://tomie-manga.com/>

The role reversal suffered by the heroine, initially a victim, later a monster, triggers horror in the narrative, building a plot with a strong emotional impulse. Being repeatedly killed by the men she seduces, Tomie appears to be subjected to explicit violence, the violation of her bodily integrity further emphasizing the importance of physical appearance and the sinister atmosphere. Moreover, Tomie's body is categorized as abject through bloody representations, horrific deformities and elements inside the body (Figure 3). In this sense, we see the importance of the visual component in the construction of the work's narrative. Monochrome and expressive images stand out through the artist's distinctive style, which instills a feeling of contagious fear.

²² Kathy Wang (2020). *Postmodern Manga: Junji Ito's Tomie*, in “Journal of Visual & Critical Studies”, p. 28.

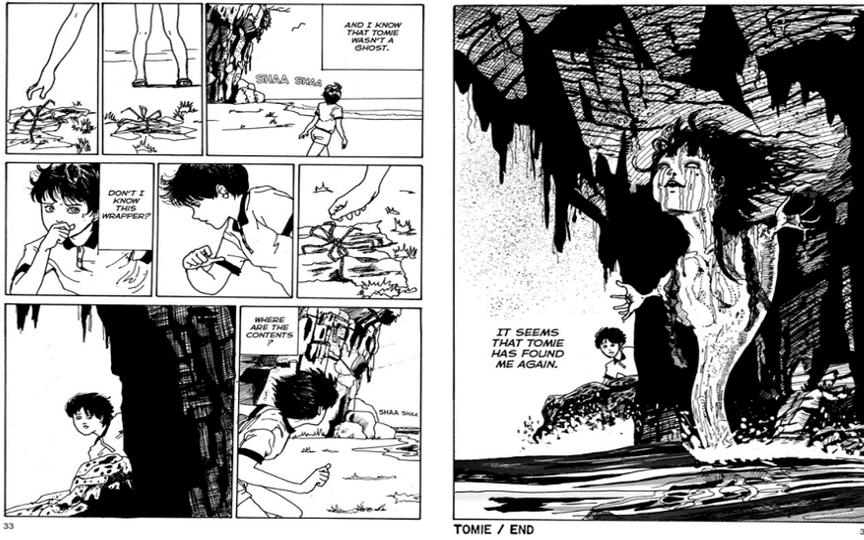


Fig. 3 Junji Ito, *Tomie*, 1987–2000, graphic novel, source: <https://tomie-manga.com/>



Fig. 4 Junji Ito, *Tomie*, 1987–2000, graphic novel, source: <https://tomie-manga.com/>

This feeling is deepened by the narrative rhythm achieved through various compositional mechanisms. Another technique is the illustration of horrific events on the following page. The sudden revelation of such scenes is Ito's preferred method of shocking the reader when turning the page. The consecutive presentation of details from one panel to another and the emphasis on certain elements in the foreground frames increase the tension at a moderate pace throughout the story.

According to the ideas analyzed above, the graphic novel stands out as a distinct medium, endowed with its own arsenal of means, innovations and traditions. This art form has a significant characteristic in its ability to evoke at least two or even more stories in parallel on a single page, in a unique symbiosis between illustrations and text. Horror graphic novels, regardless of their format, physical or digital, reflect humanity's fears and problems, exploring the limits of morality and human consciousness. Their themes are similar to those in other forms of *horror art*, but they add intensity through the combination of unique visual and narrative elements.

Conclusion

This study shows that the horror graphic novel functions as a complex narrative medium in which text and image work together to intensify the emotional experience of art-horror. By combining visual symbolism with narrative structure, the graphic novel amplifies key elements of the horror genre – such as fear, suspense, and the grotesque – while offering a distinctive way of engaging the reader. As a result, horror narratives in graphic novels reveal both the adaptability of the genre and the expressive potential of sequential art.

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