ANALYZING THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF THE AJANTA PAINTINGS AND FINDING ANALOGUES IN THE CONTEMPORARY (GRAPHIC) STORYTELLING

DESIGN RESEARCH SEMINAR
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APPROVAL SHEET

This Design Research Seminar Project entitled **"Analyzing the narrative structure of the Ajanta paintings and finding analogues in the contemporary (graphic) storytelling"** by Abhishek Verma, 126340008 is approved in for the fulfillment of the Masters Design Degree in Animation and Film Design.

Project Guide:

Date:

Place:

DECLARATION

I declare that this written submission represents my ideas in my own words and where others' ideas or words have been included, I have adequately cited and referenced the original sources. I also declare that I have adhered to all principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misrepresented or fabricated any idea/ data/ fact/ source in my submission. I understand that any violation of the above will be cause for disciplinary action by the Institute and can also evoke penal action from the sources which have thus not been properly cited or from whom proper permission has not been taken when needed.

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ABSTRACT

The project aims at the analysis of the structure of story-telling within the paintings that exists on the walls of Ajanta Caves. These paintings depict the stories based on the lives of 'Boddhisatvas', famous fable known as 'Jatakas'. The canvases of the paintings are the walls inside the 'Viharas' (residency and the prayer halls for the Buddhists monks) and the paintings take the huge walls of the caves as their canvas, without obvious frames or panels.

If one looks at the paintings for the first time, it would be very difficult to follow a particular direction and read those stories in sequence. However, if guided though, one gets the sequence of events correctly going from top-down, right-left, left-right & bottom-top. So, this project aims at determining how those paintings could be analyzed or read in a particular order and derives different forms of narrative within the frame of wall and still gets those Stories correctly.

As these paintings were done between 1st-6th centuries A.D., we tried to follow analogies and their narrative mapping into the contemporary graphical novels and comic books.

INTRODUCTION & BRIEF:

Ajanta Caves and its paintings

Graphic & comic books

Narrative

Story

Ajnata Caves and its paintings:

The Ajanta caves are isolated scrap of horse shoe rock rising ranged across the river *Waghora*. There are all together 32 caves and among those few are incomplete were as few consists paintings and the remaining has been finely sculpted. The paintings exists in cave 1, 2, 16, 17 & 19. And the best and the prominent ones lie in 1, 2 and 17.

Inside the caves which is classified as Chaitya halls and Viharas consists of Jataka stories in the form of paintings.

In this report we will be analyzing the story of 'Mahajanaka Jataka' which is in cave 1. The story of Mahajanaka jataka follows the story of events from the time Mahajanaka became the king till he acquired 'Boddhisattva'.

The stories are in the sequence of events.

*Acquiring the throne
*Life as a king
*falling into dilemma
*Meeting the saint
        -process of renunciation
*Leaving the palace

Graphic & comic books:

The graphic or comic books are the sequence of visual panels that follow a procedure of reading them from left to right and from top to bottom. All of the events/actions are enclosed in marked panel arranged sequentially. There is a gap between each of the panels i.e. called Gutter. Gutter is organized that story can flow easily in between time & space. This is the basic design of a comic or a graphic novel. But there are the things happening which are not bounded under these kind of rules.

Few of them follow the structures that exhibit the overlapping narratives. The analogy of this kind can be seen on the walls of Ajanta paintings.

Narrative:

The narrative is a sequence of events in a story. The sequence could be linear or non-linear. But based on the kind of story telling there are many other forms of narratives that has evolved and analyzed here as follows:

-linear narrative
-non-linear narrative
-nested narrative
-loop narrative
-overlapping narrative
In this analysis we will be focus on overlapping narrative structure.

The presence of narrative manifests in:

-novels/story books
-music
-films
-documentaries
-comics
-project documentation
-graphical novels
-paintings
-illustrations
-sculptures
-posters
-installations and many other forms.

These have remarkable story telling capabilities that put the viewer into considerations of how one deciphers the subtext within it. It can follow the arrangement of being in sequence or jumbled, depending on the creator of that particular piece.

Story:

Narrative exists within the frame of story i.e. communication of certain kind. Story carries the narrative within that defines the style of the story of it is going to be told to a certain target group of viewers.

Stories can be told by one or more person, either put up in a linear or nonlinear arrangement. The important point here is that the narrative within each story is analyzed in the form of events with pace, direction, loops and patterns.

So here we will discuss and look upon the wall paintings in the context of evolving narrative structure.

Events: Events are the smallest unit of actions that happen in a story. Combining many such events together we get our story in place. It also triggers the following event in a story. So in most of the cases one event is directly or indirectly related to the other sequence of events.

ANALYSIS

How analysis can be framed?

This comes under the frame structure.

The frame structure is the defined context based on which the stories are kept and told. Here we take the example of Ajanta's wall paintings and the frame structure in the fables, 'Jatakas'.
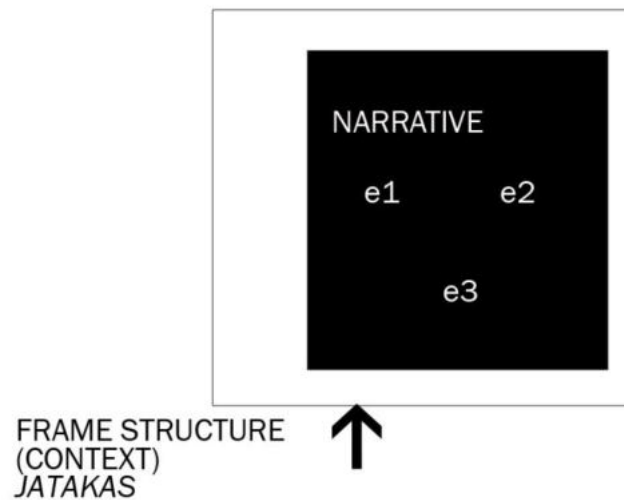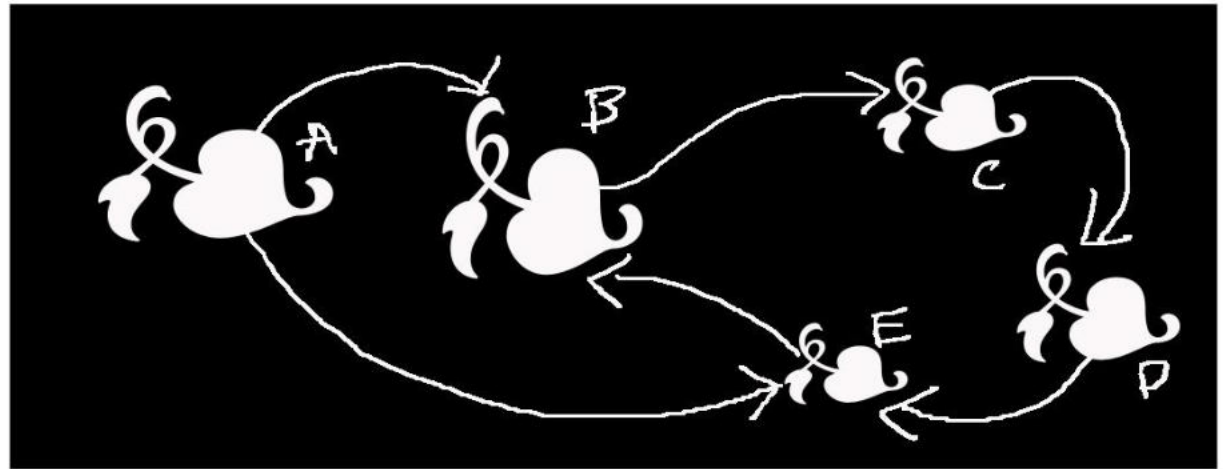

fig. 1

Within this frame structure all the different kinds of narrative structures could exist if required. It depends upon the sequence of events that exist in that particular painting.

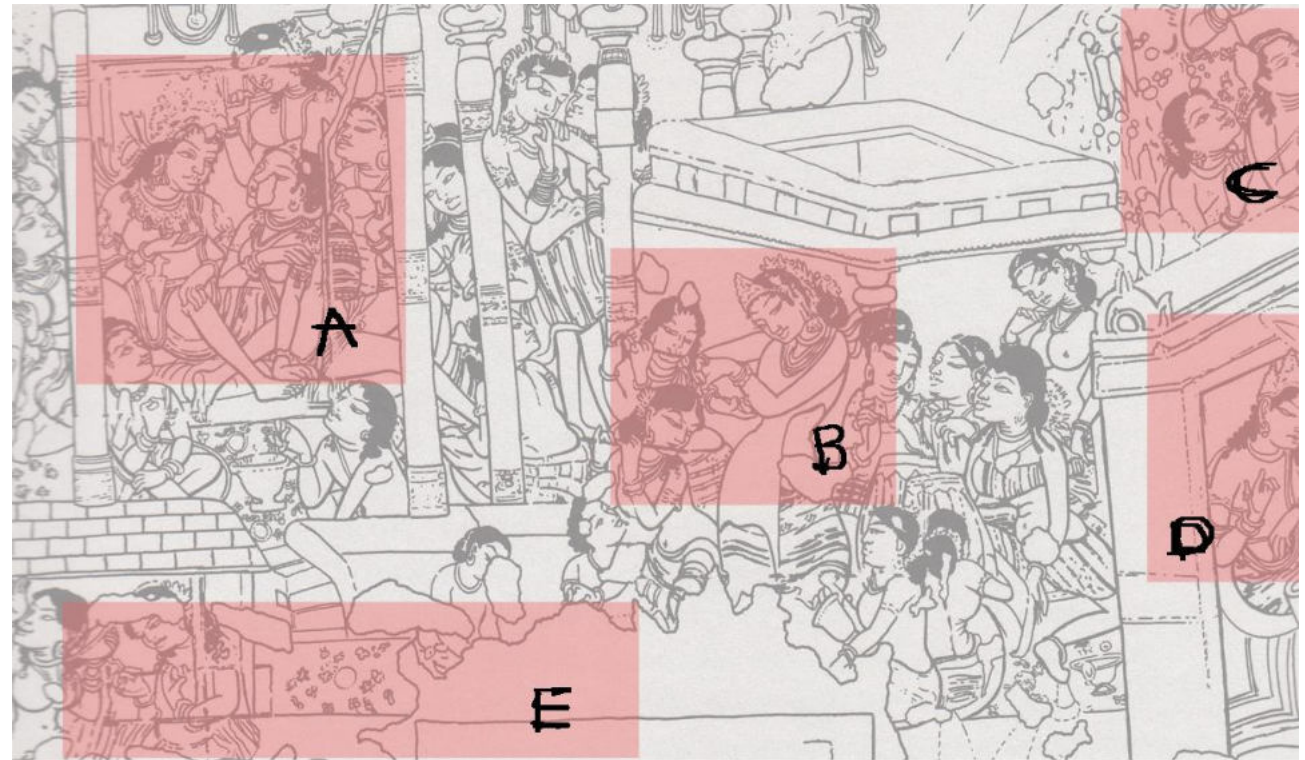Here we have a story which has a fixed narrative structure that comes under the Jatakas.

wall painting

fig. 2

This is a wall painting, within which there are many separate events in sequences which combine with each other to structure the whole painting.

E<A>B>C>D>E>B

So here the sequence of events depicted as A,B,C,D & E and how they correlate with each other to form a narrative.

Cave 1 painting depicting the Mahajanaka Jataka. The events A-B-C-D-E combines into one to explain the entire painting.

fig. 3

In this excerpt graphic from the painting of Mahajanka Jataka.

A. Where the king Mahajanaka is in dilemma and explaining the situation that he wants renunciation from the life of an elite.
B. The dance sequence arranged by the queen so that king will attain distractions form the feeling of being ascetic.

C. Celestial beings are shown listening to the saint verses
D. King seeks advice from the bodhisattva
E. Down: king in the process of renunciation

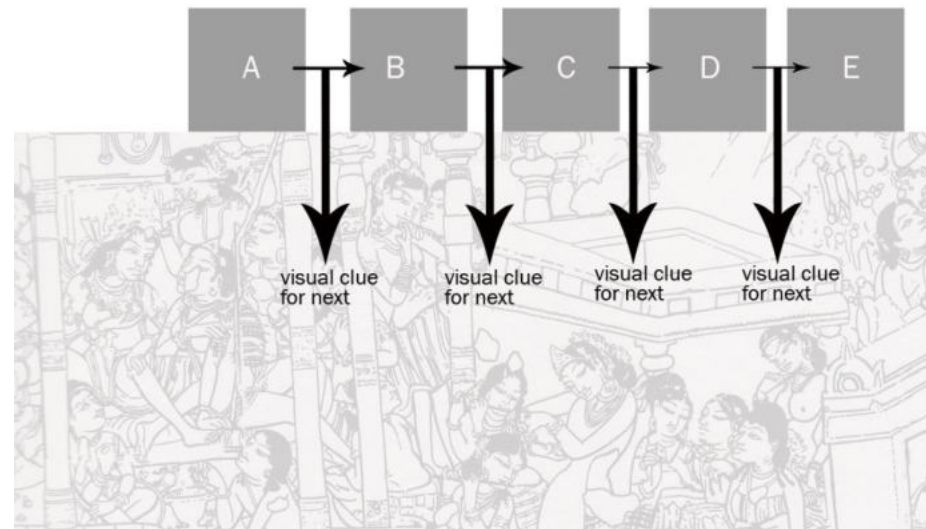So the entire chain of events is shown to represent the entire painting canvas.

fig. 4

Such examples show that each and every event painted triggers the next possible event so that the story gets its form.

STRUCTURE OF THE PAINTING

The cave paintings that have been made, do not follow any particular sequence or direction or position into the wall. It follows the major event/action that particular Jatakas explains. Thus we can clearly see that the painting have a certain style of depicting the event which has a closer similarity to overlapping Narrative structure.
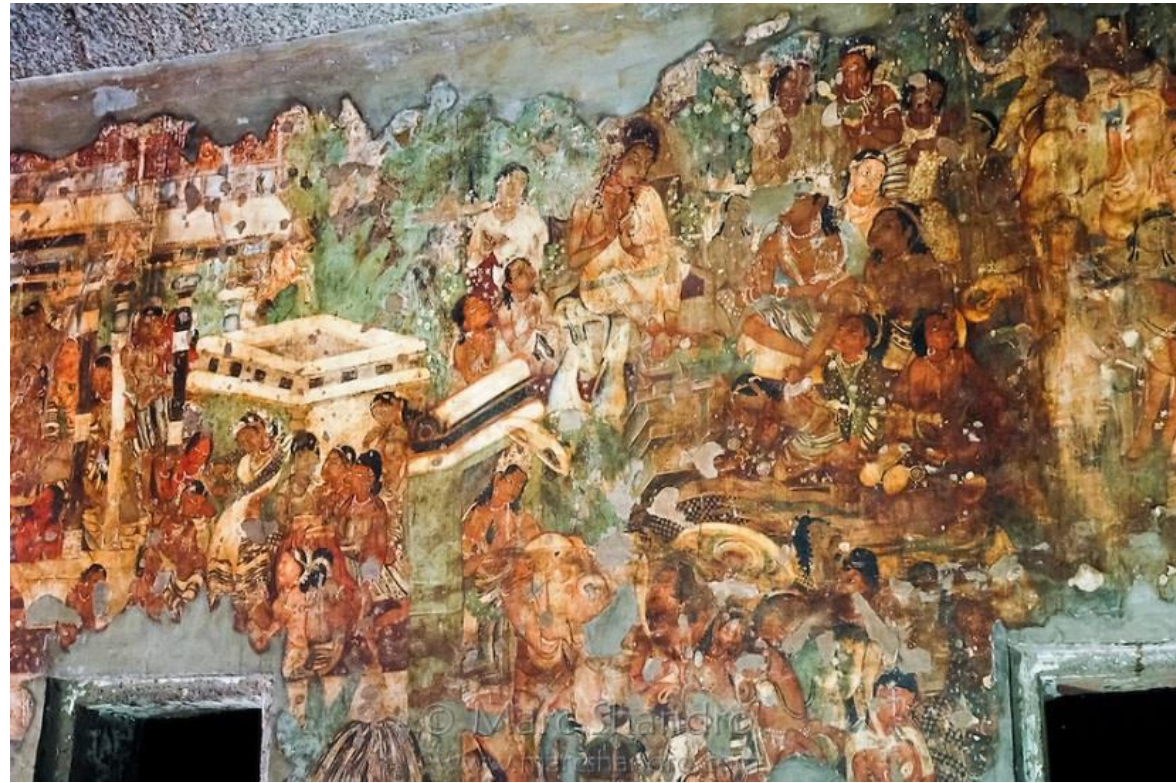

fig. 5

OVERLAPPING NARRATIVE

fig. 6

ANALOGY to the CONTEMPORARY STORYTELLING.

The Ajanta painting on the cave1 has been analyzed in the sense of narrative that has overlapping visual events and sequential story events. So we can categorize them into

*visual clues

*Story clues

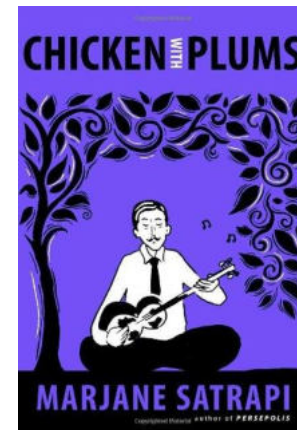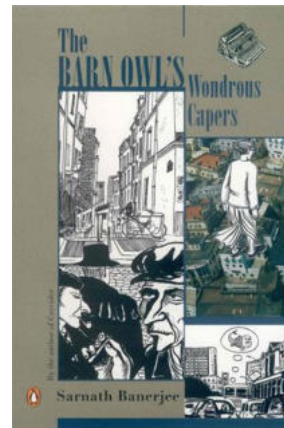The visual & story clues of such kind mainly exists in the modern day graphic novels.

fig. 7,8,9

Here for the comparison we take Craig Thompson's Blanket & Sarnath Banerjee's The barn owl's wondrous capers.

Craig Thompson's Blanket

fig. 10,11

fig. 12

The visual events that have been constructed here has an extreme overlapped structure. If we look at the first Image in the blanket the sequence of events with respect to the character and his girlfriend has been depicted in the block or pattern design present in the physical blanket. It shows how they met and other events that romanticize their chemistry in graphic screen.

Now if we look at the other two images from the same book Blanket we find the context to be the same but the representation is quite different. In these pages one finds simple visual clues that they

are together and just below in the same page they are separated. Here no rules of gutters or panels are followed.

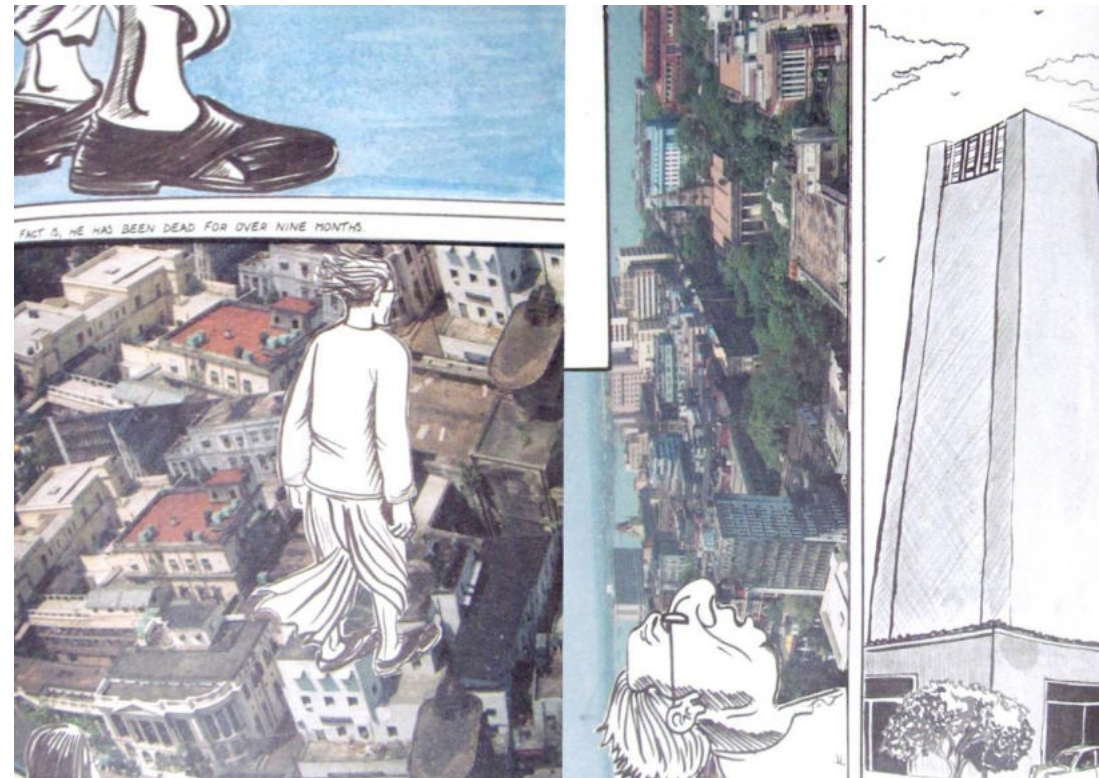**Sarnath Banerjee's the barn owl's wondrous capers.**

fig. 13

In this we will look into the two pages of event sequence where the character is looking at the building where his father used to work. He is at the roof top although he himself is dead nine months ago. So the establishment is done here in the form of visual clue that the character is in original location and still standing in air. So in a page it gives us the sense of events that the character is dead and trying to look at the office where his father worked and his father too died long ago.

Story Clue.

For this we will look at the graphic novel by

Marjane Satrapi's Chicken with plums.

fig.14, 15, 16

Here the narrative that is explained is very interesting because it follows a sequence of backtracking of events. The protagonist in the story is dead and the story is all about the 7 days before his death.

In the sense of story clues it binds different independent stories related to him and his death of how Nasser (the protagonist) came to death following such 7 days of events. Those events build great anticipation as to how one has reached to death.

Comparing to the paintings and the narrative of Mahajanaka Jataka, it shows a similar structure as we already knew that the king Mahajanaka is going to attend Boddhisattava but interesting as to how it was followed from being a King to a saint.

CONCLUSION & COMBINATION

Here as detailed case study we have looked into the story of Mahajanaka Jataka in the Cave1.

We already knew the structure and the painting style in cave1. The visual clues were explained in the form of overlapping narrative whereas the story clues followed the events that are related to each other.

Suppose we take different independent keywords and try to form the overlapped narrative of Mahajanka Jataka . Will it be possible? The answer is yes.

The keywords are MANGO TREE and SEA.

Now the sequence was:

*Acquiring the throne
*Life as a king
*falling into dilemma
*Meeting the saint
        -process of renunciation
*Leaving the palace

| Act 1 King in dilemma | Act 2 King goes to seek advice | Act 3 King abdicates | Act 4 King leaves palace | Ship wreck (An earlier scene) |

Fig. 17

So the basic question arises that initially Mahajanka was a poor boy, then how come he acquired the throne? After becoming the king why suddenly he fell into a dilemma.

The answer lies in the keywords.
There used to be an old sea. No one was able to cross that sea ever because the sea either drowned them or ask them 3 difficult questions. Mahajanaka too tried to cross the sea and as usual encountered the old sea. He was the one who answered the three questions and was able to cross the sea. The subtext was clear that Mahajanaka was powerful.
Why after becoming a king he was in dilemma? It was because of mango tree. There were two mango trees one was overburdened with fruits and other was green but bore no fruits. One day a group of

soldiers attacked the tree with fruit, while they didn't care about the next tree which was fruitless. This incident came into the ears of king and he realized that with more power one has more responsibility. This was the reason for him to be in dilemma.

Fig. 18

 So
*Acquiring the throne (story of an old Sea)
*Life as a king
*falling into dilemma (because of the mango tree)
*Meeting the saint
        -process of renunciation
*Leaving the palace

So altogether the Narrative analysis presented here is just a subjective analysis with the point of view of a reader in order to derive a lucid understanding of the whole sequence of paintings. There are always many possible alternatives to this analysis in order to derive a new set of narrative in each of the paintings.

The comparison made with the mentioned graphic novels was done to show the direct and indirect influences of such story form into our present day story-telling. There could be more such influential facts that too constitute our way of story-telling.

LINKS AND REFERENCES

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