Research Paper

Margins of War: Visualising Conflict through a reading of "Vanni" and "This Side That Side".

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Abstract: *In the exploration of graphic narratives, the reader's engagement transcends mere visual observation. A single panel evokes a recollection of preceding sequences and anticipates forthcoming ones, often guided by a cursory glance across the page. Moreover, the act of reading entails a dynamic interplay between textual and pictorial elements, wherein the gaze fluidly traverses from one thematic focal point to another, intricately weaving a tapestry of temporal and spatial dimensions. This scholarly inquiry delves into how authors harness the nuanced architectural framework of the medium to orchestrate the narrative's temporal and spatial progression, drawing insights from seminal works such as Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock's "Vanni" and Vishwajyoti Ghosh's curated anthology "This Side That Side".*

I. Introduction:

Jean-François Lyotard in his *Paradox of the Graphic Artist* argues that the slowing down or arresting of the movement of the eye is fundamental to understanding the beautiful in art:

"What is beautiful catches the eye, stops the permanent sweeping of the field of vision by the gaze (which is what happens in ordinary sight), visual thought pauses, and this point of suspension is the mark of aesthetic pleasure. It is what is called contemplation". (Lyotard 36).

Graphic narratives, an interplay of words and images, create an immersive medium that unpacks the complexities of storytelling while fostering visual-verbal literacy. While the superhero genre dominates popular perception, alternative graphic narratives serve as counter-histories, amplifying marginalized voices and challenging dominant narratives. By foregrounding overlooked histories and acts of oppression, they bring the experiences of the subaltern into focus, reminding us that societies are built upon the labour and struggles of those often relegated to the margins. In tandem with the thematic considerations inherent in graphic narratives, there has emerged a burgeoning scholarly interest in the formal attributes of comic books. Particularly noteworthy is the examination of how the page's structural composition, delineated by a succession of panels, engenders a distinct mode of readerly engagement, hence the lexicon's incorporation of terms such as 'sequential narrative' to encapsulate this phenomenon. The act of reading transcends the mere perusal of panel sequences, as it is imbued with a profound interplay between text and image. Herein lies the pivotal role of textual elements in directing the reader's gaze towards specific objects or traversing the image's spatial expanse. This movement inherent in the act of reading serves as a linchpin for elucidating the mechanics underlying comic book dynamics, delineating how the medium's conventions have evolved to facilitate narrative exposition.

The framing of panels in graphic narratives not only facilitates the progression of the story but also serves as a conduit for the reader's engagement and interpretation. While the act of reading graphic narratives may not adhere strictly to a linear path, with readers often jumping between panels or pages, the arrangement and composition of panels exert a subtle influence, directing the flow of narrative comprehension. Each panel encapsulates a discrete moment or scene within the overarching narrative, presenting visual and textual information that contributes to the story's development. As readers navigate through these individual panels, they are guided by the spatial and temporal relationships established by the panel framing, intuitively piecing together the sequence of events and their significance within the larger narrative framework. The size, shape, and placement of panels within the page layout dictate the rhythm and pacing of the storytelling, with variations in panel design signalling shifts in mood, tone, or narrative emphasis. Furthermore, the use of panel borders,

gutters, and transitions between panels serves to connect disparate moments in the narrative continuum, bridging temporal gaps and maintaining coherence across the visual storytelling landscape. The reading experience of graphic narratives may be characterized by its non-linearity but it crucial to underscore that the framing of panels remains an essential structural element that guides readers through the narrative journey, fostering immersion, comprehension, and interpretation.

Keeping in mind the interpretation and implementation of graphic architecture in mind, the article examines how the authors uses the intricate architecture of the medium to facilitate the temporal and spatial movement of the story through a reading of Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock's *Vanni* and the edited anthology by Vishwajyoti Ghosh titled *This Side That Side*.

Time in graphic narratives is represented by spatial notions and there are no set criteria for how these concepts transfer into time as time in this medium is a particularly challenging and complex topic. Graphic narratives utilize a variety of techniques to convey time to their audience, including panel content, panel count and form, and panel closing. The panel border thereby directs the reader's perception of place and time. A panel's content typically gives the impression that it is a single moment in time, although it frequently isn't since the words and the events they depict may not happen at the same time. Readers can also understand time by looking at the quantity and design of the panels. A bigger panel or a sequenced repetition of the same panel, for instance, can convey a pause. Even though the characters may or may not be moving, both give the reader the impression that time is passing. Similar to this, a panel that "bleeds" or is "borderless" might inspire a feeling of timeless design. A panel that overflows the page is said to be bleeding. In either of these cases, a choice is made with accordance to the situation or the theme of the story.

Graphic narratives employ a time dimension that encompasses not just the passing of minutes or hours, but also the past, present, and future. The pages, panels, and gutters of this medium provide readers a vastly different perception of the past, present, and future than they do of time in other media. The reader is continuously surrounded by the past, present, and future. By the readers' efforts and eye movements, the past becomes more present. As a result, compared to other media, viewers have far more control over how they consume the content that is offered.

Drawing Time
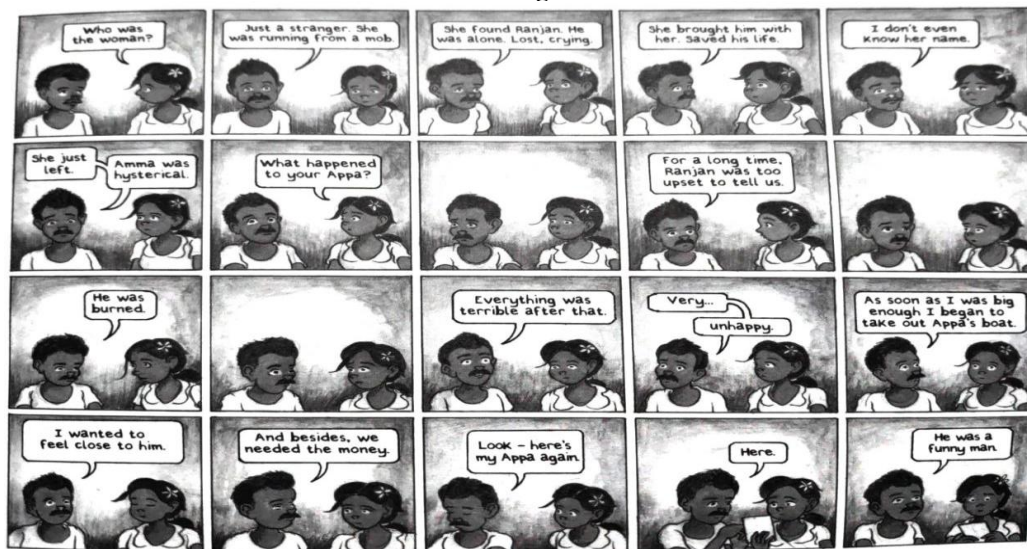
Figure 1: Panel repetition in in *Vanni* (2019). © Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock. All rights reserved.

One of the architectural tools that authors use to facilitate the movement and progression of the story is through the use of montages or panel repetition. Montages in graphic narratives represent a compelling and multi-faceted approach to the portrayal of the flow of time. They serve as a visual storytelling technique in which a sequence of images is juxtaposed to convey the passage of time, the development of a narrative arc, or the evolution of characters and settings. Temporal compression and expansion, as manifested in montages within graphic narratives, represent a fundamental duality in the portrayal of time. Temporal compression encapsulates the art of condensing significant temporal spans into concise visual sequences. By juxtaposing multiple images or moments within a single panel or page (Figure 1), the narrative efficiently conveys the passage of time, allowing readers to grasp extended durations without protracted exposition. This compression serves as a storytelling economy, maximizing the narrative's efficiency and succinctness. Conversely, temporal expansion in montages involves the meticulous dissection of time into smaller, detailed components. Each image within the

montage can represent a distinct facet of an action, emotion, or experience, offering readers a comprehensive understanding of the temporal nuances. This non-linear arrangement of temporal elements encourages readers to engage deeply with the story's temporal dimensions, as they navigate the intricacies of various temporal aspects. By deftly employing temporal compression and expansion, graphic narratives harmonize the need for brevity and in-depth exploration in their portrayal of the complex flow of time.

The proliferation of panels within a graphic narrative serves a dual purpose: it facilitates the depiction of temporal progression by guiding the reader's gaze across the page while also attenuating the pace of reading. However, the alteration in perspective holds equal significance, as the effective management of reader attention hinges upon perceptual differentiation. Were the same visual content reiterated across successive panels, with only variations in speech balloon content, the reader would be prompted to introspect on the act of reading itself. Such an approach would prompt scrutiny of each panel's graphical attributes in relation to its predecessors, thereby disrupting the fluidity of narrative continuity. Analogously, the repetition of words within a sentence can similarly impede the reading process, as the reader's focus shifts towards the phonetic nuances of the word. Interestingly, such repetition fosters heightened scrutiny of an image's surface properties, potentially enriching reader contemplation. Notably, in the instance of panel repetitions, despite the expedited reading facilitated by smaller, unaltered panels, temporal progression within the narrative is paradoxically decelerated. This is exemplified in the depicted moments of Antoni's recollection of his traumatic past to Rajini, where the frenetic pace of narration is momentarily arrested by the recurrence of identical panels, thereby imbuing the story's progression with a palpable sense of temporal dilation.. Antoni recalls the horrors of "Black July", reliving the memories that fragmented not only his country, but shattered his family as well. With subtle changes in body language, the aforementioned set of panels distil Antoni's complex and fragmented experiences of trauma into a condensed visual narrative. The stillness of time captured in the images delineates a powerful thematic representation of trauma's persistence and its enduring effect on individuals. The visual consistency in these repetitions underlines the permanence of the event, leaving a lasting impression on the reader's psyche.

Panel repetition in graphic narratives transcends mere visual duplication. It functions as a sophisticated tool for addressing the flow of time by emphasizing cyclicality, reflecting emotional resonance, and enabling readers to explore temporal transitions. This technique enhances the narrative's depth and engages readers in a reflective examination of the intricate interplay between past and present within the temporal framework of the story.

Directions of Space
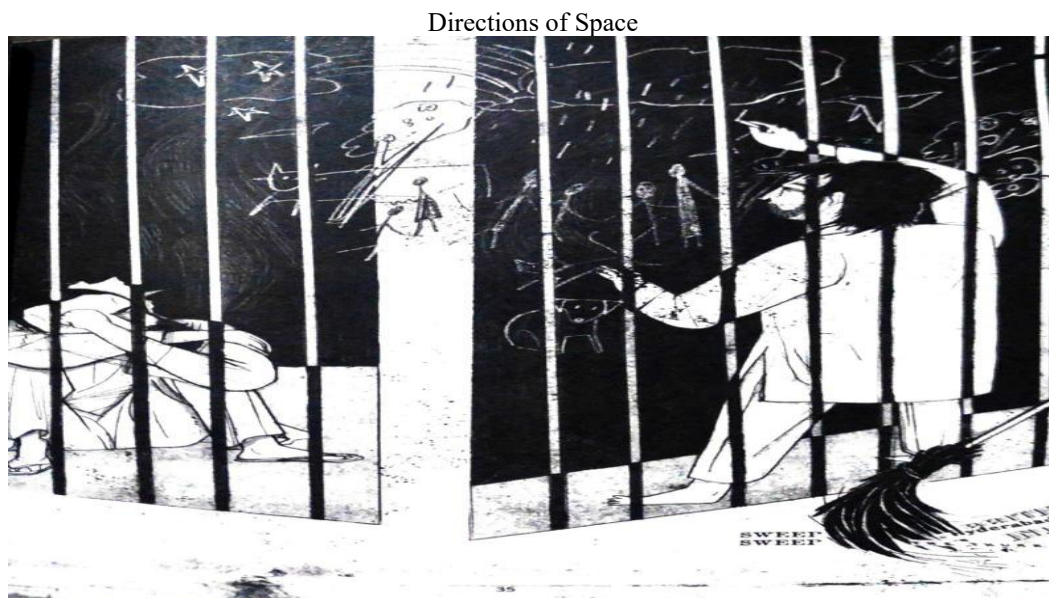
Figure 2: The 'intertwined' gutter in the story "Fault Lines" in *This Side That Side* (2013). © Vishwajyoti Ghosh.

The gutter, in the context of graphic narratives, plays a pivotal role in orchestrating the ebb and flow of the narrative, effectively facilitating both pauses and movement within the story. Its function is intertwined with the spatial and temporal dynamics of the medium, and it significantly influences the reader's engagement and comprehension of the narrative. The interpretation of graphic narratives is intrinsically connected to the arrangement of panels and gutters on the page. Panels represent distinct moments in time, and gutters—the spaces between panels—act as temporal devices, prompting readers to bridge the narrative gaps. Reader response influences how these gaps are mentally filled through a process known as "closure" (McCloud 63).

This mental closure is paramount in understanding the flow of the story. It can either lead to seamless transitions as readers move fluidly from one panel to the next, fostering a sense of continuous movement, or it can instigate stoppages as readers pause to reflect on the nuances of a particular scene or image. Reader response thus directly affects the pacing and rhythm of the narrative, as well as the perception of time within the story

Firstly, the gutter's width serves as a visual cue that directly impacts the reader's perception of time and pace. A wider gutter suggests a substantial pause or transition, creating a visual and cognitive break between panels. This width encourages readers to take a moment of contemplation, allowing them to absorb the emotional weight of a scene or ponder the significance of a particular moment. In this manner, the gutter acts as a temporal anchor, slowing down the narrative's movement and providing readers with a space for reflection. Conversely, a narrow gutter conveys a sense of immediacy and continuous movement. When panels are tightly connected with minimal gutter space, readers are prompted to seamlessly transition from one moment to the next, maintaining a swift narrative pace. This not only quickens the progression of events but also amplifies the reader's sense of immersion, as they are propelled through the story without interruptions.

The gutter acts as an indispensable tool for bridging temporal gaps. The reader's mental process of closure, in which they connect the events between panels, is facilitated by the gutter. The reader engages in a cognitive act of filling in these gaps, translating visual cues and symbolism into a cohesive narrative. This seamless bridging of gaps in the gutter enables readers to maintain a sense of continuity in the story's movement, even as it transitions between different scenes or time frames. In Figure 2, a still from the short story "Fault Lines" is showcased where two prisoners stuck in a prison in No Man's Land during the ongoing partition conflict of 1947. Stuck in a prison, unaware of which side of the border they belong to, they lose the sense of space and time which is reflected through the bleeding of panels into the empty spaces of the gutters. Such articulation showcases the senselessness of the Partition through a blatant disregard for borders that encloses the panels and bridges the gap of self and the other, the stranger as part of self as in what is external is also internal. Borders become ambiguous as panels bleed into each other.

The gutter in graphic narratives is a multifunctional element that simultaneously invites pauses for reflection and contemplation through its width and conveys the momentum of the narrative through its narrowing. It is the conduit through which readers navigate the temporal and spatial dimensions of the story, shaping the overall experience of movement and stoppages within the narrative. The manipulation of gutter width and placement is a deft artistic tool that graphic novelists employ to guide readers through the narrative's rhythmic cadence and temporal nuances and enhances the reader's experiences.
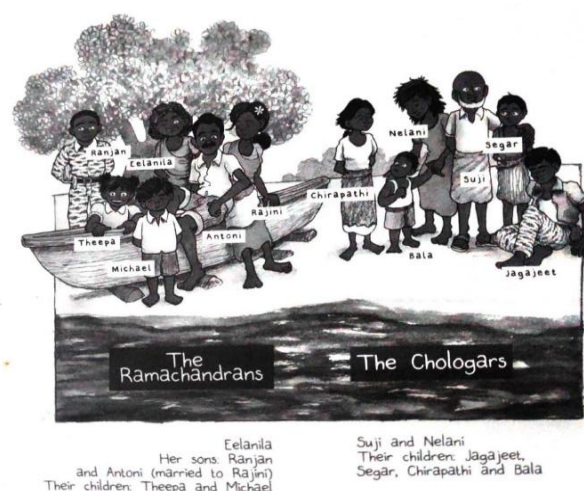
Establishing Shots

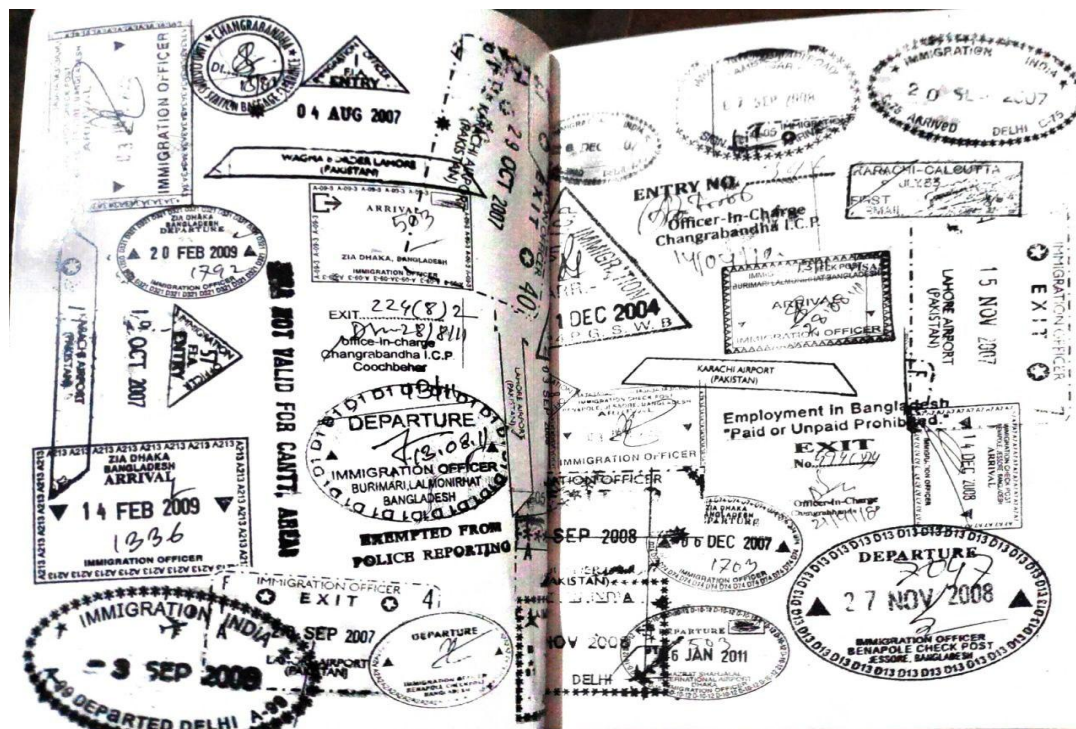Figure 3 (a): The establishing shot of in *Vanni* (2019). © Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock. All rights reserved.

Figure3(b): The establishing "shot" of *This Side That Side* (2013). ©Vishwajyoti Ghosh. All rights reserved.

While there aren't any "cameras" in graphic narratives, the author is still both director and cinematographer: they decide what to draw and how to draw it in order to ensure that a scene reads clearly, to capture a particular tone or mood, and to convey character's emotions. By directing the "camera" in comics, panel-to-panel, they communicate to the reader more specific moods and ideas as well as to give the reader a sense of being a part of a scene instead of in the audience. The authors intricately manipulate the readers gaze by altering and adding different point of views and angles to facilitate the progression of the story. One of the techniques used by authors is the establishing shot of a comics panel that establishes setting. The establishing shot plays a significant position within the narrative architecture of graphic storytelling, often serving as a focal point for dramatic impact, thematic resonance, and visual spectacle. As a single, expansive panel that spans either an entire page or two facing pages in a graphic narrative, the establishing shot commands attention and offers artists a canvas on which to showcase pivotal moments, dynamic action sequences, or striking visual imagery. Establishing shots also have the effect of pausing the action while giving out enough information to set the location and the tone of the approaching scene. Figure 3(a) showcases the Ramchandran and Cholgars family, and establishes the setting of a rural coastal village in Sri Lanka while providing intricate details that foreshadows the fate that awaits the families. Intricate details such as the military outfits of the characters in the establishing shot makes the reader aware of the presence of possible conflict, thereby foreshadowing the imminent violence that razes the small rural village of Vanni into the ground. While the establishing panel in "This Side That Side" (Figure 3b) presents an intriguing insight into the "restorying" partition narratives through the stamps of immigration officers which indicates a peek into the often-overlooked stories of Partition. The innumerable stamps in the splash page in the beginning of the work indicates the innumerable stories and innumerable fractures that goes on to define the South Asian histories and stories.
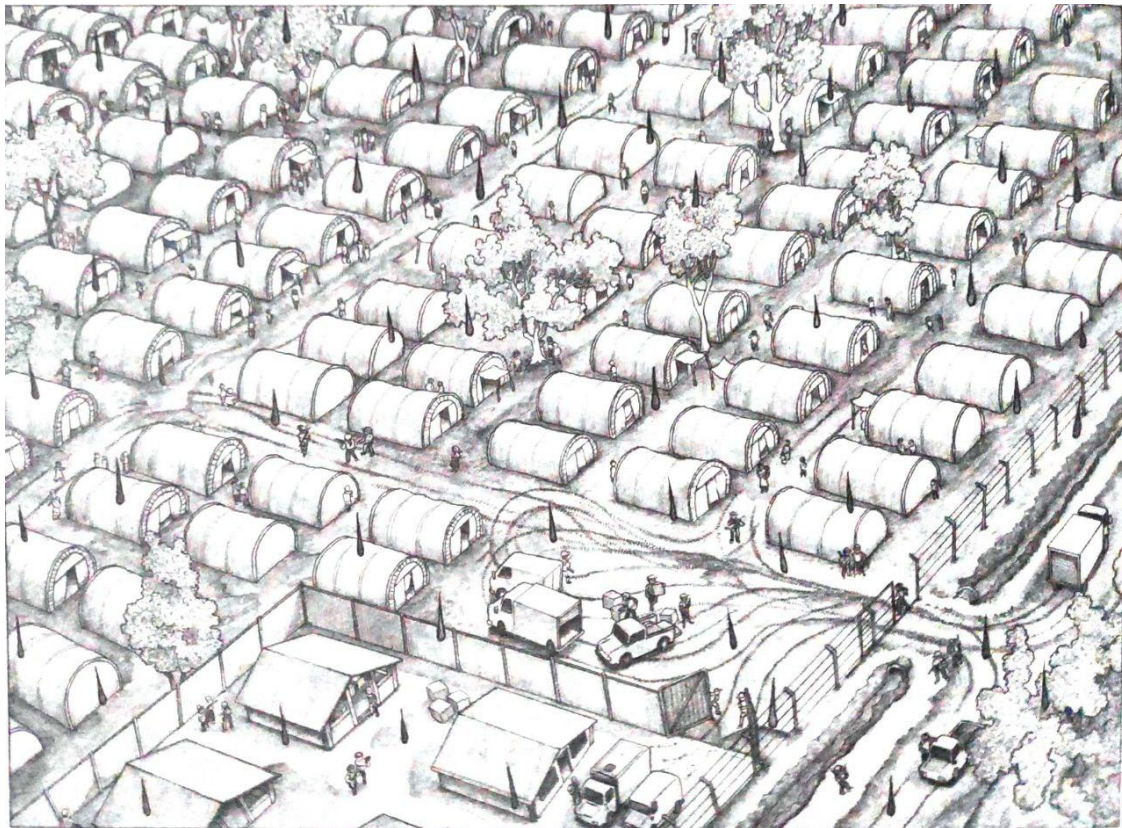
Wide Angle Shot

Figure 4: "Manik Farm": The refugee camps in Sri Lanka in in *Vanni* (2019). © Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock. All rights reserved.

Another technique is the use of the wide angle shot, which is a bit different from an establishing shot in that it occurs within a scene that is already well underway. It's still a large, pulled out shot–usually with at least some background–but typically it's used to give the reader a wider range of information outside of a character's immediate vicinity. The wide angle shot creates a sense of space as it can be used to show the emotional distance between characters or to connect them relative to their locations to each other within the shot. It can estrange them from their environment or make them feel like they're a part of it. It can even establish social relation to the group: being a part of it or being separated from it. Like the establishing shot, the wide-angle shot bestows power upon backgrounds. By presenting a panoramic view of the scene or setting, the wide angle shot provides readers with a comprehensive understanding of the story's environment, encompassing key landmarks, architectural details, and geographical features. This contextual information not only grounds the reader in the physical reality of the narrative world but also fosters a sense of immersion and verisimilitude, enabling readers to mentally inhabit the depicted space. Furthermore, the wide angle shot facilitates smooth transitions between different locations or time periods within the narrative, serving as a visual bridge that connects disparate scenes and maintains narrative coherence. Whether depicting sweeping landscapes, bustling cityscapes, or sprawling interiors, the wide angle shot offers readers a sweeping vista that invites exploration and evokes a sense of wonder, enriching the overall reading experience and deepening their engagement with the graphic narrative.

The wide angle shot of Manik Farm (Figure 4), one of the largest refugee camps in the world with more than 300,000 people cramped together in dehumanising conditions. The term "farm" dehumanises the internally displaced refugees and the image shows the debilitating conditions of the people. A closer inspection at the backgrounds and smaller details shows how militarised the camps are, with regular questioning and untold atrocities, thereby compounding the miseries of the traumatised refugees. While the ensuing panels discloses the atrocities and inhumane conditions of the camp, the wide angle shot provides a bird's eye view and allows the readers to witness the extent of turmoil and chaos, immersing them in the visceral realities of conflict and violence.

The space provided by backgrounds allows the reader to escape the character's immediate emotional sphere and superimpose their own experiences and feelings in the space around them. Wide-angle shots are a way of taking the mood and heightening it then releasing it into a space that feels less immediate and more timeless.

Close up and Zooming:

The use close-up presentation of a character creates visual and emotional intimacy with a character. It exaggerates the subtle and overblows the obvious. By allowing the reader close within a subject's personal space, our empathy reaches into that character so that whatever that character is feeling becomes our own. Whether we feel sympathy or revulsion, sorrow or joy, the close-up amplifies those emotions.
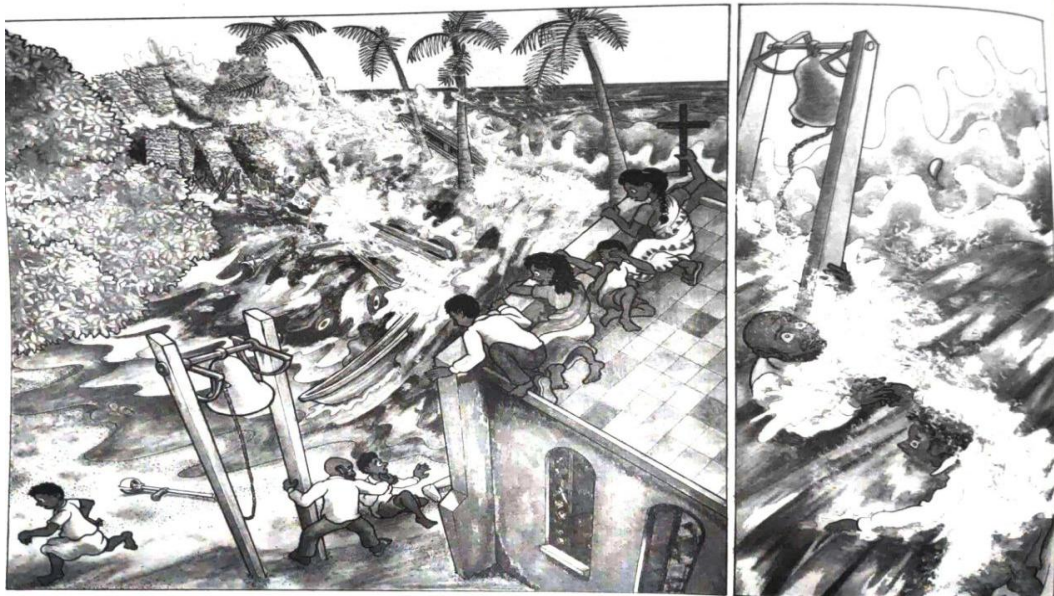

Figure 5: Zoomed in panels in *Vanni* (2019). © Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock. All rights reserved.

Another integral tool is the use of zooming technique to accentuate our attention to the panel. It may seem strange to use a word like "zoom" in such medium since it implies motion in a static medium. In the context of graphic narratives, however, the zoom-in refers to how something is staged from panel to panel. The zoom-in gives the reader the illusion of physically moving closer to the subject matter, transitioning from distant-observer to intimate-acquaintance within the space of a few panels. Such a transition puts us in the middle of the story affecting our response to the characters plight (Figure 5) while at the same time delineating the passage of time. Jagajeet, a blast survivor, had just started to shed off his fears and started to walk with the help of a prosthetic and his doting father, when the disaster strikes. The zoomed in sequence not only shows the last moments of the father son duo, but their shocked and fear stricken faces provides a contrast to Jaga's earlier comments about being unafraid of death. The readers also become a part of the secondhand witnessing of trauma along with Antoni's family as the first zoomed out panel shows the manipulation of space to engage the readers in one of the distinct features of a graphic narrative. The use of different angles in panels of different sizes not only accentuates the aesthetic of the narrative but also impacts the response of the reader. Furthermore, the lack of speech balloons and words in the panels denotes the 'unspeakabilty' of trauma. Traumatic events often elicit intense and overwhelming emotional responses, such as fear, shame, guilt, and horror, which can be profoundly distressing. These emotions, when intertwined with the memory of the traumatic experience, create an aversion to revisiting and verbalizing the details of the event. The affected individuals may fear that recounting the trauma would reawaken these distressing emotions, leading to re-traumatization, and may, therefore, choose to remain silent.

Graphic narratives represent a unique medium that showcases transmedial narratology through their multifaceted fusion of visual and textual elements. Transmedial narratology, a theoretical framework that examines the principles of storytelling across different media forms, finds an ideal playground in the realm of graphic narratives. This genre's integration of images and text creates a dynamic interplay between visual and verbal storytelling components that enriches the narrative experience. Graphic narratives break down the traditional boundaries between media and storytelling modes and this is achieved through the use of myriad of visual techniques as discussed in the paper, which have the capacity to 'surprise' because they mark a change in the mode of presenting stories and conflicts in literature.

Within the realm of graphic narrative analysis, the reader's engagement transcends the mere deconstruction of visual attributes. Rather, it entails a dynamic interplay between panels, wherein the viewer retains a residual memory of preceding sequences while anticipating forthcoming ones. This anticipatory cognition is often facilitated by a cursory perusal of adjacent pages. Moreover, the act of reading involves a rapid ocular traversal from textual to pictorial elements, seamlessly integrating them into a multifaceted

temporal construct. The reader's gaze navigates fluidly across the panel, transitioning between different subjects with celerity. Despite these swift movements, the perceptual synthesis of the entire scene occurs in real-time, akin to the holistic apprehension of a word despite its sequential text to text decoding. The graphic narratives and its own unusual characteristics and techniques which affects the temporality and spatiality provides a unique insight into the aspects of conflict and trauma poses as evidenced in *Vanni* and *This Side That Side.*

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