



An Ecosophical Exploration of War and Violence in Graphic Novel *Vanni*: A Representational Visual Meta-Function Analysis

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Abstract

The present study focuses on the correlation between ecosophy and visual grammar. For this purpose, this study incorporates Guattari's ecosophy through the model of Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual grammar (2006) to trace the environmental crisis in the graphic novel '*Vanni: A Family's Struggle through the Sri Lankan Conflict*' (2009). The study is qualitative in nature based on multimodal discourse analysis. The findings of the study developed arguments for an ecosophical lens as a way of creating a change of vision within our ethical, social, and political spaces. Through the representational, interactive, and compositional meanings represented in *Vanni's* visuals, Felix Guattari's ecosophies highlight the trauma of war and its impact on people and the environment.

Key terms: Guattari's ecosophy, visual grammar, Vanni, multimodality

Introduction

The twenty-first century has made a mark in the Anthropocene era by propelling the ecological crisis across the world. Environmental issues are discussed extensively in today's society, involving concerns expressed about the extinction of natural resources, various types of life, and the consequent extinction of the human species on the globe as a result of war. According to this perspective, today's environmental issues are the result of deliberate behavior of modern men such as wars, which end in ecological disaster.

According to Guattari (2009):

Individual and collective human lifestyles contribute to the continuous deterioration of our world. Ecosophy focuses on the broad and deep connections that we all share, the relationships that exist inside, among, and between social processes, economies, ideologies and living systems. It raises awareness of these systems in forms of dynamic assemblages, which can be connected and reinvented in revolutionary ways. (p.22)

Guattari (1996) saw the necessity to 'alter mentalities to reinvent social practices that would give humanity a sense of responsibility, not only for its own existence, but also for the future of



all lives on the earth, for animals and vegetable species' (p. 120).

Ecosophy is a practical and theoretical, ethical-political and aesthetic paradigm, a simple and efficient reformation of existing ways of thinking about the human being, society, and the environment. With ecosophy, it is possible to understand that nature and human beings are part of the same ecosystem. Guattari's ecosophy is based on three ecosophies: the environment, social interactions, and human subjectivity, and it addresses our understanding as part of the environment in which we live, as well as how we learn and act on environmental issues. In order to trace the consequences of war and violence linked with the environment in the graphic novel 'Vanni' by Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock, the current study aims to analyze the Guattari's ecosophies embedded in 'Vanni' through the model of visual grammar (2006).

Problem Statement

Many studies of ecolinguistics focus on the analysis of the language and ignore the analysis of the visuals. Consequently, all the messages encoded in the images are neglected and the construction of meaning is solely confined to the analysis of the verbal content. The study however, focusing on analyzing the visuals through employing visual grammar (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006) to focus on the ecosophical aspects of the graphic novel.

Research Questions

- How does the graphics of *Vanni* employing the model of Kress and Van Leeuwen involve in the meaning making semiotic process regarding the effects of war on environment?
- How does the ecosophy by Felix Guattari in the visuals of *Vanni* investigate the detrimental impact of war on ecology?

Review of the Literature

Ecolinguistics is a branch of CDA that combines discourse analysis with ecological considerations. Ecolinguistics employs many of the same techniques as CDA, but it views ideology and power relations as concepts that relate to both human and non-human subjects (Dash, 2019). How language contributes to the creation of certain stories or narratives, or what Stibbe (2015) refers to as "the stories we live by," is an important field of inquiry for ecolinguistics. These are cognitive frameworks that influence how we perceive the human-nature interaction, economic growth, and technological progress, and, as a result, how do we react in respect to the environment.



Eco criticism claims that the hegemonic narratives to which we are exposed appear between the lines of a text (Stibbe, 2015). These narratives can be identified, however, by analyzing a certain discourse. Following the path of multimodal analysis, the ecolinguistic framework can be expanded to different semiotic codes. Working from a multimodal approach, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) believe that the way we experience reality is influenced by the way images are created and presented (the visual choices we make). Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) proposed a theory of visual grammar, a multimodal approach to communication that separates three types of meaning: representational, interactional, and compositional, to investigate how visual structures affect human perceptions.

Graphic novels, in essence, employ visuals and print text to captivate readers and convey stories. Readers walk with characters and see from their points of view. Both print text and graphics are equally significant in the narrative, as they both provide crucial information. When reading visuals and words, a reader is given considerable freedom in their interpretation (Kress, 2004).

According to Stibbe (2015) narratives govern our lives by naturalizing what is social; we live through stories that bring socially shared signs into play and influence human relationships with humans, other animals, plants, forests, rivers, and the physical environment, as well as refer to the exercise of power by various groups (p. 6). These can be stories regarding massive consumption, economic growth, advertising, intensive agriculture, animal exploitation, and stories that portray nature as a machine or resource to be used or exploited by humanity or they can be stories concerning respect, coexistence, and understanding with a different and more respectful vision of nature. The damage to the ecosystem is being used as a criterion for categorizing these stories. They are regarded harmful if they promote or enable some form of harm to species and the environment and they are considered positive if they encourage attitudes or behaviors that promote care and protection. According to Fill (2002) ecolinguistics is a discipline which separates numerous areas of inquiry into several categories from which two main interests emerge: 1. Critical analysis of animal/environmental discourse and 2. Language ecology. Critical analysis of animal/environmental discourse uses CDA, framing theory, cognitive linguistics, rhetoric, and systemic-functional linguistics as linguistic tools. The significance of language and other semiotic resources in the creation of hegemonic meanings and the repetition of ideologies in texts and



discourses is of particular interest to CDS. Arran Stibbe has recently been active in incorporating ecolinguistics into critical discourse studies. He stresses that social and ecological issues are not as distinct as one may think, particularly in light of the current imminent ecological crisis (Stibbe 2021). Ecological destruction is a consequence of oppressive human-to-human relationships. While ecolinguistics recognizes the link between environmental issues and social processes. It goes deeper and explores the repercussions of environmental deterioration and the ecological catastrophe not only on social connections between societies and individuals, but also on other living beings. These include future generations of humans who will be affected by our current actions, as well as non-human life forms such as animals and plants.

According to Trampe (2017) ecolinguistics analyzes the anthropocentric worldviews that dominate human language and discourse, arguing instead for an ecocentric and biocentric perspective that recognizes the intrinsic worth of all life forms on earth.

Fill (2017) states that ecolinguistics follows the theory of 'ecology' from biology, where it refers to the interaction of organisms with their environment, to discourse and communication. As a consequence, ecolinguistics is primarily concerned with the relationship between humans, language, and the environment (p. 15). As a result, this ecological viewpoint strengthens critical discourse studies as socially oriented values and norms. To this purpose, Stibbe uses the term ecosophy coined by Arne Naess (1995) a philosopher and founder of the deep ecology movement. Stibbe (2015) considered ecosophy as an ecological philosophy consisting of beliefs, values, and norms about the interaction between human civilizations, other living things, and the physical environment (p. 11). According to Guattari (2009) we live on a planet where technical-scientific mutations are accelerating and unsustainable development is separating us from our personal, social, and environmental interactions. Stibbe sees this ecosophy as a normative framework against which the discourses under investigation are evaluated.

Theoretical Framework

Ecolinguistics has widened its conventional focus on the environmental view of language to include other sign processes as well. The present study focuses on ecolinguistic approach by delineating the ecosophical framework of Felix Guattari (2009). In line with the ecosophical approach, the present study focuses on the mental, social, and environmental ecosophies embedded



in the graphic novel of *Vanni*. The study employs the model of multimodality (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006) as a tool to unveil the ecosophies in the novel.

Data Analysis

Benjamin (2009) has very skillfully portrayed the tragedy of antony to make it an inclusive theme for his audience and his focus on ecological elements in the graphics make them explicit to understand the deeper level of meaning in the graphic novel '*Vanni*'. To explore the ideological meanings of the graphic novel '*Vanni*' in the ecosophical context the present study concentrates on the elements and structure, the participant's positions, modality, composition, and framing. *Vanni* explores the intimate experiences of conflict, torture, loss, displacement, and transnational migration in the context of mental, social and environmental ecosophies, based on a fictionalized family of antony. The context of second visual is to highlight the peace and prosperous condition of antony's family. According to the Kress and Leeuwen's conception of the experiential meta function in images, it relates to narrative processes, concerns the representation of objects and the representation of relationship between those objects (2006). In their approach, the relationships between objects are either realized by vectors formed by movement (action processes) or vectors formed by the direction in which the eyes of an object are looking (reaction processes). An example of an action process can be seen in figure 2. In the action process in figure 2, it is evident that the actors are the antony and his family and the goal is the viewers. According to the model of multimodality, there are three types of circumstances. The circumstance of means concerns the object with which the action was carried out. Figure 2 of *Vanni* reveals that the circumstance of means are babies and bowl of food carrying by amma. Their vectors are formed towards the viewers who are the implicit goal of their vectors. The second type of circumstance is the circumstance of accompaniment. The final type of circumstance is the circumstance of setting. Figure 2 shows an example of a circumstance of setting that is defined by the lightness of the background.

The action and reaction processes are also further subdivided to indicate whether they are directed at someone or something (transactional actions/ Non transactional). Figure 2 represents transactional process because of direct gaze of actors which is directed towards the audience. Figure 2 is a kind of still image in terms of the movement. Interactive meanings are significant in terms of



contact. This can either involve the represented participant looking at the viewer (demand), or not (offer). Figure 2 involves the contact with the viewers through the smile. This increases the attachment with the viewers. In terms of social distance, all actors are standing close to each other representing the close ties of the family. Long shots and close shots are showing the full participants, close shots thus create a sense of intimacy between the viewer and the represented participant. Attitude is inclusive and subjective as narrative participants share the direct gaze with the viewers which is high and vertical to show equality and engagement with the viewers. The eyes and smiles are significant in terms of the formulation of vertical angles indicating power and peace. The second types of vectors formed by their hands are also important showing the close connection of family i.e. rajini's hands are forming vectors by holding her babies and amma's hands are carrying food. Their vectors are forming request to let them live in peace. Figure 2 is also offering a close relationship of human and animal which is essential part of ecological harmony. The participants are interactive with the viewers. Saliency has been created by depicting the family without any background information.

Summary of the visual analysis of figure 2(*Vanni*)

Representational Meaning:

Narrative Process	Present
Actors	Antoni & his family
Goal	Viewers
Speech Process	Material
Conceptual process	Absent
Transactional/non-transactional	Transactional
Formation of vectors	Vertical
Circumstance	Present
Means	Bowl, babies
Setting	Light background
Accompaniment	Absent
Classification	Present (binary of peace and conflict)
Overt/covert	Overt
Structured/unstructured	Structured
Temporal	Day
Exclusive/inclusive	Inclusive
Spatial context	Present through cultural dress code
Symbolic attributive process	Symbolic / peace and prosperity

Interactive Meaning



Contact	Present
Gaze	Direct
Social distance/ Size of frame	Long and Close
Attitude: Subjective/ objective	Subjective
Modality: Colour saturation	Black and white
Contextualization	Background information is missing

Compositional Meaning

Information Value	Stative image
Saliency	Psychological saliency
Framing	Implicit

The figure 6 is based on the Sri Lankan civil war and Antony's family's forced displacement and migration as a representational act as well as its deep, intricate, and analogous entanglement with ecosophy to create synchronous emotive intensities among a larger audience. This way of representation entails a collaborative and participatory engagement with the contributions and perspectives of participants, as well as their distillation and fictionalization through sequential art. In visual 6 of *Vanni*, there is narrative process to show the physical and mental agony of the main character Antony, a man represented in visual graphic in a distressing physical and mental state. The closer analysis of graphic 1 in the panel 6 suggests the formation of Antony vectors in terms of calling (material process) his lost mother. The vector in the first visual (Antony's hand on his mouth) to call his amma shows that he is in pain, searching for his 'amma'. The vectors in the 2nd visual of panel represents Antony's inability to breathe due to the polluted environment of dead bodies after bombing. In the 3rd visual, vectors of his hands are formed to call his amma. Visual 4 vectors are formed with dropping hands, the direction of his eyes and limbs are towards the ground for the sake of searching his amma's body among the several dead bodies scattered around him. Visual 5 depicts the distress and grief of Antony in form of the informal South Asian expression of 'AIYOO' it means "oh no" which is an exclamation term used in spoken Tamil in South India and Sri Lanka. Moreover, vectors in visual 5 are significant as Antony is holding his nose with his hands as he could not breathe in the polluted environment. Vectors of visual 6 depicts Antony doing



vomiting due to the stinking smell of the corpses around him. Visual 7, vectors are formed by his bent legs as he is sitting and holding his nose with one of his hands. In Visual 8, antony is in great distress placing his chin at his hands, thinking about his amma by looking her dead body in front of him. Visual 9 of figure 6 vectors are formed through antony's constant gaze towards his dead amma to whom he is holding in his arms. The text of the speech bubble is monosyllabic which consists of the material process of calling. As far as circumstance and settings are concerned, the graphics are designed to represent the air attack in *Vanni* which resulted in death of antony's mother. The visual graphics are represented as overt representation started initially with a single character, antony to move towards multi-layered events contributing to the life story of antony i.e. bombing, killing of his mother, family tragedies resulted from the civil war. The social context (dress, etc.) shows antony, an inhabitant of Sri Lanka. The brightness of visuals in terms of white color suggests temporal settings of the graphics which is daytime in all the visuals. The modality of the visual of *Vanni* is depicted in the white and black panel (which is highly symbolic) in terms of the mental representation of the character. According to Satrapi (2008) black and white panel is significant in terms of highlighting tragic incidents or framing a tragic context. In the last graphic, the vector of antony holding his dead mother in his hands is significant in the context of ecosophical patterns, contributing to the narrative process. The images are arranged from top to bottom, demonstrating sequential representation. Contact is represented skillfully in the visuals as a major event in the story as antony is searching for his mother and wants to have immediate contact with her, in the end, his contact turned into an identification of a tragic event (death of his mother). Attitude is developed through the monosyllabic material process of calling and the physical appearance of antony which represented his tragedies due to the civil war context. Distance is implicitly represented through the tireless journey of antony towards his attainment of peace. The images from the context of ecosophy can be highlighted as the images reveal that even animals are affected by the disasters of war. Vectors in the visuals are very obvious and suggestive to the theme of the story. Besides, the reactional process of antony is shown as having a serious problem in coping with the world represented as full of tragedies and turmoil. Tragedies are evident not only depicting the inner world of the characters but the outer world as well. Through white and black panel, the writer, Benjamin Dix has also highlighted the binary of peace and conflict. In the last



graphic, the broken twigs and leaves depict the ecological destruction due to war.

Summary of the visual analysis of figure 6 (Vanni)

Representational Meaning

Narrative Process	Present
Actors	Antoni
Goal	Viewers
Speech Process	Material (Amma), AIIYO (exclamatory expression)
Conceptual process	Absent
Transactional/ non transactional	Transactional
Formation of vectors	Horizontal, Downward, Towards the dead body of his Amma,
Circumstance	Present
Means	Weeping, Vomiting
Setting	Background representing destruction, scattered dead bodies of human and animals, broken trees
Accompaniment	Carrying dead body of his Amma
Classification	Present
Overt/covert	Antoni (Overt), Amma (Covert)
Structured/unstructured	Structured top to bottom representation of the aftermath of war
Temporal	Day
Exclusive/inclusive	Inclusive (emotional engagement with viewers)
Topographical process	Not any
Spatial context	Present through cultural dress code& spatial background
Symbolic attributive process	Symbolic / physical and mental tragedy

Interactive meaning

Contact	Searching for the immediate contact, found his Amma
Gaze	Indirect
Social distance/ Size of frame	Long and Close



Attitude: Subjective/ objective	Subjective
Modality: Colour saturation	Black and white representing the tragic incidents
Contextualization	Post war context

Compositional Meaning

Information Value	Forced displacement & killing
Saliency	Created through background information
Framing	Left aligned, upward information

Ecosophical Analysis

Today's warfare is typically characterized by heinous acts of violence and brutality caused by bombing and outright genocide of minorities. Visuals of *Vanni* depict the traumatic memories of the destruction of Antony's homeland, the loss of his loved ones in the civil war, his subsequent detention, torture, the anthropocentricism of human beings in form of war and its disastrous impacts on environmental, mental and social ecosophies. Guattari's ecosophy proposed the totalizing dimension, of contemporary issues, causing political, social and cultural dimensions. According to Muhlhausler (2003) ecosophy consists of a paradigm shift, where man is aware that he is an inseparable part of the environment. Ecosophy embedded in *Vanni* depicting the tragedies in form of human relations (killing of Antony's mother) and human subjectivity (traumatic experiences of Vanni), social relations (Antony's longing for his mother), and the disastrous impact on environment, through the three ecosophies: mental, social and environmental. The visual flashbacks in *Vanni* can help to understand the ecosophical patterns. As a result of war, a process of change in the relationship between man and nature, triggered an unequal relationship and significant change in the environment of Sri Lanka portrayed in the selected novel. The ecosophical analysis of *Vanni* provides a rational appeal for the construction of new socio-environmental and ecological knowledge. In this way, ecosophy consists of more than just a philosophy of ecology, but a way of thinking about the destruction of nature and human relations in contemporary society.

Social Ecosophy



Social ecosophy depicts the social ties of individuals with the nature. In social context, antony's anguish for his mother shows the close family ties. Economic semiotics in the visuals depicts that antony belongs to a low-income group. As shown in the visuals antony belongs to the proletariat class where he is at the base structure. In this context, antony and his family suffered more due to the lack of economic resources and not having social and economic power to save themselves. It is relatable to the unequal division of resources leads towards unequal relationship of men with nature. This environmental pollution is also parallel to the emotional turmoil experienced by antony. Background images show devastation of social structures as the outcome of war. The social ecosophy presented in *Vanni* allows thinking about social relations in the perspective of the anthropocentrism of men caused by their promotion of war in the contemporary world. Social ecosophy in *Vanni* through the character of antony also highlights the integrated world capitalism leading towards the collective destruction of the society. According to the ecosophical lens of Guattari, the present study traces the themes of forced displacement of civilians experiencing the aftermath of war and antony's distress at observing the victims; humans, animals and nature. Social ecosophy is prevalent in the novel as the protagonist is anguished and experienced the trauma of the civil war. The ecological disaster was due to the 'spectacular violence of Anthropos which eradicated trees, killed animals and humans. Anthropocentric violence shows that the war caused killing, forced displacement and social segregations. The war also caused displacement as in the case of antony's mother who was initially displaced due to the war like situation.

Mental Ecosophy

Mental ecosophy is evident in the graphic novel 'Vanni' as a philosophical attitude through critical reflection in a way of coexistence and reframing relationship between man, society and nature. It shows the amalgam of "nature" and "society" as inseparable entities, bringing human subjectivity, social multiplicity and environmental diversity as necessary issues. The novel depicts how everything is interconnected, from the depression, trauma to the physical and psychological violence and degradation of the environment. The fundamentals based on the ecosophy of Guattari collaborates for the rational and logical development of ecological balance and human subjectivity. This subjectivity refers to how we see the world and ourselves, as well as how we think and behave



in order to protect and care for the environment. Mental ecosophy in Vanni proposes to raise awareness and knowledge of the individuality of man in connection with other individuals, family, political and social life. It depicts postmodern mutations which transformed the way of living in the modern world. The mental ecosophy in Vanni raises the collective contemporary psychological issues as the result of the lack of a meaning of the individuality of man, corrupted by the forces of the world capitalist power and lack of rational approach as it is evident from the mental trauma faced by antony who could not give even proper burial to his beloved mother. Thus, according to Guattari (2009) mental ecosophy has the capacity to critically analyze the introjection of repressive power by the oppressed as depicted in 'Vanni'. Moral subjectivity is not the outcome of 'singular self' but also considers society itself in ecological terms. Mental ecosophy in Vanni highlighted the subjective semiotics that the solution of the problems of modern man, caused by segregations and war, lies in the principle of coexistence in groups and collectives.

Environmental Ecosophy

Environmental ecosophy is evident in the character of antony which showed himself as an inseparable part of nature. Vanni depicts civil war as the cause of great environmental damage and the source of transforming life of the natural habitat. Environmental ecosophy brings together the heterogeneity of human changes. Environmental ecosophy in Vanni reveals the dynamic interrelatedness, of social structures and political phenomena. It also highlights the notion of landscapes. According to Guattari (2014) 'Landscape' refers not to a scenery but a balance of nature and culture. War in Vanni has been depicted in the visuals as the destruction of landscapes at Sri Lanka representing unequal relationship between human and natural life. As a result of our understanding of the three ecosophies, it is critical for us, as human beings as an inseparable participants of the environment, to seek a reconciliation of the relationship with the nature to reduce the risks of environmental problems and human interventions. Gonçalves (2008) highlights that ecosophy puts into question the action of man in environment, his ways of living as part of the natural ecosystem. In this way, ecosophy consists of the philosophical attitude between the balance of the contemporary way of life and the relationship with the environment.

Findings

Employing the theory of visual grammar revealed many of the implicit meanings embedded



in the visuals. Each metafunction offered various factors upon which the images were analyzed. Representational meta-function enabled the researcher to unfold the three types of ecosophies represented by participants in the visuals. The dominance of transactional processes was evident in the visuals which demands the rational approach from the viewers to stop war as a proponent of environmental destruction. The relationship between participants were also inferred through the analysis of narrative processes in which participants were worried about the ecological crisis. Taxonomies were also highlighted in terms of ‘class division’ showing human anthropocentrism. The participants in the visuals have offered the viewers a food for thought to contemplate on the environmental crisis. This engages the viewers to make them understand ecosophies as the only rational approach towards looking at inseparable relationship of man and nature. The disasters of war have been depicted in close-shots employed in the images. The selection of frontal horizontal angles strengthens the relationship between participants and viewers. The visuals of the graphic novel ‘*Vanni*’ highlighted the ideas of environmental protection based on Guattari’s ecosophies. The visuals represented ecosophical crisis due to war. The visuals in the selected novel depicted the solution of environmental problems as the social and moral responsibility of man, manifested individually and collectively. The visuals draw attention towards subjective semiotics which evoke the collective consciousness towards environmental solutions. The images defined the need of unity and interconnectedness for the rational conceptualization of ecological issues. In other words, Guattari’s ecosophy demands a rational approach that human should reform their vision towards war and violence. Thus, the researcher found that visuals of ‘*Vanni*’ shed light on various perspectives of ecological crisis which demand the accountability to the natural environment. Moreover, the present study revealed the implicit meanings of the visuals in terms of social, subjective and environmental semiotics.

Conclusion

The analysis of the graphic novel ‘*Vanni*’ depicted through the discussion and analysis that every image is important to find the underlying meaning of drawing the graphics of particular events. Also, it can be concluded that the selected images revealed the social, environmental and mental ecosophies due to war and violence in *Vanni*. Boff (2014) states that the mission of human beings is not the domination of nature, but to take care of it, as he is a responsible part of the entire



planet community. As a result, in today's society, we need the expansion of ecological thinking to include ecosophical thinking as a rational paradigm. Ecosophy contributes to the minimization of devastating impacts of environmental crisis of man and society. It contributes positively to the understanding of the fundamentals of man's feelings and his subjectivity, group experience, territories, care of landscapes, culture and environment. Thus, for Guattari (2009) the principle of environmental ecosophy is that everything is possible, both the worst and the best. Irrationally, both the worst catastrophes are possible, such as the war like situation portrayed in the Vanni. On the other hand, a flexible evolution of man is also possible, which uses knowledge and wisdom to improve the world in which he lives, such as the use of what nature offers us in renewable sources and without the destruction of our natural habitat. The visual ecosophical analysis also depicted that “nature” and “culture” emerge as inseparable entities, bringing human subjectivity, social multiplicity, and environmental diversity as necessary issues. The present analysis unites the visuals with the philosophical notions of ecosophy to settle the antinomies between man and nature. Ecosophical attitude is depicted in the selected novel ‘Vanni’ as the totality of contemporary problems, through the use of rationality. In short, visual grammar offers a way of comprehending civil war in Sri Lanka, forced relocation, war crimes suffered by antony and his family embedded in social, mental, and environmental ecosophies.



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22



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