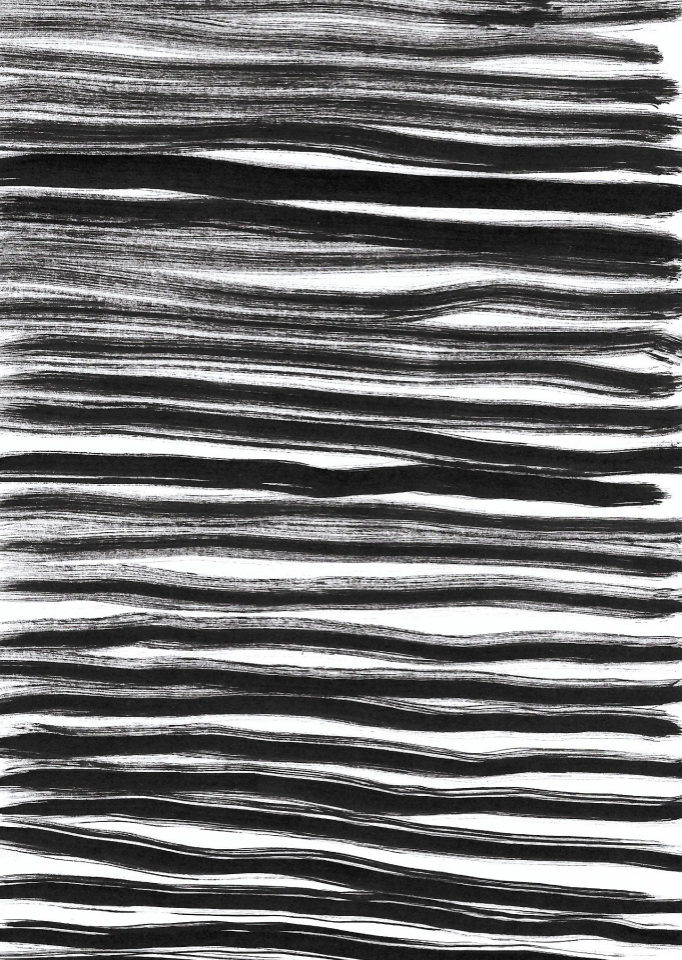


essay

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Four years ago, I had
a gut instinct to study
and make comics.

Now I can explain why.

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Early 2018 I worked a corporate job that was unfulfilling. One night out of frustration and eagerness for change I applied for a second bachelor's degree, this time in Comic Design. Having studied Computer Science before that, **there was no connection between me and art** up 'till then, the only driving force for this endeavor was a very strong **gut instinct**.

Four years have passed since then, I am finishing my Comic Design study, and **I can finally explain** what that gut instinct was and why comics is the medium that spoke to me so strongly.

The three historically big subcategories that began the mainstream popularity of comics

are **superhero comics**, **funny strips** (mostly newspaper prints) and **manga**. More often than not, this is how we get introduced to comics as children and for many people this is still the only form of comics they know. Since the 1990s, the comic medium has expanded to much more than these three options and there's a plethora of variety in shapes and stories that has really shown the versatility and accessibility of this medium, not to mention the freedom of expression it gives to artists to tell their story in a unique way using both written and visual language.

My own first impression of comics was the **Donald Duck** and Goofy strips that were selling at the newspaper stands and I would always beg my parents to buy them because

of the colourful, funny drawings. As a teenager I got introduced to superhero comics like **Batman** and Spiderman. That was the extent of comics I knew growing up. For many people manga was also one of their first introductions to comics, but alas, in post-soviet Bulgaria, manga was not easily accessible nor was anime being played on TV that much, so I wasn't exposed to the richness and imaginativeness that manga stories offer.

In my early 20s I was introduced to "**Watchmen**" by **Alan Moore**. It still had a lot of the visual qualities of classic superhero comics – angular bodies, muscular men, oversexualised women, intense colours and lots of text. The appearance put me off because of its connection to

superhero comics, they were simply not appealing to me because **they weren't really designed to be read by young girls.** To this day I still believe superhero comics are solely created for the eyes of men (Hickey,2017).

Nevertheless, I plowed on with *Watchmen* and its heavy text use and complex plot. By the middle of the comic, I was mesmerized by the storytelling power of Alan Moore and proceeded to read each one of his comics like "*V for Vendetta*". **There was so much more than stereotypical "heroes" in these comics,** they were more complex and nuanced, for example some parts of "*V for Vendetta*" start off with sheet music of specific songs to set the tone. This is something that stood out to me, **the element of music** in the

comic, which was not just in the sheet music but also referenced throughout the comic, even though it was images and text, it gave liveliness to the page with the idea of music playing alongside some scenes.

One fateful day, looking through my school's library I stumbled upon **a graphic novel that didn't look like any of the ones I'd seen before** that and would make a lasting impact on me, without knowing it at the time. The graphic novel was "*Persepolis*" – an autobiographical story of an Iranian girl living and going through war and revolutions there, escaping to Vienna and then coming back. The drawing style was minimalistic, black and white, the main character was a woman, it was a long book, with a start and finish,

there was no superheroes, there was no “BAM” or “POW”, there was no excessive cleavage, there was no centering the story on love interests - it was a true and beautiful story of life and its struggles, most importantly, it represented somebody from the Middle East (where my parents are from) that thought like I did, which I’ve never seen or read before. **The empowering force of positive representation** is not something to be taken lightly for the development of a young person. Middle easterners have mostly (if not always) been represented in popular media as terrorists, thieves, scoundrels, or villains. Yet here was a graphic novel that normalized being middle eastern (Iranian) by bringing forth a personal true story that also encompassed historical events which we could more

tangibly understand and sympathies with the character through the story. This is the power of comics.

It's through the richness of the personal story that we can truly comprehend on a deeper level a historical event. This is partly the reason for the rise and popularity of journalistic comics or graphic journalism (Ramsay, 2021). And it's through the comic medium that these stories can really shine and reach a wider audience.

Art mediums such as writing and film are very strong but in only one aspect – text or images, whereas comics can interchangeably play on both qualities' strengths, using images when text is not enough and vice versa.

The construct of a comic is unique, there are a lot of elements to consider and make use of – every page is like a separate story, panels can create movements, the gutter (in between space) creates space for rumination where the reader can activate their own imagination and play an active role in reading the story.

Imagine reading a comic, a combination of words and images, usually if you're not used to it, it'll require some adjusting to your brain. You need to focus on the images but also on the text, so either you scan the whole page looking at the visuals, and then you go ahead and read the dialogue to completely understand the story, or you read within each panel images then text or vice versa,

panel by panel. Some might say it requires more effort to read a comic than just reading text or watching a film, but I think that effort is exactly what makes comics more engaging. **By requiring more attentiveness of the reader, a comic has more power to stimulate contemplation, curiosity and observation**, and, in this way, play out one of the essential roles art has in our lives – to gain a better understanding of ourselves and the world around us.



The concept of **high and low art** has existed for centuries, and it's still a dispute with no clear answer even today. Back in the 18th century a distinction was made of art that

was for aesthetic contemplation (high art) and that which was for practical/utility functions (low art) (*High and Low Art* | *The Rapidian*, n.d.) Unfortunately, this debate has connotations of what is good and what is bad art, where high art would be of greater regard than low art, therefore low art is bad art (*Fisher*, 2013). **Comics have historically been regarded as “low art”** since they were mass produced publications. And because it uses both images and textual elements it seemed to be a bastardisation of both the written and visual languages.

Will Eisner (one of the fathers of comics) gives the definition of comics as **sequential art** – images put in a specific order to tell a story. If we use that definition to describe comics

then their history can go further back than the 18th century, in fact, we can go back and consider Egyptian hieroglyphics as comics. The Lascaux Cave in France hosts 600 cave paintings that are estimated to date back 17,000 years ago, and most of them are sequential art (*Wikipedia, 2022*). Therefore, we can start thinking that **comics is one of the most ancient forms of recorded history** we have. Thinking of comics as prehistoric feels weird, right? It feels unnatural to say that comics is an ancient form of storytelling with great significance. Our most recent narrative we've had about comics is that they're funny gag strips in the newspaper or superheros, cave painting doesn't even come near our perception of comics in this regard. The great flexibility and scope of

the comic medium is too broad to comprehend it wholly. This is what I would call a **disruptive quality** of comics, they challenge your perception of history and art. Another way comics are disruptive is when we take a closer look at autobiographical comics. With autobiographies in general lies **the dilemma of authenticity.**

Autobiographies are retellings of personal stories, and I would argue, the way the person felt and what their perception of the experiences was, is what's most important to establish authenticity with the reader. If we take the manner of drawing and creating the comic as an artist's own "**communicative language**" then this is the more authentic way of retelling the story rather than using realistic depictions (*Kunka, p.70*).

As stated by **El Refaie**:

Although the visual style of a comics artist is an important authentication strategy, it often draws its power less from its iconic resemblance to reality than from the indexical clues it seems to offer about the artist's genuine characteristics and intentions.

Autobiographical comics play with elements with **both fiction and reality** in a delicate way. Take for example "*Maus*" by Art Spiegelman, he represents Jews as mice and Nazis as cats. This zoomorphism is obviously fictitious, but it does add an element of allegorical information to the reader that cannot be conveyed through just written text for example. This is what Andrew Kunka

describes as retelling of the
“**emotional truth**” of a story
(*Kunka, 2017, p.71*), through the
fictitious elements of comic drawings.

In a way, that kind of truth is more
important than the realistic depiction
of characters and events.

It can be a more authentic retelling of
not just the story but also the feelings
of the protagonist. In this way, don't
autobiographical comics tell a
**more honest truth than
other mediums?**

In an interview about her comic
book “*The story of my tits*”, Jennifer
Hayden explains her drive and
where her idea to put the story
in a comic form came about. She
originally wanted to be a writer, then
a fiction writer, then children's book
illustrator and **ended up finding**

comics as the medium to best tell the story of her battle with breast cancer and the aftermath (*Kunka, 2017, p.235*). For her, it was a natural evolution of artistry that led her to use comics, the limitations of her previous endeavors showed her the power of sequential art. I find it particularly interesting her response to the question of why it had to be an autobiographical story, her response was merely that she was compelled to do it. **She had to!** This reminds me of the feeling I had four years ago when I applied to study comic design.

I found my way into art in an untypical way. I think because of the way I was raised and the environment I was in, **I naturally craved a way of expressing myself more freely** to the world. I think we all crave that

in some way or another, some do it through art, some do it by their job, some do it through their fashion or hobbies.

Coming from a Muslim family I was restricted on what I was allowed to do or say and growing up there's even more constraints from society as what a woman can or should do. The world of **comics showed me a little haven** where expression was so versatile and seemingly limitless that I was eager to use that path for expressing myself freely as well. People are multidimensional, very diverse and constantly changing/growing. **Expressing yourself in a diverse and flexible way**, I find, comics are a more natural way of doing that than any other way. The nature of comics (even though it also

has its limitations), is more akin to the diverse nature of human beings than other medium of expression. Comics combine storytelling with the power of visual and textual language, not to mention the shape and diversity of the printed or online material which can also affect the reader's experience and can be used as an element of expression from the author (for example *Calvin and Hobbes*' writer Bill Waterson never wanted to make movies or TV from his comics, he believed what he created was only authentic and powerful in its printed comic form).

Another aspect of comics which makes it so alluring is accessibility. Anyone can make a comic, with just a paper and pen. Comics don't require a big production team like cinema,

no expensive equipment needed like film, no need for exceptional language skills either, because your story doesn't solely rely on the written word like in literature.

Production and sharing of comics can also be relatively low cost. Usually publishing a whole comic book could be competitive (because of the limited publishing houses that support comic creators) and expensive (making a comic book takes a lot of time and effort). However, even in this instance there are solutions – zines.

Zines are mini comic books, usually printed from a photocopier on printer paper. Their purpose is to be cheap and shareable, reaching a wider audience. This is how for example comic artists can share part of their projects while trying to get published.

Not to mention the power of the internet now, you don't even need to go through normal publishing houses, just by sharing your art online and gaining a following, they could support the artist to self-publish. Self-publishing is very popular among comic artists.

This aspect is not often mentioned, but I believe, in this internet-dominated times, our attention span is more limited. There's a lot of saturation of products and media. It's very difficult to stand out. Being able to tell your story in images has a higher chance of reaching more people than using just text(literature), not just because of the limited attention span but also because **visuals are a language in themselves, a universal one,**

which can reach more people since
you're not limited to only one
group of people.

This variety in the medium and not
having a true definition (besides
being sequential art) are disruptive
qualities of comics which don't
conform to any rules and makes
us question how we perceive
information and media. A comic can
be wordless, it can be a collage, it can
be photographs instead of drawings,
it can involve characters or just
abstract shapes, it can be small with
only one page, or it can be a 700-page
tome. Combine what we perceive
historically as comics and the great
variety of what we consider comics
today and you'd be sure to give
yourself a bit of a headache.

This is part of **the power of comics**
– their unwavering non-conformity,
accessibility, and the freedom of
expression.

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