

In Defence of the Graphic Mythologies of Ramayana

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Abstract:

Though the Ramayana has never lacked elements of the fantastic, its trajectory within graphic media has transformed it into a significant mytho-poetic device in contemporary cultural discourse. Graphic renditions often reimagine sacrosanct heroes and divine figures within visually stylized, sometimes exaggerated narrative worlds that foreground their conflicts with antagonistic forces. Yet, despite such transformations, the epic has not lost its philological depth or cultural potency. Invoked variously as fable, folktale, fairy tale, shastra, and kavya, the Ramayana has continually reinvented itself as a modern myth that appeals to imagination and creativity, and more recently, as a fertile ground for the idioms of digital and superhero fiction. Through these graphic rearticulations, the horizons of world literature are being visually and narratively redefined.

This paper argues that graphic adaptations of the Ramayana are not reductive popularizations but complex narrative forms that expand the epic's interpretive and aesthetic possibilities. Rather than merely simplifying the source text, these works participate in both the reinvention and recontextualization of the literary canon. Drawing on adaptation theory, intermediality, and comics studies, the paper examines how texts such as *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Ramayan 3392 AD* reconfigure myth through the interplay of visual and verbal storytelling. Through close analysis of panels, layout, and visual style, it demonstrates that graphic narratives do not diminish the epic tradition but actively contribute to its renewal within contemporary culture.

Keywords: Ramayana, Graphic, Adaptation, Comics, Narrative

1. Introduction

Graphic adaptations of mythological texts are often dismissed as simplified or derivative retellings. This paper challenges that assumption by asking: how do graphic versions of the Ramayana reinterpret the epic through the specific affordances of the comics medium? It argues that graphic narratives are not secondary to the textual epic but constitute a distinct interpretive mode. By combining image and text, they reshape narrative structure, reader engagement, and cultural meaning.

Graphics, as an intermedial art of storytelling, emerge from what Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon describe as the most “basic and trans-cultural human inclination” to give narrative form to experience and imagination (Stein & Thon, 2013, p. 385). Across the longue durée of world literature, this impulse has migrated across media, assuming new shapes while retaining its primordial energy. The Ramayana, like all mythic systems, may be imagined as a cosmic Dogon egg i.e., a generative matrix in which emergent forms gestate even as earlier narrative embodiments continue to thrive, mutate, or dissipate.

From the ochre-streaked walls of prehistoric caves to the algorithmic luminosity of digital screens, the same narrative impulse persists: Neanderthal hands grinding pigment to inscribe the story of humankind find their distant echo in the contemporary artist rendering myth through pixels and code.

Graphic narratives thus stand as descendants of an expansive visual genealogy stretching from Byzantine iconography and medieval tapestries to Egyptian sequential art, Chinese shadow puppetry and Sanskrit theatrical traditions. These forms are marked by what Stein and Thon term “intense and aesthetically sensitive responses” to narrative representation (389). In their contemporary manifestations—whether Japanese manga or newspaper comic strips—graphic media participate in processes of canonization, recuperating and legitimizing forms once relegated to the margins of literary culture (Stein & Thon, 2013, p. 391). Comics and graphic novels, in this sense, do not merely illustrate stories; they reactivate the primordial human contract with images, provoking and renewing the affective bond between vision and narration.

The provenance of graphic art lies within this vast and discontinuous cosmos of visual traditions—an archive fractured by ruptures yet sustained through reinvention. It is within this aesthetic continuum that the Ramayana finds renewed articulation, as mythic-historical material fuses with fictive elaboration and artistic conjecture (Stein & Thon, 2013, p. 394). The present study seeks to excavate these processes of transformation, not as acts of diminishment but as modes of narrative expansion.

Within art-historical discourse, positivist approaches have long privileged the analysis of formal qualities and symbolic motifs. Yet any single artwork based on the Ramayana remains but a fragment—a shard within the vast, sedimented history of its interpretations. Rather than treating these graphic texts as definitive visual exegeses, it is more productive to approach them through a lens akin to what Gilles Deleuze describes as a “logic of multiplicities”—an aesthetics grounded in proliferation, difference, and creative becoming (as cited in D’Alleva, 2005, p. 12). These works do not seek to rediscover the epic; they unfold it, generating new interpretive trajectories.

At the same time, this study retains an affinity with formalist concerns for direct engagement with the artwork. Immanuel Kant’s conception of aesthetic experience as that which “enlivens the mind” by opening it to “an illimitable field of kindred representations” remains instructive Kant (1790/2013, p. 49). Graphic adaptations of the Ramayana operate precisely within such an expanded imaginative field, refusing prescriptive modes of interpretation. Such artistic practices resist being told ‘what to believe or what to think,’ positioning themselves outside rigid disciplinary enclosures. In doing so, graphic iconography assumes a quietly revolutionary role, rescuing the epic from what may be termed elitist esotericism and releasing it into a space of visual play, inversion, and imaginative freedom.

Walter Benjamin’s reflections on mechanical reproduction further illuminate this transformation. The migration of the Ramayana into graphic and digital media does not diminish its aura but reconfigures it, producing what may be called an intensified suggestive power (Benjamin 1936/2008). These narratives overwhelm sensory perception, offering an aesthetic experience grounded as much in illusion as in interpretation. Philosophical traditions from Plato’s allegory of the cave to the epistemological inquiries of Descartes, Leibniz, and Kant have long established that reality is mediated through perception. Graphic narratives, therefore, do not distort truth; they foreground its interpretive condition, aligning themselves with the imaginative faculties through which all meaning is constructed.

This becomes particularly evident in the contrast between different graphic iterations of the Ramayana. The juxtaposition of an *Amar Chitra Katha* rendition with Shamik Dasgupta’s *Ramayan 3392 AD* reveals not merely stylistic divergence but a fundamental reorientation of narrative vision. Where the

former stabilizes the epic within a devotional and pedagogical frame, the latter fractures it into a dystopian, speculative universe. The difference is not only one of artistry but of epistemic imagination—a shift from reverential continuity to radical reconfiguration.

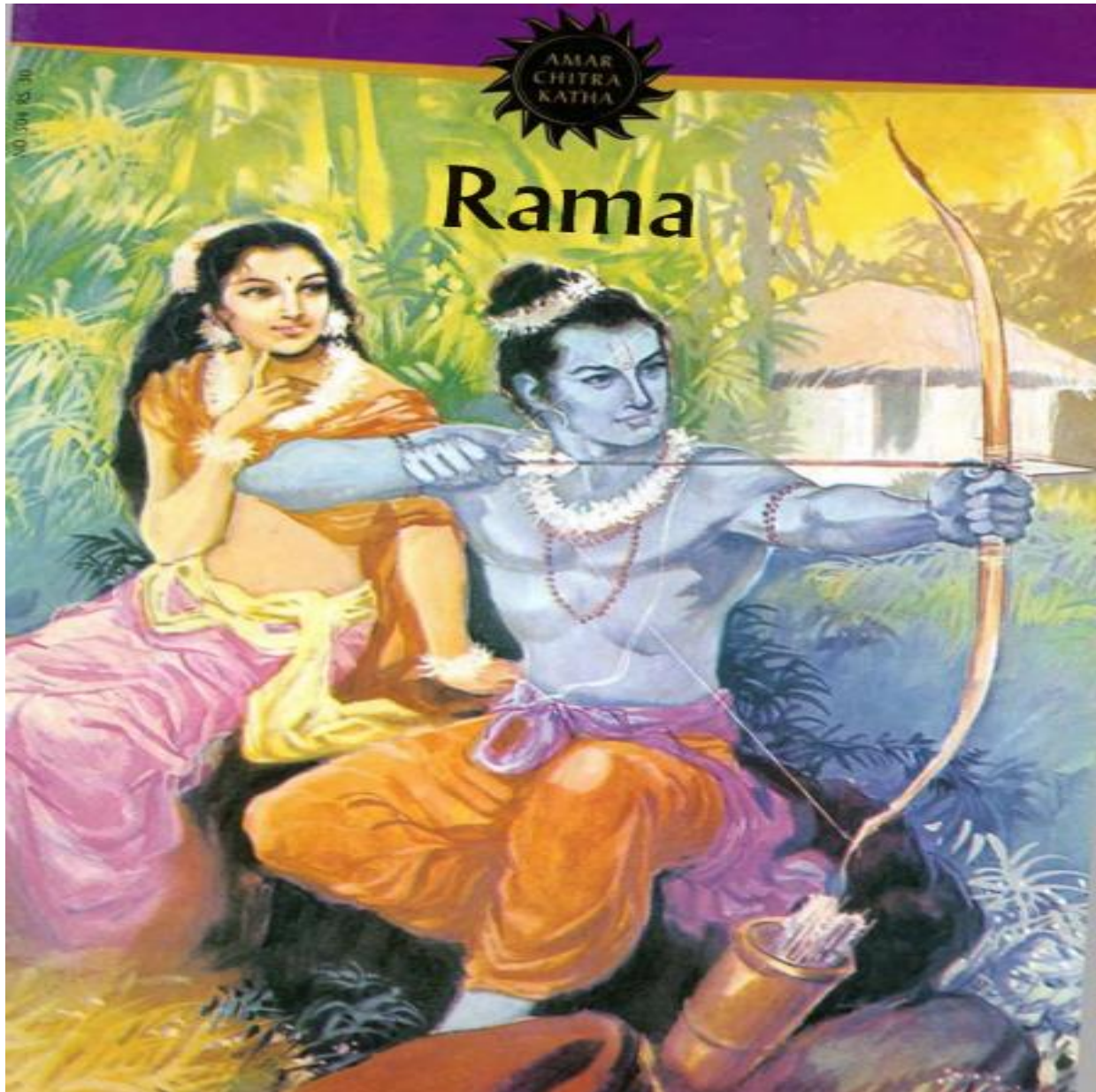


Figure 1: *Rama* (No. 504), part of the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, retells the story based on the *Ramcharit-Manas* of Tulsidas; it was edited by Anant Pai, with illustrations and cover art by Pratap Mulick, and published by India Book House Pvt. Ltd. in Mumbai, first released in 1997 and later reprinted in June 2005 (ISBN: 81-7508-098-1).



Figure 2: Ramayan 3392 AD, a futuristic graphic retelling of the epic, was written by Shamik Dasgupta, with artwork by Abhishek Singh, and published by Virgin Comics in collaboration with Liquid Comics, first released in 2006 as part of a multi-issue series.

The visual grammar of the Ramayana undergoes a striking metamorphosis when one moves from *Amar Chitra Katha* to *Ramayan 3392 AD*, a shift that is at once aesthetic, affective, and ideological. In the former, the pictorial field is deeply indebted to the devotional naturalism of Raja Ravi Varma and the visual idiom of calendar art: luminous palettes, idealized anatomies, and composed, serene expressions coalesce to produce an iconography of bhakti. The frame is suffused with reverence; divinity is rendered legible through harmony, balance, and moral clarity. Figures appear less as narrative agents and more as emanations of an already sanctified cosmos, their presence stabilizing the viewer within a familiar

sacred order. By contrast, *Ramayana 3392 AD* inaugurates a radical visual dissonance. Here, the epic is transposed into a dystopian, post-apocalyptic future, where the pastoral serenity of Ayodhya gives way to scorched terrains and biomechanical excess. Rama is reconstituted not as the tranquil Maryada Purushottama but as a hardened, technologically augmented warrior; the bow mutates into plasma weaponry, and the Asuras emerge as grotesque, hybridized entities. The palette darkens, the line hardens, and the page becomes a site of visual aggression. This is not merely stylistic divergence but what Thierry Groensteen might recognize as a reconfiguration of the comics system itself—where panel density, framing, and visual rhythm collaborate to produce an altered ontology of the epic.

This divergence in visuality is inseparable from a deeper shift in narrative intentionality. The *Amar Chitra Katha* project, conceived by Anant Pai, is fundamentally pedagogical, anchored in what may be termed a logic of reverential continuity. Its narrative architecture seeks to transmit a stabilized moral universe, where the Ramayana functions as both cultural archive and ethical compass. Ambiguity is minimized; the epic is curated into a didactic form in which virtue and vice are distinctly legible, and Rama's ideality remains uncontested. The act of adaptation here is conservative: it preserves, consolidates, and disseminates. In contrast, *Ramayana 3392 AD* operates through what may be described as radical reconfiguration. It does not inherit the epic as doctrine but appropriates it as a speculative template. The narrative is propelled not by the declarative authority of 'this is how it was,' but by the interrogative impulse of 'what if?' In doing so, it fractures the linear sanctity of the source text, reassembling it within a futurist mythos that foregrounds survival, mutation, and cosmic conflict. The epic ceases to be a fixed narrative and becomes instead a modular system of signs, capable of endless recombination.

Underlying these formal and narrative shifts is a transformation in what may be called the epistemic imagination i.e., the very framework through which the epic is known, interpreted, and rendered meaningful. In the *Amar Chitra Katha* episteme, the past operates as a sacred foundation; knowledge is accrued through continuity, fidelity, and collective cultural memory. The Ramayana is not simply a story but a living tradition, and its graphic retelling participates in the preservation of a civilizational ethos. Truth here is cumulative and reverential, embedded in the act of faithful repetition. Conversely, *Ramayana 3392 AD* envisions the past as malleable, as a reservoir of archetypes rather than a fixed canon. The epic is liberated from its ritual context and translated into the idiom of global speculative fiction, suggesting that its narrative core possesses a transhistorical resilience. This is an epistemology of transformation rather than preservation, where meaning is generated through displacement, distortion, and reinvention.

The movement from *Amar Chitra Katha* to *Ramayana 3392 AD* may be understood as a paradigmatic shift from myth-preservation to myth-production. The former gazes backward, anchoring the present within a sanctified past, while the latter projects forward, stress-testing inherited archetypes against the contingencies of imagined futures. Yet this is not a story of rupture alone. Rather, it reveals the Ramayana as a profoundly adaptive narrative system that persists not by resisting change, but by absorbing and rearticulating it across visual, narrative, and epistemic terrains. Thus, graphic adaptations do not simply retell the Ramayana; they translate, mutate, and reimagine it within new medial ecologies. Far from being reductive, they constitute vital sites of cultural production where myth is continuously renegotiated. In this ongoing process, the Ramayana is neither diminished nor displaced; it is reanimated, its narrative energies dispersed across the visual-textual landscapes of contemporary culture.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in three complementary theoretical frameworks that together illuminate the complexity of graphic adaptations of the *Ramayana*. First, drawing on the work of Linda Hutcheon, adaptation is understood not as a secondary or derivative act but as a creative and interpretive process. Hutcheon conceptualizes adaptation as both repetition and transformation, enabling graphic narratives to be read as autonomous rearticulations that extend, rather than dilute, the semantic and aesthetic possibilities of the epic (Hutcheon 2006). Second, the framework of intermediality, as theorized by Irina Rajewsky, provides a lens to examine how graphic narratives function through the dynamic interaction of visual and verbal sign systems. In this view, meaning is not contained in either image or text alone but emerges through their interplay, producing a hybrid communicative mode central to the graphic retelling of myth (Rajewsky 2005). Finally, insights from comics theory, particularly Thierry Groensteen and Hillary Chute, emphasize the structural logic of the medium. Concepts such as panel relationality, spatial organization, and sequentiality demonstrate how narrative meaning is constructed across the page (Groensteen 2007; Chute 2010). Together, these frameworks position graphic adaptations as sophisticated cultural texts that actively reinterpret and reconfigure the *Ramayana* within contemporary visual culture.

Graphic versions of the *Ramayana* condense, reorganize, and visualize narrative events through processes of selection and emphasis, foregrounding certain episodes while omitting others; yet this is not a logic of loss but of reinterpretation, where narrative and visual transformation operate in tandem. Characters are redesigned, settings reimaged, and themes reframed for contemporary audiences, producing adaptations that are at once culturally embedded and formally innovative. In this sense, both *Amar Chitra Katha* and Shamik Dasgupta's *Ramayan 3392 AD* function as custodians of the epic tradition, even as they diverge radically in style and intent. While the former's devotional caricature invokes reverence, the latter's dystopian imagery does not constitute a violent transgression but rather a rearticulation within a shifting cultural matrix. Both may be understood through what Jan Białostocki terms "iconographic gravity," whereby motifs accrue new meanings across contexts (qtd. in D'Alleva 2012, 24). This aligns with Erwin Panofsky's conception of iconology as an interpretive practice that situates visual symbols within broader cultural frameworks (Panofsky 1955, 205). The *Ramayana* thus emerges as a "culturally hybrid aesthetic phenomenon," participating in what Johann Wolfgang von Goethe conceptualized as *Weltliteratur*, a domain shaped by processes of mutual influence and continual renewal (qtd. in Stein and Thon 2013, 402). Its dharmic and spiritual preoccupations persist even as its narrative body undergoes transformation.

This adaptive fecundity is further evident in Shamik Dasgupta's *Ramayan 3392 AD* where the epic's moral certainties are reconfigured within a dense intertextual weave of romance, gothic fiction, realism, and fantasy, producing what Stein and Thon describe as a site where narrative discourse itself is negotiated and deconstructed within the comics medium (Stein and Thon 2013, 294). Similarly, *Ramayan 3392 AD* reimagines Aryavrata as a post-apocalyptic, extraterrestrial wasteland, situating the epic within a science-fictional "space opera" aesthetic akin to *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*. The sombre tonalities, biomechanical imagery, and visual desolation where figures dissolve into shadowed penumbra construct an affective landscape of impending catastrophe. Drawing on Marshall McLuhan's insight that comics and film extend narrative propensities across media (McLuhan 1964, 31), such works amplify the medium's expressive capacity, forging heightened emotional engagement and intimacy between reader and mythic figure. Even critiques regarding the perceived lack of "auratic" cultural capital are

countered by the medium’s ability to sustain prolonged, affective investment in the epic’s characters and conflicts.



Figure. 3 Though mythical and fantastical, dexterity of both art and film are visible. Taken from Dasgupta, Shamik. *Ramayana 3392 AD*. India, Westland Limited, 2013.

From a phenomenological perspective, Martin Heidegger’s hermeneutics suggests that meaning is not contingent upon prior knowledge alone but emerges through encounter and being. Graphic narratives, in this sense, democratize access to the *Ramayana*: even readers unfamiliar with the textual tradition can apprehend its existential and emotional stakes through visual form. The predicament of Dashratha or the ethical burden of Rama becomes legible not merely as cultural knowledge but as a universal human condition. Thus, the graphic *Ramayana* does not merely retell an epic; it re-mediate, re-situates, and reanimates it, sustaining its narrative vitality across shifting aesthetic, cultural, and epistemic terrains.

The composition in Figure 3 is dominated by deep blues, teals, and dense blacks, producing a chilling, nocturnal atmosphere. This restrained, cool palette is punctuated by a striking intrusion of crimson and orange around the character’s eye and forehead. Such selective deployment of warm, volatile hues

immediately directs the viewer's attention to the gaze, signalling heightened vigilance, psychological intensity, and a sense of 'impending catastrophe.' The image employs a stark chiaroscuro technique, generating extreme contrasts between illumination and darkness. This synthesis exemplifies how the graphic medium reconfigures epic symbolism within a post-apocalyptic, technologically saturated aesthetic framework.

3. Corpus: *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Ramayan 3392 AD*

The *Amar Chitra Katha* version presents a devotional and pedagogical interpretation of the epic. This page exemplifies the classical narrative and visual ethos of *Amar Chitra Katha*, where panel structure, color, and character design work together to reinforce a stable moral universe. The clean, linear grid establishes a sense of order and predictability, guiding the reader smoothly through a sequence that moves from the failed attempts and hubris of other princes, to wise counsel, to the effortless triumph of Rama, and finally to Sita's modest acceptance. This structured pacing contrasts sharply with modern reinterpretations like *Ramayan 3392 AD*, where fragmented panels and dynamic layouts evoke chaos and intensity; here, even the breaking of a divine bow unfolds with calm inevitability. The bright, saturated color palette that is free of shadow or ambiguity visually encodes moral clarity, while Rama's gentle blue skin signals his divine nature within traditional Indian aesthetics. His serene expression and lack of physical strain emphasize divinity as effortless, in contrast to the visibly struggling, sweat-laden princes who remain bound by human limitation. Sita's demure composure further aligns with classical ideals of grace and modesty. Together, these elements transform the scene into a moral tableau rather than an action spectacle, encapsulating a worldview in which truth, virtue, and cosmic order are transparent and absolute.





Figure 4: Dhanurdhara: the mythic archer

Shamik Dasgupta's *Ramayan 3392 AD* reimagines the epic within a dystopian, futuristic setting. The contrast between *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Ramayan 3392 AD* reveals a profound shift in how the *Ramayana* is visually and philosophically reimagined. While ACK's rigid grid and orderly panel composition construct a world governed by stability and moral certainty, *Ramayan 3392 AD* fractures this structure into cinematic, overlapping frames that generate urgency and psychological tension, pulling the reader into an immersive, high-stakes experience. This transformation is intensified by the shift in color palette—from ACK's bright, saturated tones that signify moral clarity to the grim, desaturated hues of 3392 AD, punctuated by harsh lighting that evokes a dystopian, morally ambiguous universe. Correspondingly, the figure of Rama undergoes a radical reinterpretation: no longer the serene, divinely composed avatar, he emerges as a hardened, battle-worn leader, marked by aggression, fatigue, and the burden of survival. His rhetoric, steeped in the language of war and existential threat, replaces the ethical assurance of dharma with the urgency of resistance. Ultimately, these contrasting visual and narrative strategies reflect two distinct purposes of retelling the epic, one that upholds an idealized moral cosmos rooted in divine order and another that reconfigures the story into a visceral exploration of human struggle, uncertainty, and survival in a fractured world.



Figure 5: The aggression and angst of Rama.

The contrast between *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Ramayan 3392 AD* can be understood as a shift in intermedial frameworks, revealing how each text remediates different artistic and cultural traditions to reinterpret the *Ramayana*. ACK operates as a synthesis of classical painting and oral storytelling, drawing heavily from the visual legacy of Raja Ravi Varma and calendar art, where defined contours and flat colors translate the grandeur of academic realism into an accessible comic format. Simultaneously, its use of pedagogical narration boxes evokes the cadence of oral recitation, positioning the reader as a listener in a didactic, morally guided storytelling environment. In contrast, *Ramayan 3392 AD* abandons these traditional modes in favour of contemporary intermedial references rooted in cinema and digital gaming. Its cinematic composition—marked by dramatic lighting, dynamic angles, and expansive splash panels—mirrors the visual grammar of cyberpunk films, while its depiction of weapons and bodies draws from the hyper-stylized aesthetics of video games, transforming characters like Rama into figures resembling digital-age protagonists. This shift fundamentally alters the reader's experience: where ACK encourages a contemplative, linear engagement grounded in moral clarity, *Ramayan 3392 AD* produces a visceral, immersive encounter aligned with the fast-paced, screen-saturated sensibilities of contemporary global audiences. Ultimately, ACK bridges ancient textual and oral traditions with

20th-century print culture, whereas *Ramayana 3392 AD* repositions the epic within the audiovisual and interactive language of 21st-century media, demonstrating the evolving semiotics of myth in a technologically mediated world.

4. Myth and the Superhero Paradigm

Graphic adaptations reposition the *Ramayana* within global popular culture by aligning its characters and conflicts with the conventions of the superhero genre, thereby reconfiguring traditional ethical binaries into more fluid and psychologically complex frameworks. In works such as *Ramayana 3392 AD*, figures like Rama and Ravana are no longer confined to fixed moral archetypes but are reimagined through themes of power, identity, trauma, and conflict that resonate with contemporary audiences. This transformation does not erase the epic's ethical concerns; rather, it reframes them within modern discourses where good and evil are no longer absolute but negotiated and unstable. As critics note, Dasgupta sustains the "passion and social conscience" of the epic while recasting it as an affirmation of superhero heroism, one that privileges disciplined self-improvement over simplistic hypermasculine dominance, even as it occasionally stretches patriarchal norms to exaggerated extremes. Drawing on *Reading the Male Body*, this reinterpretation resists rigid binaries of masculine and feminine, instead foregrounding virtues such as sincerity, loyalty, and ethical struggle. In this light, Rama and his allies resemble the conflicted antiheroes theorized in *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*—figures defined by inner turmoil, personal loss, and a justice that often transcends the law—akin to Western icons like Batman or Spider-Man. Simultaneously, Ravana emerges as a complex antagonist, comparable to Iago from *Othello*, embodying calculated ambition and moral darkness. The narrative thus thrives on mirrored oppositions and shifting subjectivities, where even the Rakshasas become agents of action, driven by revenge, familial loyalty, and individualized codes of justice. Ultimately, graphic adaptations do not simply modernize the *Ramayana*; they transform it into a dynamic site where mythology, masculinity, and morality are continuously renegotiated within the idiom of global superhero culture. These graphic narratives have an explicit resolute awareness of its own portrayals and manifestations. Through its distinctive semantics and multilayer transparency, they are a viable site of enquiry, especially for such efficacious sites of juxtaposition. Philip French speaks to the universality of this genre:

There is no theme you cannot imagine in terms of the Western, no situation which cannot be transposed to the West. Throughout the history of the narrative arts, theatre, literature, and myth, an oppositional structure has been the overriding method of storytelling (qtd. in Palmer, 2007, pp.195).

This type of storytelling has affinity to "Lévi-Strauss's structural analysis of myth" where a "central antithesis between wilderness and civilization, from which all other conflicts derive" is examined (Palmer 195). Thus *Ramayana* "with its eternal syntax of good versus evil" its "moral ambiguities of later incarnations, provides a framework by which so many unexpected narratives may be examined" (196). Revisions in the epic's "classic generic characterizations" are keeping the form alive and thriving (197). Dasgupta's places both the supposed protagonist and antagonist i.e., Rama and Ravana on an "ambiguous moral spectrum" and situates them within "multiple thematic oppositions", establishing a "fluid hybridity" between them (Palmer, 2007, pp.198). By inciting the "concept of high culture versus low culture", Dasgupta depicts his heroes as "frequently wounded in painful ways" and going beyond the "revenge motive", hence invoking the Shakespearean nobility (199). With distinct visual iconography and psychological undercurrents, Dasgupta provides "visual and thematic cues" to the

epic's "evocative generic lineage", though the basic narrative impetus, a search for justice, remains the same (Palmer, 2007, pp.208).

In his essay *The Myth of Superman* Umberto Eco derides:

the monstrous quality of the superhero who is not "consumed" by time, who never grows older, who is always cycling through the same kinds of experiences, never moving any closer to death (qtd. in Jenkins, 2006, pp. 66).

Despite *Ramayanas*' timelessness it has connected well with the "iterative structure of comics" where its "completed action of myth or the unique events of the novelistic" were given a new "temporality" (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 67). Like Eco's Superman, *Ramayana* possess the characteristics of "timeless myth but is accepted only because it takes place in our human and everyday world of time" (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 67). Dasgupta recognises Eco's approval of continuity and renders *Ramayana* as a "psychological space that similarly denies death and mortality, that encourages a nostalgic return to origins". *Ramayana* has become a "site of enormous diversity, innovation, and experimentation" (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 67). Its characters have been "interpreted across various generations", its story has gone through "dramatic shifts in styles, successive waves of revisionism, various stabs at relevance or topicality" (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 68). Eco's claim that "superheroes are not consumed by death" helps to understand the nostalgia and fondness one feels for *Amar Chitra Katha*, for they are a "point of return to bygone days" (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 74).

Kathryn Strong Hansen in *In Defense of Graphic Novels* affirms the validity of those folkloric graphic novels by alluding to "their complex stories and rich character development" which creates "pleasurable challenges for readers" (Hansen, 2012, p. 20). Their lazy readership honours "art as a cultivating force" since they "convey a richness and depth of ideas that require interpretation and high-level critical thinking, analysis, and evaluation skills" (21). Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaptation* says that: the adapter's job is one of subtraction or contraction; this is called a surgical art', it entails a responsibility on the part of the adapter, a responsibility for taking the known tale forward, or imagining it once again, as something potentially new, and recreating it based on a personal interpretation, since 'Adapters are first interpreters and then creators (qtd. in Singh, 2017, pp. 3).

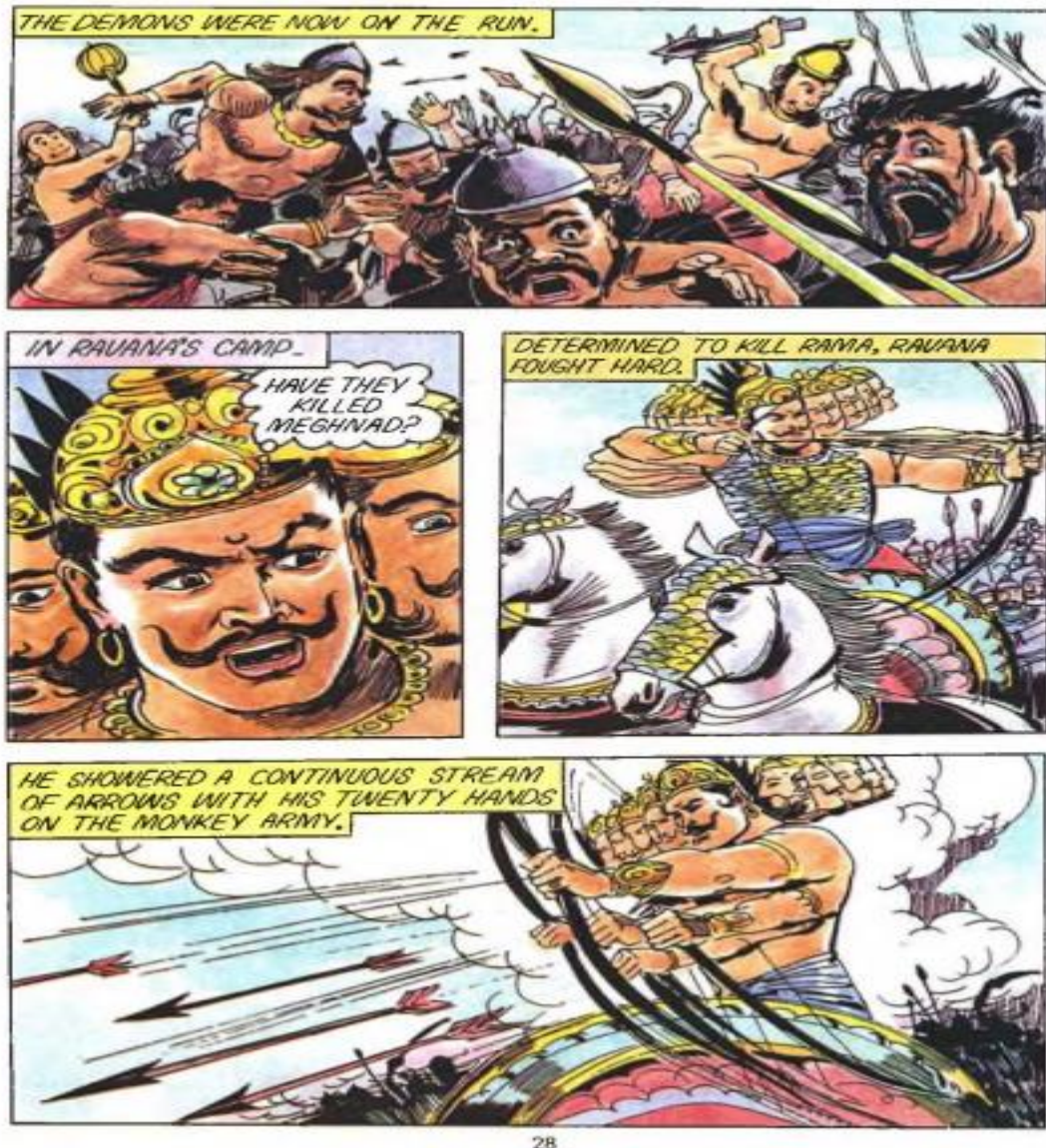


Figure 6: Ravana, a multi-headed king, on a chariot shooting arrows with a bow at monkey soldiers.



Figure 7: Whereas the caricature of Ravana as a Cyborg relegates the narrative to Posthuman lore, the propensity to violence demotes the epic back to its allegorical origins.

A close comparison of Ravana in *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Ramayan 3392 AD* highlights a decisive shift from mythological representation to post-human horror, reshaping both his visual form and philosophical meaning. In ACK, Ravana adheres closely to traditional iconography as the ten-headed, twenty-armed titan adorned in royal regalia, his human-like features and expressive face grounding him within a moral universe defined by pride, grief, and ambition; his concern for his son Meghnad underscores a recognizable emotional depth that renders his villainy tragic and comprehensible. By contrast, *Ramayan 3392 AD* strips away this multiplicity and replaces it with a sleek, cybernetic singularity i.e., a metallic, emotionless entity whose power lies not in excess but in its cold, mechanized precision. This transformation is reinforced through aesthetic devices such as jagged, black speech balloons and distorted lettering, which signal a voice that is no longer human but alien and unsettling. The shift extends to his interpersonal dynamics, particularly with Mandodari: while traditional narratives preserve a familial bond, however strained, the 3392 AD version depicts Ravana as violently detached, reducing even his wife to an inferior biological construct. Ultimately, ACK presents Ravana as a fallen yet intelligible figure shaped by mythic hubris, whereas *Ramayan 3392 AD* reimagines him as an eldritch, post-biological force—an embodiment of technological terror that operates beyond emotion, morality, or the very logic of life itself. A comparison of Ravana across *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Ramayan 3392 AD* reveals a profound epistemic shift from theological evil to existential, sci-fi horror.

In ACK, Ravana is the mythic *Dashanan*, a towering demon-king whose ten heads and twenty arms symbolize divine excess and supernatural power; his visual form—rooted in classical performance and calendar art—anchors him within a recognizable moral universe. His evil is humanly legible: driven by pride, grief, and desire, he emerges as a tragic, fallen scholar whose transgressions can be understood within ethical frameworks. In stark contrast, *Ramayana 3392 AD* reimagines Ravana as a post-human, bio-mechanical singularity, stripped of multiplicity and rendered as a cold, cybernetic entity that has transcended organic life. Here, evil is no longer moral but ontological—he does not feel rage or ambition but operates as a nihilistic force of destruction, a “blasphemous presence” that mimics life only to extinguish it. This shift is further underscored in his relationship with Mandodari: where traditional narratives position her as a moral counterpoint whose counsel is dismissed out of arrogance, the 3392 AD version reduces her to a subordinate biological construct, subjected to violence devoid of emotional impulse. Ultimately, ACK presents Ravana as a superhuman figure defined by ethical failure, whereas *Ramayana 3392 AD* transforms him into a figure of cosmic horror—a synthetic overlord whose very existence destabilizes the boundaries between life, machine, and annihilation.

Ramayana boasts of an “unending recyclability through numerous transmissions” and hence the choice of the medium of graphic novel allows Dasgupta the “poetic licence to imagine the story through succinct and potent visual metaphors” (Singh 3). The “verbal and visual idiom” comes together in a “narrative cohesiveness which betrays the dichotomising of literary and non-literary elements” incriminating the graphic book medium for its non-seriousness. But as Max Gladstone says in his review of Amruta Patil’s *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* (2012) that only the “most chaotic of American literary modes, the comic book” could take on the “sheer intra-textuality” of the *Mahabharata* with thousands of stories all connecting with and re-contextualizing one another”, leading to a “nice, subtle thread to an already-impressive tapestry” (8). But Patil’s graphic narrative is quite distinct to Dasgupta’s, not only inciting different epics but also for its closer affinity to the avant-gardism of Raja Ravi Verma. For in retrospect, Dasgupta’s art is an ode to the computer-generated fantasy images, whereas Verma’s art is an anterior protraction to Paul Cezanne, Frida Kahlo, Amrita Sher-Gil and Gustav Klimt’s “viscerally felt art, sketched, drawn and painted, deserving of an intensive understanding of the nuanced layers of meanings” (Singh, 2017, pp. 13). The same fabula/story and the same sjuzet/plot is being visualized by different techniques, the intention still remains the same, to “question the epistemological and ontological purpose of being” Daniel Stein in *Superhero Comics and the Authorizing Functions of the Comic Book Paratext* relies on Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory, especially Latour perception that super hero narratives act as an “intermediary that simply transports, transfers, [or] transmits creative content, genre conventions, and information” for they “actively participate in the construction of their narrative apparatus because they authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, [or] forbid” (qtd in Stein and Thon 2023, pp.157). Michel Foucault points out that popular culture much like *Ramayana* has an inclination for “conflicting desires for authorial unity and heterogeneous author figures and hence is overwhelmed by the “proliferating, sprawling, and often contradictory narrative styles and contents”. Hence any author who engages with it does so through a “principle of unity in writing where any unevenness of production is ascribed to changes caused by evolution, maturation, and outside influence” and that hence “neutralizes the contradictions that are found in a series of texts” (qtd in Stein and Thon, 2013, 157).



Figure 8: *Jatayu Vadham (The Slaying of Jatayu)*, painted in 1895 by Raja Ravi Varma, is an oil on canvas work currently housed in the Sri Chitra Art Gallery, with a slightly different commissioned version from 1906 preserved at the Jagannmohan Palace.



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Figure 9: Abduction of Sita

A comparison between the work of Raja Ravi Varma and *Amar Chitra Katha* reveals how a singular, high-art masterpiece is translated, simplified, and democratized into a mass-market visual idiom suited to 20th-century comics, marking a crucial shift in the movement from myth to modernity. Ravi Varma's oil painting operates as a unified tableau, condensing the dramatic encounter between Ravana, Sita, and Jatayu into a single, emotionally charged frame where spatial composition, anatomical realism, and chiaroscuro lighting produce immersive intensity and theatrical depth. In contrast, ACK adopts the logic of sequential art, breaking the same moment into digestible panels that guide the reader through narrative progression, prioritizing clarity and accessibility over visual density. This shift is mirrored in style: Ravi Varma's academic realism—with its textured feathers, muscular modeling, and lifelike drapery—gives way to ACK's graphic simplification, defined by bold outlines, flat colors, and stylized forms designed for rapid reproduction and instant legibility. The portrayal of violence and emotion also

transforms accordingly; where Ravi Varma renders Jatayu's injury with somber realism and Sita's grief as internalized and restrained, ACK reframes the same moment through softened, symbolic violence and exaggerated expressions that make the scene pedagogically appropriate for younger audiences. Yet, despite this simplification, ACK remains deeply indebted to Ravi Varma's visual vocabulary—retaining key iconographic elements such as Ravana's regal posture, ornamentation, and physiognomy, even as it reintroduces his multi-headed form in line with scriptural description. Ultimately, this transition reflects not a loss but a reorientation of purpose: from elite aesthetic contemplation to widespread cultural pedagogy, where myth is reshaped into a visually accessible, morally instructive narrative for modern mass readership.

This painting by Raja Ravi Varma titled *Jatayu Vadha* (1895) functions as the crucial historical and aesthetic anchor that explains both the visual language of *Amar Chitra Katha* and the later rupture enacted by *Ramayan 3392 AD*. Ravi Varma's synthesis of European academic realism with Indian mythological subject matter transforms the *Ramayana* into a theatrical, emotionally immersive spectacle: the suspended mid-air composition, the dramatic diagonal of Jatayu's falling wing, and the chiaroscuro lighting concentrate the narrative climax into a single, charged tableau. His characterization of Ravana as a muscular, regal, humanized titan, Sita as the demure, veiled embodiment of vulnerability, and Jatayu as the tragic, anatomically detailed hero establishes a visual grammar that would come to define mythological representation in modern India. Through the widespread circulation of his oleographs, this grammar became culturally internalized, enabling ACK to adopt and simplify it into a mass-readable, pedagogical comic idiom—retaining iconographic fidelity while translating painterly realism into bold outlines, flat colors, and sequential clarity. In turn, *Ramayan 3392 AD* emerges as a deliberate break from this lineage, rejecting both Ravi Varma's devotional realism and ACK's didactic accessibility in favor of a globalized, cyberpunk aesthetic that reimagines the epic through fragmentation, dystopia, and speculative technology. What unfolds across these three moments is not merely a stylistic evolution but a broader cultural trajectory: from myth as high-art realism, to myth as popular pedagogy, to myth as experimental, transnational genre fiction—each stage redefining how the epic is seen, understood, and experienced in its time.

While Foucault ignores the role of reader and storytelling Umberto Eco stresses on the “dialectic between order and novelty, [...] between scheme and innovation”. He blames the “naïve reader” for succumbing to the “strategies of the author who will lead him little by little along a series of provisions and expectations” and heralds the “smart reader” who consciously “evaluates the work as an aesthetic product by [...] recognizing its narrative strategies” (qtd in Stein and Thon 158). But whereas texts based on *Ramayana* are considered, especially Shamik Dasgupta's graphic rendition of the *Ramayana*, a reader is both naive and smart for he relishes the “familiarity of certain characters, settings, drawing styles, and story structures as much as treasuring the variations, additions, and revisions” that make it more interesting than the now rudimentary *Amar Chitra Katha* and hence are a step ahead in artistic innovation (158).

As aesthetics philosopher David Davies has put it: “In appreciating a work, we must always attend to how an artistic statement has been articulated in a particular artistic medium, and how the articulation exploits the qualities of the vehicle that realizes that artistic medium.” (qtd. in Smith 190). Pascal Lefèvre believes that everything from “graphic style, *mise en scène*ⁱⁱ, the combination of verbal and visual elements, the breakdown (or *découpage*ⁱⁱⁱ) of the story in distinct panels, the inter action between panels, page layout, and the plot structure” play a crucial role in graphic storytelling (qtd. in Smith, 2012,

pp. 72). Though the stylized images of Dasgupta may be “less visually analogous to reality”, yet they effectively capture the essence of the epic.

The popularity of *Ramayana* is primarily due to the fact that it is procumbent to what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000) refer to “remediation” for it allows “transmedial storytelling and diversification” and literal cum pictorial narratives based on *Ramayana* are not only “transmedial phenomena due to their remediation potential, but they are also “intermedial narratives based on words and images that collaborate” to relate its many fables and anecdotes (Stein and Thon, 2103,pp. 191). Irina O. Rajewsky in *Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality* (2005) refers to intermediality as “a communicative-semiotic concept, based on the combination of at least two medial forms of articulation” i.e. “Media combination” or “the transformation of a given media product or of its substratum into another medium” i.e. “Medial transposition” (195). *Ramayana* has been tolerant to both these transgressions. It has always been a “product of collaboration where the penciler or the scenarist “replaces Valmiki as the “dominant creative force” (203) and the reader is left to “construe the narrative coherence of whatever he or she confronts” leading to “intensification of the reader’s narrativization activity” (209).

João Pedro Oliveira in *What a Wonderful (Post-Apocalyptic) World: Representations of India and the West in Ramayan 3392 AD* (Oliveira 2024) by argues that the series should not be read as a mere Westernized distortion of the *Ramayana*, but rather as a complex site of cultural hybridity shaped by global and local influences. Oliveira contends that the narrative constructs India and the West as ‘antithetical but intertwined’ entities, where mythic spirituality and technological modernity coexist in tension rather than opposition. The graphic novel appropriates global sci-fi and superhero conventions while simultaneously engaging with contemporary Indian nationalist discourse, thereby asserting rather than diluting cultural identity. As a result, *Ramayan 3392 AD* emerges as a transnational text that negotiates questions of representation, power, and identity, illustrating how mythological narratives can be reconfigured within modern, post-apocalyptic frameworks without losing their ideological and cultural depth.

While these graphic narratives are yet to receive the pedagogical legitimacy and are neither included in the curriculum, they owe their existence solely to the enthusiasm and zeal of their creators and connoisseurs. But it is must be acknowledged, that our myths and gods by being resurrected as superheroes continue to remain pertinent and even inspire the same fervour and devoutness as their antecedents in frescos and sculpture. These graphic narratives despite their digital subversions of myths have not robbed them of their esoteric fantasy, and instead in their own distinct way have amplified it. It may be regarded as a highly presumptuous and a pompous claim, but this is how the future millenniums will know of *Ramayana*.

5. Conclusion

Graphic adaptations of the *Ramayana* should therefore be understood as legitimate cultural texts that extend, rather than dilute, the epic tradition. Through their unique synthesis of image and text, they do not merely retell but reconfigure narrative experience, opening new pathways for engaging with myth across generations and media forms. By foregrounding visual storytelling, these works expand the interpretive possibilities of the epic, ensuring its continued relevance within an increasingly hybrid and rapidly evolving media landscape.

Rather than occupying a peripheral or derivative position, *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Ramayana 3392 AD* demonstrate that adaptation is itself a mode of cultural production that actively participates in the ongoing life of the text. These works reveal that the Ramayana is not a closed, sacrosanct artefact but a dynamic, regenerative system, capable of absorbing diverse aesthetic idioms, ideological frameworks, and technological forms. In doing so, they bridge the seeming divide between tradition and modernity, devotion and experimentation, pedagogy and speculation.

Moreover, the visual-verbal hybridity of comics enables a democratization of access, inviting readers who may be distanced from the epic's classical linguistic or ritual contexts to engage with its ethical, philosophical, and emotional dimensions. The interplay of panels, sequencing, and imagery transforms reception into an active process of interpretation, aligning with contemporary modes of reading shaped by visual culture. Thus, the graphic Ramayana does not simply preserve cultural memory; it reanimates and redistributes it, situating the epic within global circuits of storytelling.

The movement from textual epic to graphic narrative signals not a rupture but a continuum of creative evolution. The *Ramayana* persists precisely because it is open to reinvention—its narrative energies unfolding across media, its meanings proliferating through reinterpretation. To dismiss graphic adaptations as reductive is to overlook their critical role in sustaining the epic's vitality. Instead, they must be recognized as sites of erudite engagement, where myth is not diminished but continuously expanded, contested, and renewed within the visual imagination of contemporary culture.

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ⁱ High culture is a collection of ideologies, beliefs, thoughts, trends, practices and works-- intellectual or creative-- that is intended for refined, cultured and educated elite people. Low culture is the culture of the common people and the mass. Popular culture is something that is always, most importantly, related to everyday average people and their experiences of the world; it is urban, changing and consumeristic in nature. Folk culture is the culture of preindustrial (premarket, precommodity) communities. Refer to Gans, Herbert J.. *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation Of Taste*. United States, Basic Books, 2008 and Debnath, Kunal. (2019). *Between High Culture and Low Culture*; and also *The Difference Between Popular Culture and Folk Culture*. SMART MOVES JOURNAL IJELLH. 7. 12. 10.24113/ijellh.v7i8.9572.

ⁱⁱ Both highly nuanced and highly subjective. *Mise en scène* is the arrangement of scenery and stage properties in a play. Translated from French, it means "setting the stage" but, in film analysis, the term *mise en scene* refers to everything in front of the camera, including the set design, lighting, and actors. *Mise en scene* in film is the overall effect of how it all comes together for the audience. Refer to D'Arcy, Geraint. *Mise en Scène, Acting, and Space in Comics*. Germany, Springer International Publishing 2020.

iii Decoupage, translated from French, means “to cut up”; it would signify the physical act of cutting the images together, while also understanding the emotional and cinematic story being told through those visuals. Decoupage, therefore, indicates a highly nuanced and collaborative construct, that encompasses editing, narrative storytelling, camera functions and often includes the use of montage. Decoupage “cuts up” the script and establishes that scripts’ visuals, and Montage “assembles” them into an emotional story. Refer to Kessler, Frank, et al. Montage, Découpage, Mise en Scène: Essays on Film Form. United Kingdom, caboose, 2022.