Analysing Indian Superhero Comics in Accordance with Comic Theories

A Design Research Project | Guided by Prof. Nina Sabnani

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Declaration

I declare that this written submission represents my idea in my own words and where other ideas or words have been included, I have adequately selected and referred the original source.

I also declare that I have adhered to all principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misinterpreted or fabricated or falsified any ideas / data / facts / sources in my submission.

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Udbhav Jain

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Acknowledgements

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Abstract

This study is intended to study the text image relationship in context of Indian superhero comic books. Moving along the line of comic book theories that are already established by authors Will Eisner and Scott Mccloud, a selected number of Indian comic books are analysed. Any further patterns from those analysis are also recorded.

Analysis Criteria

The Indian superhero comic books selected have been strictly analysed according to structure which includes the panels and their arrangement, the relationship between the text and illustrations and the overall composition and flow, colour etc. The main motive was to check how much the parameters of these comics fall under the established comic book theories and what other relative conclusions and comparisons could be drawn from the analysis. At the same time, some other aspects specifically related to these comics have been studied.

Sources Used for Analysis and Categories

The works of Eisner and Mccloud which are considered to form the foundations for formal comics studies in English were taken as a source material for analysis:

Comics and Sequential Art by Will Eisner

Understanding Comics by Scott Mccloud

Making Comics by Scott Mccloud

Categories were decided upon to be analysed taken directly or indirectly from the above mentioned sources

- Panel Transitions
- Word-Image Relationship
- Panel Flow and composition
- Color
- Front Cover
- Splash Panels

Comic Books Selected for Analysis

Established in 1986, Raj Comics have been one of the largest distributors of Indian comic Book superheroes. Since the inception of their first superhero Nagraj, Raj comics as a production house has developed a cult following across generations in delivering superhero comics. At the same time they have gone through several changes in terms of overall structure and visual imagery of the comics.
In consideration of abovementioned points three comic books were selected of their most popular superhero characters Nagraj and Super Commando Dhruva. Each of them belonged to different parts of the Raj Comic chronology and each represented the cumulative changes that happened across the timeline. This was done to extract more data and patterns across the Raj comic's era.

The three comic books selected for analysis were:

Comic 1: Pratishodh Ki Jwala (Super Commando Dhruva) 1989

The first issue of Dhruva, one of Raj Comics' flagship characters. It also represents the initial comic stylization of Raj Comics' 30 page comic structure which was relevant till early 2000s.

Comic 2: Dhruva Khatam (Super Commando Dhruva) 2002

One of the mid issues of Super Commando Dhruva, which also represents the 59 page issue stylization followed during this timeline.

Comic 3: Hari Maut (Nagraj) 2007

One of the issues of Nagraj from his latest series that ran. It also represents the new modern stylization of Raj Comics in consideration of the new readers which included spiritual reboot of many characters and series style issues.

Analysis

I. ## Panel Transitions

Panel transitions refers to the movement from one panel to another. There are various ways in which a story can transcend between panels. As defined by Mccloud, panel transitions can be broadly subcategorized as following.

Moment to Moment: this panel transition captures the direct actions with very little closure.

Action to Action: Action to Action transition captures a single subject in distinct progressions.

Subject to Subject: in this transition the panels move across different subjects in the same scene.

Scene to Scene: single or multiple subjects move from scene to scene across time and locations.

Aspect to Aspect: these transitions are time independent and show the different aspects of a place, idea or mood.

Non Sequitur: This transition offers no relation between panels.

Comic 1

The no. of panel transitions in order for comic 1 were found to be:
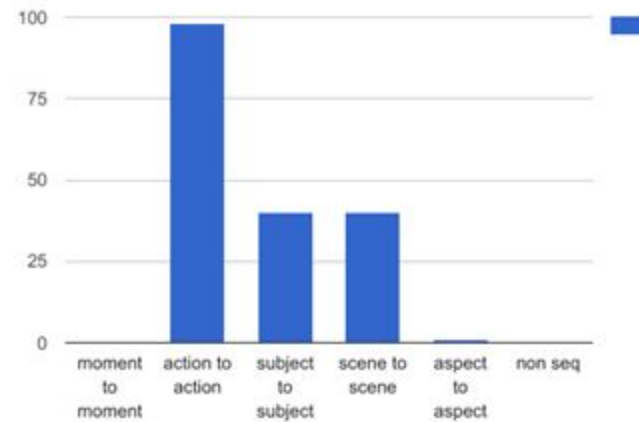
Action to Action: 98

Subject to Subject: 40

Scene to Scene: 40

Aspect to Aspect: 1

The storyline for this comic is less intensive and has no subplots whatsoever and hence the largest number of A2A transitions. Also when compared to American comics, A2A transitions are usually the largest in number. Most common A2A transitions for this comic were found to be the fighting sequences.

For this comic the number of Scene to Scene transitions are as high as Subject to Subject. The reason being the kind of story this comic presents. Being the first issue for the character, this comic has an ample amount of backstory which is presented as narrative, which is to be fit in a 30 page structure. Hence more rapid scene transitions while telling that backstory.

Surprisingly, due to the narrative plot being fixated in fixed no. of pages, one Aspect to Aspect transition is also included showing various heroic escapades of the protagonist.

Comic 2

The panel transitions for comic 2 were found to be:

Subject to Subject: 135

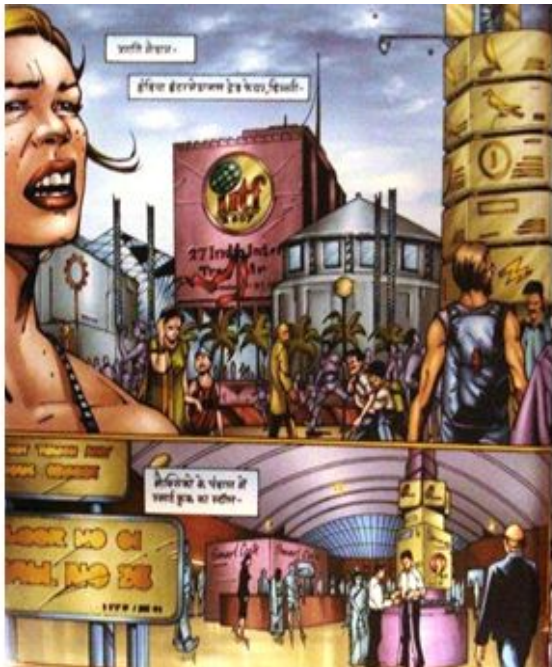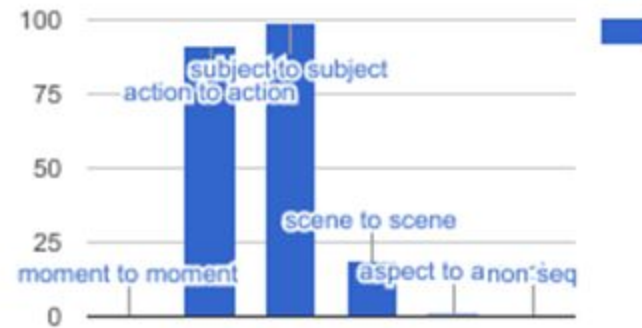Action to Action: 65

Scene to Scene: 15
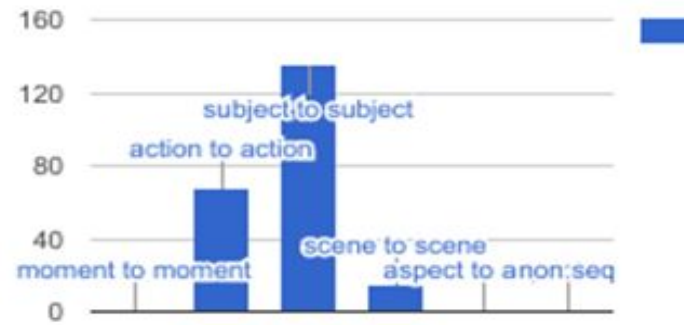
The comic consisted of an intensive story with many subplots which were to be included in 59 pages. The highest subject to subject transitions mainly included different conversations between characters. Even most Action to Action transitions also aid in explaining various subplots.

The main motive of these conversations were to explain and expand different subplots and fit them in minimum panels. There are no rapid scene transitions and most of the transitions are after the end of a subplot.

Comic 3:

The panel transitions for comic 3 were found to be:

Subject to Subject: 99

Action to Action: 91

Scene to Scene: 19

Aspect to Aspect: 1

For this comic a moderately intensive storyline is incorporated with fast paced action in a 30 page comic structure. Hence S2S transition are almost in par with A2A transitions. The comic is a spiritual reboot of initial 30 page structured comic books. Most Action to Action transitions are multi panel fight scenes.

Comparisons and Commonalities:

In all the three comics Action to Action, Subject to Subject and Scene to Scene transitions were present mostly. This pattern is common with the American comic books. Out of the three, Comic 1 follows the American comic graph most closely because of the same format of 30 page structure.
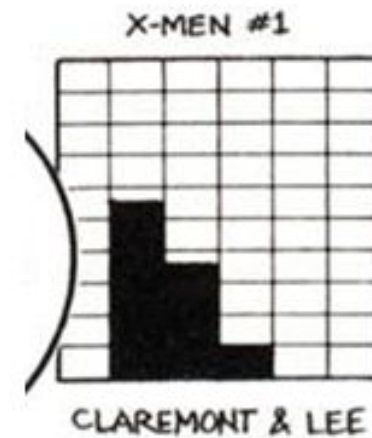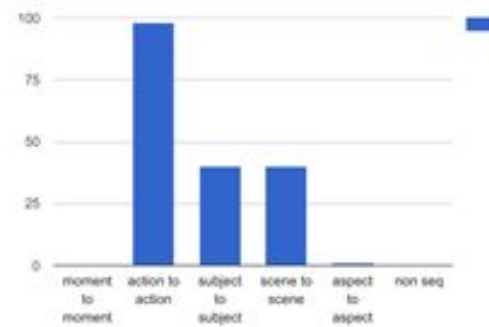
Panel transitions in these comics are mostly structure specific in the sense that they were incorporated in assimilating most story in the specific number of pages.

II. Word Image Relationship

Word image relationship in a comic refers to how the text and image in a panel are complimenting each other and eventually affecting the meaning of the imagery. There are several kinds of word image relationships:

Word Specific: In this relation the text in a panel tells more information and has more role to play.

Picture Specific: In this, the words play negligible role as compared to the pictures, which carry the most part of the information.

Duo Specific: In this relationship, both text and images provide more or less the same information.

Intersecting: Both words and pictures contributing equally in a panel.

Interdependent: Both words and pictures providing different information and together providing entirely different information.
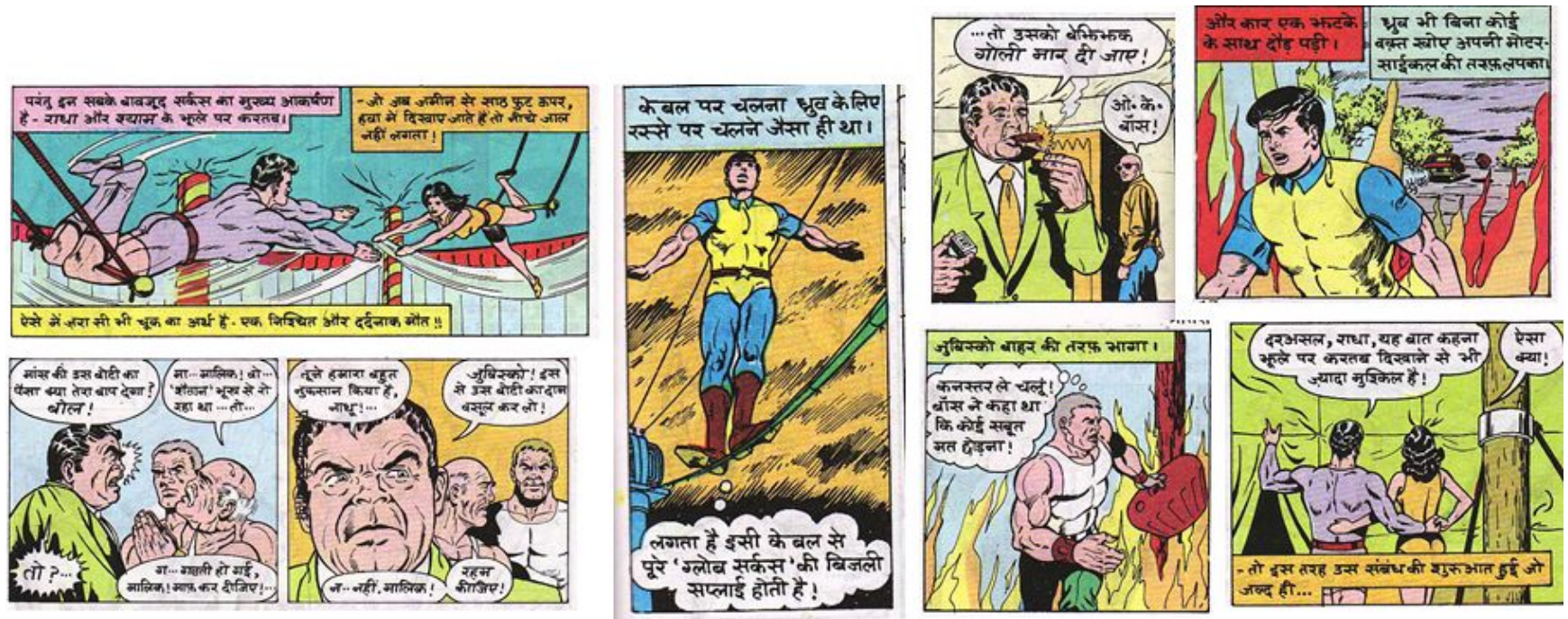
Parallel: Both words and pictures providing different information.

Montage: Uncanny arrangement of words and pictures.

Comic 1:

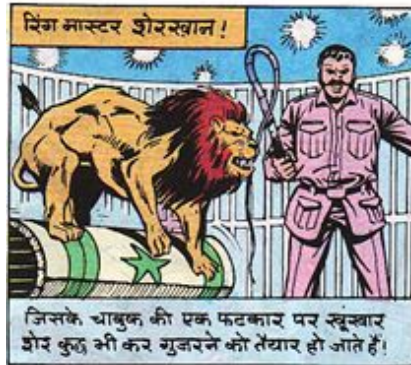The W-I relationships used in the comic are as follows:
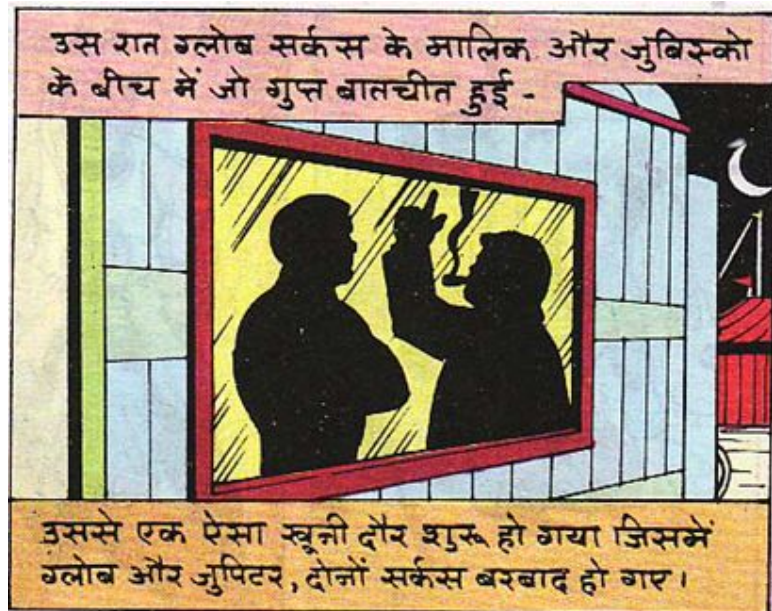
Intersecting: 82

Duo Specific: 47
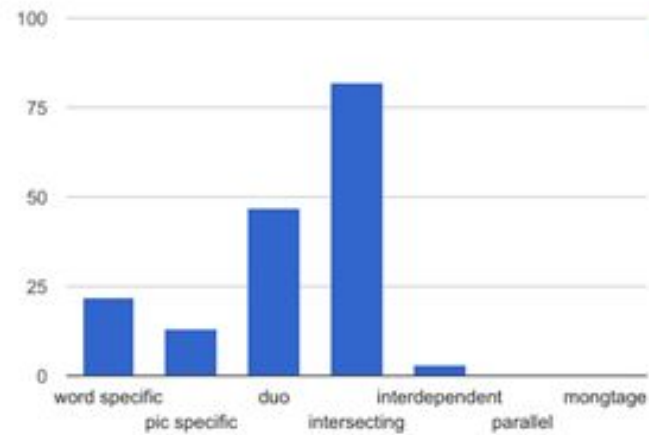
Word specific: 22

Picture Specific: 13

Interdependent: 3

Conclusions:

Intersecting W-I relationship present mostly as the most common W-I relationship. Dup Specific is the second highest word image relationship for this comic as it is mostly told in backstory narrative. The same narrative storytelling becomes word specific at times.

Most Action to Action transitions in the comic are picture specific.

Comic 2:

The W-I relationships used in the comic are as follows:

Intersecting: 192

Duo specific: 9
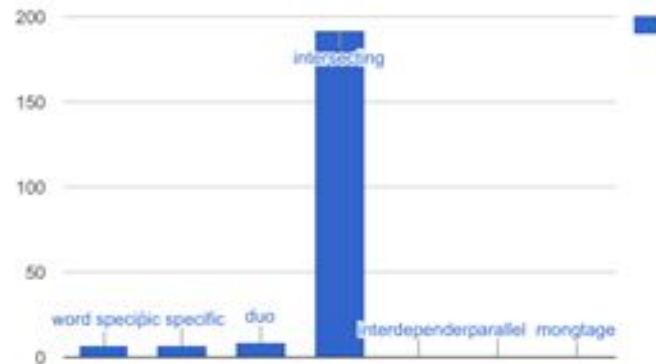
Picture specific and Word specific: 7

Conclusions:

Most of the storytelling for this comic is intensive which required both text and visuals to present maximum information to viewers and proceed the story. Hence most of the W-I relationship for this comic is intersecting.

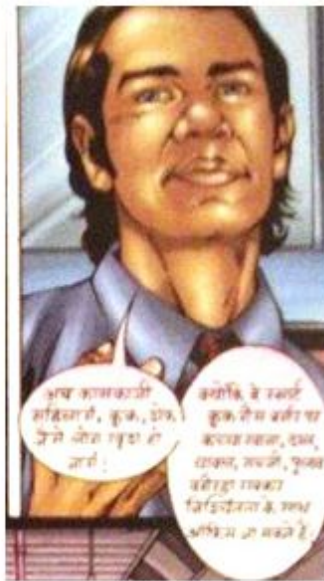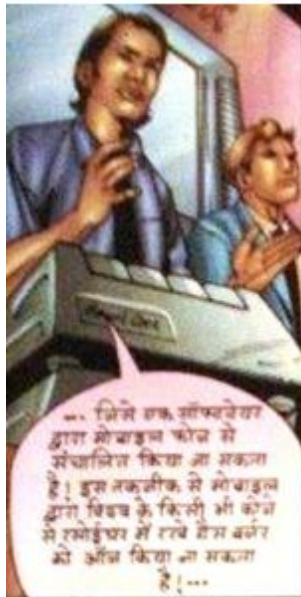**Comic 3:**

Intersecting: 160

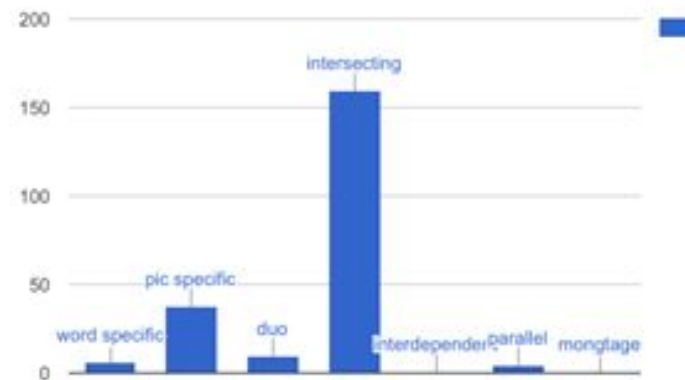Picture specific: 38

Duo specific: 10

Word specific: 6

Parallel: 4

For comic 3, along with intersecting, the second highest number is of picture specific to go with the fast paced action oriented storytelling. Also in spite of being a reflection of the initial years comics, there are less duo specific panels as the comic (as described by the creators) is mostly a nostalgia drive for the old readers, who are already aware of many comic lingos and do not need explaining.

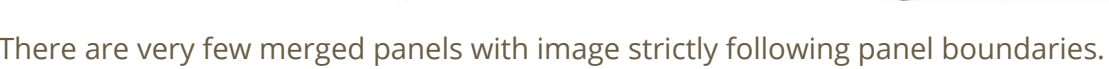## III.   Panel Flow and Composition

According to Eisner Panel flow in a comic is how the story moves or flows directionally from panel to panel and how it affects the pacing. The composition in a comic is the arrangement of panels in a page.

Comic 1

The panel flow for comic 1 is mostly standard (left to right, up to down). Sub panelling is done at very few places.

For panel composition, mostly a grid pattern of 2x3 and 3x2 is used with modifications done for larger panels.

2x2 employed at few other pages

There are very few merged panels with image strictly following panel boundaries.

Comic 2

The panel flow is almost standard for all pages.

The panel composition incorporates mostly 2x2 or 2x3 grid used with modifications. Also images overlay out of panel boundaries.

The composition of panels even though flowing a grid, are mostly irregular in shape to accompany various actions. Uniform gutter space is applied everywhere.

Comic 3

The panel flow for comic 3 is highly experimental with a lot of sub panelling done.

No uniform grid is used for composition. At the same time, many pocket/mini panels with little subtext is used.

Use of perspective is done to fit larger imagery in small panels.

Ample combinations of closed panels (for smaller info) and open panels (for larger imagery) have been used.

IV. Pacing/Timing:

According to Eisner Panel flow in a comic is how the story moves or flows directionally from panel to panel and how it affects the pacing. The composition in a comic is the arrangement of panels in a page.

Pacing in a comic book can be shown by various techniques, such as showing wider panels to show a stretch or pause of time or showing small panels with little gutter space to show rapid movements.

In context of comic 1, wider panel did not aid to pacing, rather for showing more visual information.

Some faster A2A actions were depicted with shorter width panels though. Gutter semantics was not applied in pacing

For **comic 2** again, Panel size correlation with timing is not present. Panels are more space oriented and gutter semantics is kept constant.

However for **comic 3**, wider panels are used somewhere for stretched actions along with showing more information. Smaller panels have been used for quick actions.

V.   Colour

The study of colour in context of these of Indian comic books was to study the colour palette and to note if there is any pattern whatsoever. Also to see if these colours add any emotional depth to the comic.
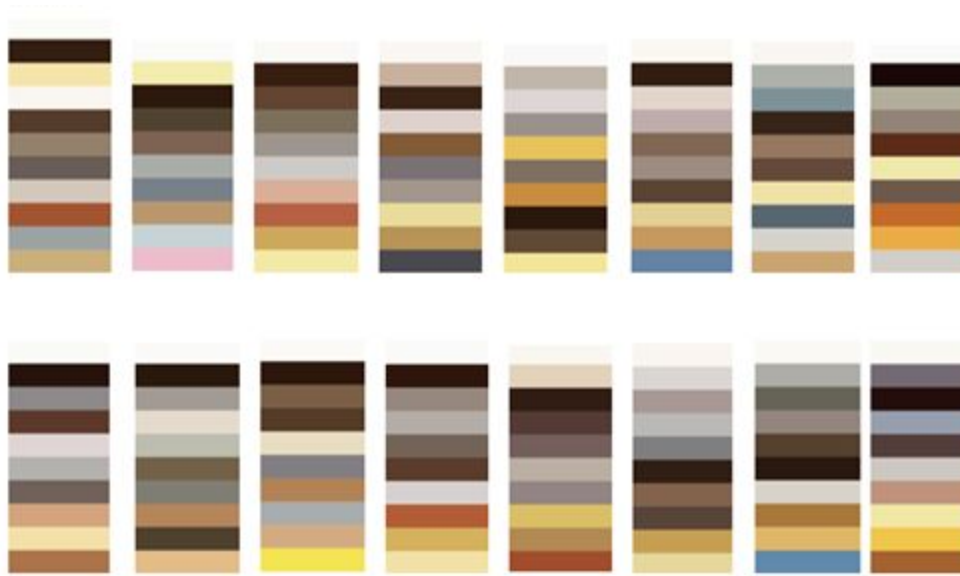
Comic 1
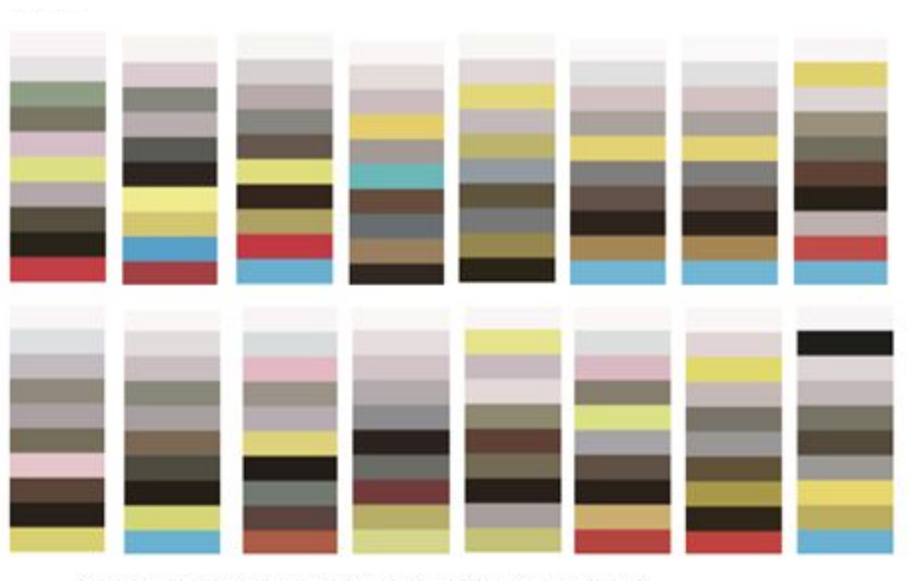
Colour palette for comic 1

Majority of colours used are warm colours (excluding black, white and grey). Overall, lighter/brighter tones have been used. For surroundings, mostly primary colours are used (to show contrast). The illustrations consists of mostly solid lines with no shades whatsoever. The skin colour for various characters have been the same. Irregularity of colours (in hair and background) was present.
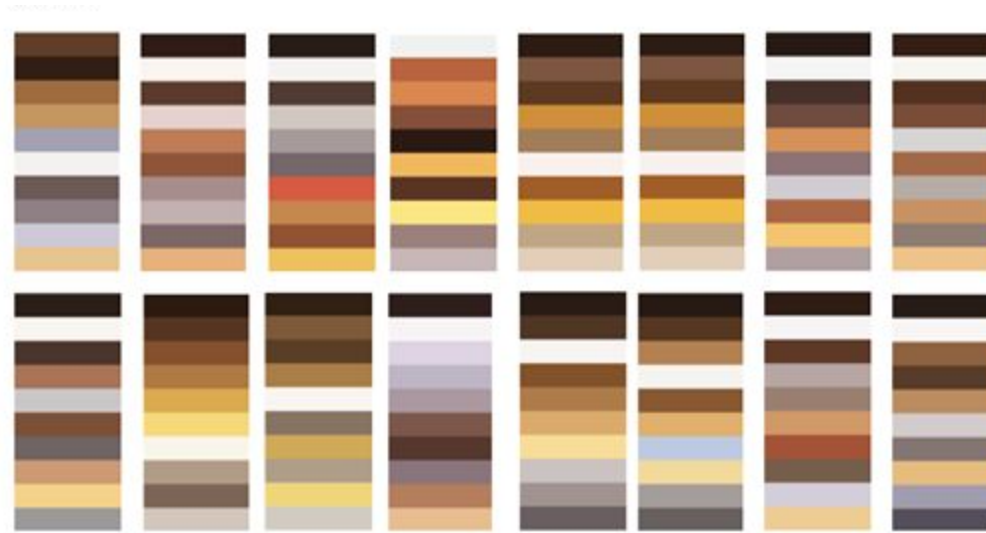
Comic 2

Colour palette for comic 2

Majority of colours used for comic 2 are cool colours moving along the darker tones. With the use of digital drawn figures there is more detailing in colours with shades applied. Though there is no overall pattern in colour compositions but primary colours have been used for surroundings to show proper contrast.
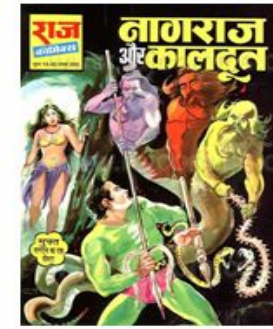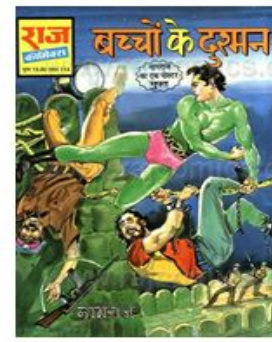
Comic 3

Colour palette for comic 2

Mostly cool colours are used with most shades of brown. In this comic a pattern for colour composition is present, which gives an overall grounded, realistic feel. Along with adding shades, lighting has been added in certain places. Also, non-complementary colours have been used which gives an overall merged feel due to which events and panels feel compressed with less scope of visual breathing.

VI. Front Covers

The study of front covers in Raj Comics was to see the transition in visual appearance that the front covers went through the years in respect to the structure of the books and how they were related to the content of the book. This also included the usage of titles of the comic and how relevant and/or informative they were in context of the story.

The covers for issues published in 1980s to late 1990s were mostly for 30 page comics. Most of them were hand drawn and painted and reflect the movie style poster illustrations. Most of these covers gave a glimpse to the theme but only a little information of the content. Also the titles used for these covers were usually longer.

1986

1993

1995

The covers for the issues published in late 90s to early 2000s were mostly for 60 page comic structure. The illustration style is digital and the overall visual is more near to the content. Single word title has been used mostly for these issues.
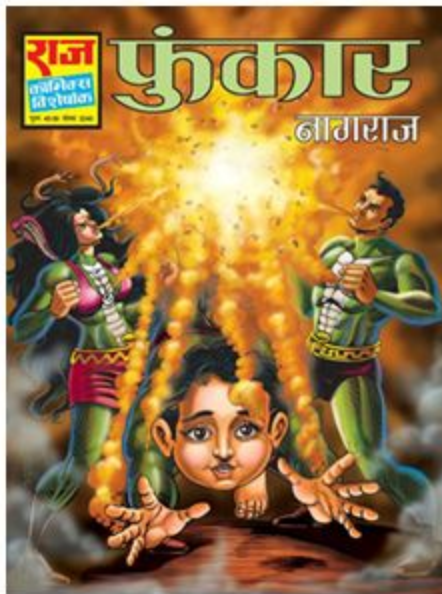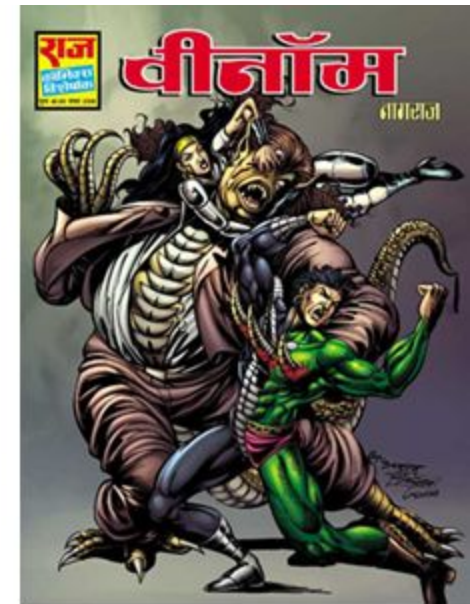

1995

1997

1999

2001

2004

The covers for late 2000s to present apart from being digitally drawn, also uses textured pages. The illustrations for these covers are more related to content. Most of the new issues being part of a longer series follow the series-subtitle format.


2007

2007

2009

VII. Splash Pages

Splash Pages, as defined by Eisner serves as an introduction to the comic as a whole. It is a launching pad for the narrative and establishes a frame of reference. It grabs the reader's attention and prepares him for the content that is to follow setting a 'climate'. Accordingly splash pages are included before the first page.

Raj Comics have specifically made use of the splash pages throughout their comics and with time the usage of splash pages have become a part of their identity and style. In context of raj comics, the splash pages follow the function of telling briefly the content of the comics in a cliff-hanger style. Also the splash pages have been used at times to tell a brief of the previous comic. The splash pages for later issues became more narrative oriented with no visuals.
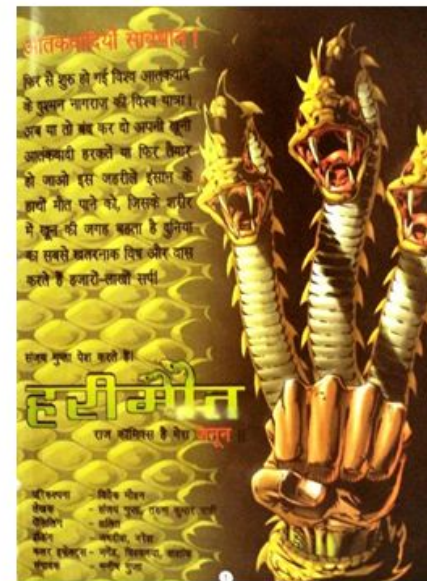
Conclusion

The analysis categories selected in accordance with Eisner's and Mccloud's theories were quite applicable on Raj publications of superhero comics. Though most parts of the analysis in an overall manner came similar to that of American comics (having mostly A2A, Su2Su and Sc2Sc transitions or having mostly intersecting text-image relationship for instance) possibly due to the similarly inspired structure of the initial comics. Despite that the comics provided with some specific patterns very personal to them, for instance, having Aspect to Aspect transition, Parallel W-I relationship in some comics and in the overall flow and panel composition. Also the use of colors and splash Pages have been highly individualistic in establishing a personal identity of these comics.