

Washington University in St. Louis

Washington University Open Scholarship

MFA in Illustration & Visual Culture

Graduate School of Art

Spring 5-20-2022

Storytelling for a changing world: Comics as agitprop

Kruttika Susarla

k.susarla@wustl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/mfa_illustration



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Susarla, Kruttika, "Storytelling for a changing world: Comics as agitprop" (2022). *MFA in Illustration & Visual Culture*. 2.

https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/mfa_illustration/2

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Art at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in MFA in Illustration & Visual Culture by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.



Storytelling for a changing world

Comics as agitprop

Kruttika Susarla



Storytelling for a changing world: Comics as agitprop

by Kruttika Susarla

This essay imagines fictional storytelling and urban practices of maintenance, repair, and care as interrelated to one another. They are both practices engaged in building a better world.

Urban scholars like Gautam Bhan, Shannon Mattern, and David Harvey propose the city as a space for envisioning the kind of community we want to be—a space for working towards our collective future. By engaging in fictional storytelling, I argue, we are doing the same thing: the dual work of taking from fact and representing it to an audience while also engaging in imagining and world-building. This is also a practice of constructing, repairing, maintaining, and caring.

As the essay argues, fictional storytelling draws from traditions of agitprop to imagine new futures. It also makes a case for how creators of comics can learn from urban practices to create spaces to form community and imagine a more just world through their practice.



Building a world that “makes sense”

I often find myself oscillating between being extremely cynical and slightly hopeful about our future, about the world™ we inhabit. It can feel like there are a lot of catastrophic things happening in the world and there is nothing I can do about them. In some ways, it is true that I cannot do anything about it by myself. I cannot do anything about it solely using my skills as an illustrator or a comic-maker either. So, how does one go from here?

I want to clarify that this is not an essay about my personal hopes and anxieties, but rather, an articulation of how pictures might work as devices for and alongside collective action to conceive transformative futures. *Transformative* because we must refuse to accept that things will not change. Transformative because it is a “future”—a time and condition that doesn’t exist yet and we can shape it into—that is, change it into whatever we put our imagination to. Envisioning a better world and making pictures both need the imagination and a vision for a thing that is not yet tangible.

In *The Necessity of Art*, Ernst Fischer, an Austrian Marxist journalist, writes that the function of art¹ changes in a changing world. What do pictures in service of this changing world look like?

“The raison d’être of art never stays entirely the same. The function of art in a class society at war within itself differs in many respects from its original function. But nevertheless, despite different social situations, there is something in art that expresses an unchanging truth.”² (11)

The original function of art that Fischer is referring to is the reason it captivates us—at some level, art is able to “entertain” us by going above and beyond reality—this is why we seek out art.

“The ties of life are temporarily cast off, for art ‘captivates’ in a different way from reality, and this pleasant temporary captivity is precisely the nature of the ‘entertainment’,”³ (10)

1 Fischer is speaking here of art in service of socialism—specifically art that aligned with the Communist Party’s ideology.

2 “The Function of Art” Fischer, Ernst. *The Necessity of Art*. Penguin Books, 1981. (11)

3 “The Function of Art” Fischer, Ernst. *The Necessity of Art*. Penguin Books, 1981. (10)

Our social and material conditions have been in a constant state of breakdown and collapse. While this is true, it is also true that there are people around us—fighting, repairing, and caring for the world—people imagining a better way of living and working towards changing our material conditions.

In September 2020, farmers' unions in India occupied the borders of New Delhi and many other cities in the country for over a year to protest against three farm bills that were passed by the Parliament of India. Farmers and farm workers withstood severe repression in the form of tear gassing, water cannoning, police brutality, and roadblocks because of their demand for the withdrawal of these laws. Owing to the pressure created by this people's movement, the union government repealed these repressive farm laws a little more than a year later. The protests were a huge win for working class farmers across the country. In late 2018, IT workers in India formed a labour union to fight for their dignity, better working conditions, and fair wages⁴. This was possible despite the union government cracking down on trade unions and amending labour laws to work against the interests of workers to benefit the wealthy few. Workers at Amazon in the United States recently formed their first labour union to negotiate for their rights⁵.

All of these instances show us that it is indeed possible to create and bargain for a world that is better for all of us. None of us can win this fight alone—we have to work together to realise this dream of a better world.

4 Menon, Rashmi. 'Even India's Tech Workers Are Interested in Employee Unions'. Mint, 8 January 2021. <https://www.livemint.com/news/business-of-life/even-india-s-tech-workers-are-interested-in-employee-unions-11610032307886.html>.

5 Blanc, Eric. 'Here's How We Beat Amazon'. April 2022. <https://jacobinmag.com/2022/04/amazon-labor-union-alu-staten-island-organizing>.

“Evidently man wants to be more than just himself. He wants to be a whole man. He is not satisfied with being a separate individual; out of the partiality of his individual life he strives towards a ‘fulness’ that he senses and demands, towards a fulness of life of which individuality with all its limitations cheats him, towards a more comprehensible, a more just world, a world that makes sense.”⁶ (8)

What does all of this have to do with making pictures, you might wonder. Fischer is suggesting that we are drawn to art time and again because we see our own struggles in its representations. At the core of Fischer’s argument is the belief that we are social and are also capable of thinking and acting outside of our individual interests. It is able to help us collectively visualise and work towards liberating ourselves from the alienation and tyrannies of living in a late capitalist society. This sort of art not only “presents an intense experience of reality”⁽⁹⁾ but it also “constructs” reality in order that we are able to look at it objectively. It is a deliberate and intentional portrayal of the world around us—it is imagining an intangible material reality.

Making pictures and telling stories that can imagine a more just world begins with caring about the world first. It begins with understanding that we cannot and should not navigate the world as people with the skill to make pictures alone. Being able to make pictures that can work as imaginative devices begins with caring about each other as people who inhabit this world together first. Art⁷ is the means through which we as individuals become a part of the “whole”, of something bigger than ourselves. It is capable of speaking to the current mood of a given society. It is able to recall a symbolically important event—keep it fresh in the memory of the viewer.

When a worker at Amazon fights for the right to form a union, they are doing so, not just for themselves but for every worker at the company. When farmers across India sat out to protest the regressive farm bills, they did

⁶ “The Function of Art” Fischer, Ernst. *The Necessity of Art*. Penguin Books, 1981. (8)

⁷ I am using the term “art” to mean storytelling broadly, but, applied to the context of illustration and comics for the sake of this essay.

so not just to fight against their exploitation, but to also be able to feed the people. Pictures are able to show us this beauty—they make the revolution irresistible. There is a liberating quality to art—both the object and the practice of making art—that is able to resolve the alienation between the individual and the larger society which has come about in our late capitalist world. It is of little surprise then that sites of protests and people's movements have also traditionally been spaces for making art about people's struggles, about singing, dancing, and drawing new ways of existing in this world. Just like the struggles themselves, art that works alongside people's movements express the people's political aspirations—it is able to help us envision ourselves as linked to a larger social group.

What kinds of pictures makes this kind of merging of the individual with the collective possible? Historically, agitational propaganda (agitprop) has occupied this space. Agitprop by definition is agitative propaganda intended to create social and political change. Agitation works to stir up and mobilise the masses around an issue that needs immediate action. Propaganda has an underlying ideology that is systemically disseminated through a variety of media like theatre, music, film, visual art.

There is a long history of agitprop in India and elsewhere that has influenced my own work. Soviet socialist realism is the shadow archive⁸ of a lot of agitprop work that I draw inspiration from. India and the USSR shared a strategic, economic, diplomatic, and cultural relationship that began in the 1940s during the Cold War. Moscow-based Progress Publishers, Mir Publishers, and Saint Petersburg based Raduga Publishers had ties with the Communist Party of India (CPI) (this was before the ideological split in the party into Communist Party of India (Marxist) and Communist Party of India (Maoist) that would happen in 1948). They regularly published translations of Russian titles for children⁹ and translated Indian literature into Russian languages through the CPI's publishing house.

8 In *The Body and the Archive*, Allan Sekula uses the term "shadow archive" to describe a body of catalogued text and images within traditional archives which influence future representations of "positions of individuals" in a given social terrain. See Sekula, Allan. 'The Body and the Archive'. *October* 39 (1986): 3–64. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778312>.

9 Roy, Nilanjana S. 'Why a Generation of Indian Writers, Publishers and Booklovers Grew up Reading Russian Books'. Text. Scroll.in. <https://scroll.in>. <http://scroll.in/article/777690/why-a-generation-of-indian-writers-publishers-and-booklovers-grew-up-reading-russian-books>.



Figure 1. Cover for the Telugu edition of **Yest' takiye mal'chiki** by Agniya Lvovna Barto¹⁰ illustrated by Veniamin Losin, Evgeny Monin, and Vladimir Pertsov. It was translated into English as **How Vova Changed his Ways**. This is a children's picture book about a little boy named Vova who is sad and unable to smile. Over the course of the poem, he learns how to laugh with the help of his friends.

10 Barto, Lvovna Agniya. *Unnaru Ilaanti Abbayilu (There Are Such Boys)*. Progress Publishers, Moscow (1957). <http://archive.org/details/there-are-guys-like-this-agnia-barto>.

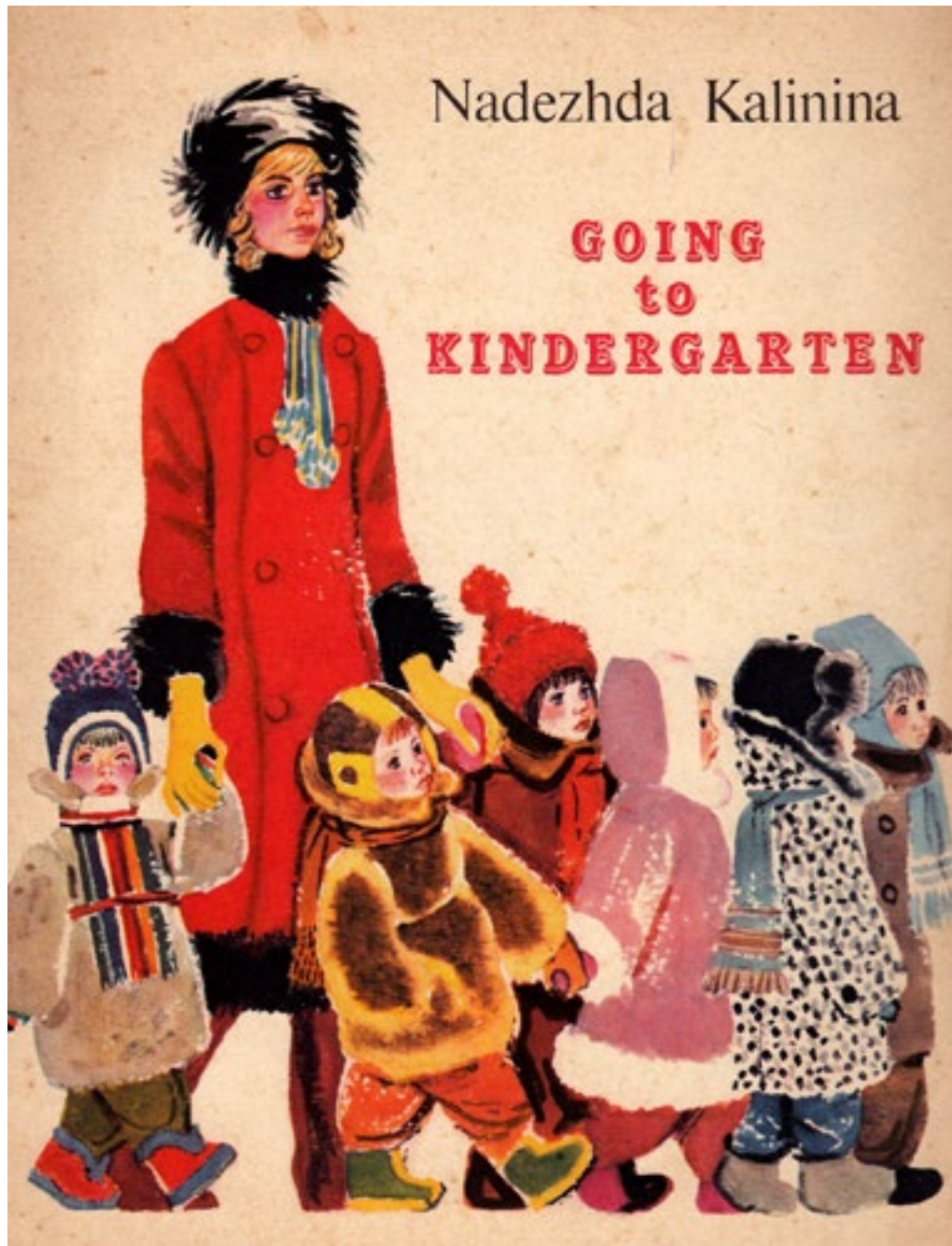


Figure 2. Cover for **Going to Kindergarten** by Nadezhda Kalinina illustrated by Veniamin Losin¹¹. The story follows twins Sasha and Alyosha who are nervous about their first day at school in kindergarten. Sasha and Alyosha, along with their classmates, discover the joy of learning together in school—they take a trip to the aquarium, play outdoors, talk about what they want to be when they grow up and meet workers in different industries.

11 Kalinina, Nadezhda. *Going To Kindergarten*. Progress Publishers, Moscow 1974. <http://archive.org/details/NadezhdaKalininaGoingToKindergarten>.



This sort of cultural exchange influenced visual agitprop that was produced in the CPI's magazines in the 1940s in India. Chittaprosad Bhattacharya (1915-1978), who later dropped his upper-caste surname and went by Chittaprosad was an artist from West Bengal. He was radicalised as a student at the Chittagong Government College in the 1930s and was recruited into the CPI's "artist-cadre" role in 1941. Artist-cadres were party members who were political and cultural organisers. Chittaprosad's *Hungry Bengal* series of drawings is one of the most influential works of agitprop the Party produced during the Great Bengal Famine of 1943.¹²

"Visual reportage combined text and image, within the didactic and activist role that the party played. [...] Chittaprosad described art as the carrier of the social mind and a weapon for society, which, he noted, must become society's "agitator and organizer.""¹³ (86-87)

12 'Bengal Famine of 1943'. In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Bengal_famine_of_1943&oldid=1081105044.

13 Sunderason, Sanjukta. "As Agitator and Organizer" *Partisan Aesthetics: Modern Art and India's Long Decolonization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020.



Left

Figure 3. Pen and Ink drawing by Chittaprosad showing two old women and a young child sitting together. Chittaprosad is focussed on their material living conditions and their weak, malnourished bodies. These images shocked their viewers and rightfully agitated them against the colonial government—but, they did so by utilising the trauma and destitution of poor people in Bengal. Source: DAG.¹⁴

Above

Figure 4. Chittaprosad, Panel for India Immortal, People's Age, 6 January 1946. Source: P. C. Joshi Collections. Courtesy of Archives on Contemporary History, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Central Library, JNU, New Delhi via *Partisan Aesthetics* (2020). Pg 105-106.¹⁵

In her book *Partisan Aesthetics*, Sanjukta Sunderason notes that Chittaprosad was influenced by the calls for writers and artists set by Socialist realism of the Soviet era. She points out that Socialist realism per György Lukács was “a possibility rather than an actuality”. It was at once pointing to future possibilities and acknowledging current material conditions. This tension is a peculiar feature of how Socialist realism got adopted in colonised countries. It is easy to see why it had to be rooted in the immediate—people in these countries were being exploited by colonial powers and elite nationalists; their living conditions were getting worse and meeting basic needs like clothing, food, and shelter became more urgent. In India, pre-cold war agitprop concerned itself with depictions of disintegration, destitution, poverty, and hunger. The Bengal famine of 1943 was a pivotal moment in how it shaped agitprop in the country for this very reason—it was a large-scale famine caused without drought that resulted in two-three million deaths. After the cold war, the projects of the CPI and the subsequent agitprop were targeted towards the colonial government and the national bourgeoisie. Sunderason calls this flavour of socialist realism, a “refraction of global concepts takes place through located triggers” (88).

The last few years of the cold war that resulted in the weakening of British power in colonised countries saw a change in the kind of agitprop imagery too. “The rhetoric of direct contact and grassroots reportage also changed, as artist-cadres were encouraged to actively accommodate and address revolutionary agency in the masses.”¹⁶ (101) We start seeing visuals of labour in action, new “horizons”, masses of revolutionary folk and workers marching ahead and big, bold typography utilising scripts from local and regional languages that the Party was campaigning in. In illustrating material for unions in New Delhi, I've adopted similar strategies of showing worker solidarity rather than resorting to representations of Hindu-Muslim binaries. Some of my illustrations for them also draw on the active, dynamic, and exaggerated body language that Soviet-era agitprop posters tend to use.

14 'Chittaprosad, A Retrospective, 1915-1978 | DAG'. <https://dagworld.com/exhibitions/chittaprosad-a-retrospective-1915-1978/>.

15 Sunderason, Sanjukta. *Partisan Aesthetics: Modern Art and India's Long Decolonization*. Stanford University Press, 2020.

16 Sunderason, Sanjukta. 2020.

Agitprop is inherently contradictory—while agitation works best for one particular issue, propaganda is effective at collectivising large groups of people around many interlinked ideas. There is an issue of scale here—a tension between the microscopic everyday social and material issues that we face and the macroscopic power structures in the world we navigate. Vladimir Lenin advances this idea in his essay, **What is to be Done:**

“The propagandist, dealing with, say, the question of unemployment, must explain the capitalistic nature of crises, the cause of their inevitability in modern society, the necessity for the transformation of this society into a socialist society, etc. In a word, he must present “many ideas”, so many indeed, that they will be understood as an integral whole by a (comparatively) few persons. The agitator however, speaking on the same subject, will take as an illustration the death of an unemployed worker’s family from starvation, the growing impoverishment etc and utilising this fact, known to all, will direct his efforts to presenting a single idea to the “masses”. Consequently the propagandist operates chiefly by means of the printed word; the agitator by means of the spoken word.”¹⁷

However, the “printed word” or the “spoken word” cannot explain *everything*. In today’s mediascape, issue-based agitprop can be very overwhelming and lead to emotional burnout. Agitprop that is centred around singular issues feels like one onslaught of bad news after another. While presenting “the death of an unemployed worker’s family from starvation” through the printed or spoken word is surely going to stir a strong emotional reaction, it is also going to cause a scarcity of agitation. In working with organisers in New Delhi, I have learnt that it is hard to sustain action induced through guilt or “feeling” alone. At some level, sustainable action that will help us create a change in our material reality has to come from a place of love and care for each other.

17 Lenin, Vladimir Illyich. *What Is To Be Done?*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/>.

The end goal of most revolutionary thought is to be able to create a better world for all of us to live in. Being able to think and act above and beyond singular issues is essential to this goal—to use our imagination and energy not only for, but also for tackling the problems of the present, but also working towards the future. How might we make art that compels us to work towards building a world that “makes sense”?¹⁸ How does art “change with the changing world”, just in the way that farmers’ unions were able to adapt protest strategies in order to make demands and bargain with the new regime in India?

My thesis is an attempt to think about these questions through what I know best: drawing. How might we tell stories¹⁹ that are acts of love and care for others around us? Why is it necessary that we do? These are questions about envisioning, finding, and building solidarity—how do we care for other people even when we do not speak the same language, share the same religion, gender, class, or caste identity? These are questions about finding the tools to build our collective future together. In order to answer them, I want to draw on ideas proposed by various sociologists and writers grounded in the language of urban practices and literary + art criticism.

As illustrators and comic-makers, we sit at the intersection of the roles of agitators and propagandists, the way Lenin describes them. We are both authors and disseminators of thought. The kind of art Fischer is talking about requires that as artists, we have a deep understanding of the social and material realities of the society we live in. Fischer develops this idea in the chapter, *The Loss and Discovery of Reality*, by asserting that when “the artist discovers new realities, he does not do so for himself alone; [...]. He produces for a community.”²⁰ (8) Fischer declares that the role of art in our society is to show that our troubled reality is “conceivable yet avoidable”.²¹ (216) This kind of art does not confuse its vision for the future as an idealised utopia but rather energises its audience to find the tools to change their present. The artist should be embedded in their society in order to be able to do this—it is an act of love and care—an act of community building. This is an act of care and repair in a world that is seemingly collapsing—an act of hope or cautious optimism, if you will.

18 “The Function of Art” Fischer, Ernst. *The Necessity of Art*. Penguin Books, 1981. (8)

19 Gesturing here to a variety of practices like illustration, comics, visual design, and interdisciplinary forms of storytelling.

20 Fischer, Ernst 1981. (8)

21 Fischer, Ernst 1981. (216)



01

Roadblocks and lessons

The first story I worked on in an attempt to answer these questions was set in a public library. Here is a short synopsis that might help with some context:

Sarayu—resident expert in all fantastical plants at The Strange Garden wakes up to find that her new crop of Nightshades is in peril. She needs crucial information from the last remaining library in the garden which, unknown to her is being raided by a group that call themselves ✂. To save her plants and secure the future of the library, she has to work with Ammu, a resident of The City—a place that has not had access to libraries in decades.

Left

Figure 5. Early sketches from the previous version of the comic with Sarayu as the protagonist. This page features a police officer who was an aid to the "bad guys".

At its core, it was Sarayu's (the protagonist's) story: a character with an inherent flaw that she has to overcome through a long and arduous life-changing journey. At the end of the journey, she emerges victorious and gains the thing she most desired in her life before returning home. As I made progress through the story, I realised it was quickly falling apart. I had set up multiple plot points with a lot of side characters who had equally important storylines and none of the promises I made in the prologue plots were getting fulfilled or resolved. In this story, there were two diametrically opposite characters that failed to conflict with each other. Sarayu, who kept to herself, was an elitist who gatekept knowledge while Ammu was street-smart, warm, and had a lot of friends. One way to resolve the problems with this comic was to pick one plot, or one character and follow them on their "journey"—but that did not feel right.

While the comic did not pan out the way I hoped it would, it helped me understand what my priorities with the thesis project really were. I realised this was not Sarayu's story—it was the story of the people in that world. It was a story about access to public infrastructure—but, on a deeper level, it was a story about people who did not agree with each other, coming together to work towards a common goal. It was the story of this community's material realities and their collective future. It was falling apart because I was too focussed on Sarayu. The narrative structure did not give me enough space or room to tell a rich and complex story about how various people within the world of the story affected each other and how their lives were interlinked. I needed to reconsider the narrative structure and go back to my drawing board. It was hard but it helped me understand what was important to the story I wanted to tell.

02

Other narrative ethics

How can we imagine the narrative structure of a story about the people? It would be a structure that is able to hold many different ideas, characters, failures, and small wins together. It would have room to expand and grow. It would engage the reader and give them hope. What does the shape of this story look like?

American speculative fiction writer, Ursula Le Guin (1986) would say the shape looks like a carrier bag. She is not a fan of the hero's journey model or of conflicts. In her feminist critique of this structure in *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, she insists that the earliest cultural invention must have been receptacles of some kind—sacks or bags or slings—a container that allows us to carry more than what our two individual hands can hold. The carrier bag contradicts the idea that the earliest tools of invention must have been destructive tools like knives. It is an alternative proposal to the idea that life is a series of conflicts, that problems can and should be solved by some kind of force, some kind of weapon. Le Guin views the hero's journey as a very masculine approach to storytelling. It is a model, in Le Guin's words, that has decreed "that the proper shape of the narrative is that of the arrow or spear, starting *here* and going straight *there* and THOK! hitting its mark (which drops dead); second, that the central concern of narrative, including the novel, is conflict."²²

One might even extend this critique to say that it is an individualised and atomised way of looking at the world. It refuses to acknowledge the feminine care work that is the gathering of seeds in a sack. Her proposal against the hero's journey model is the "life story": the passive story of people trying to figure out things together. The structure of the story as a carrier bag opens up possibilities of unlikely things sitting next to each other. Understanding the nature and

relationship of these things (characters or plotlines in a story for example) next to each other will require some care and attention. It doesn't offer a quick and easy-to-digest solution.

"A book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us."²³


This container or bag for fiction she says can be 'full of beginnings without ends, of initiations, of losses, of transformations and translations, and far more tricks than conflicts, far fewer triumphs than snares and delusions; full of space ships that get stuck, missions that fail, and people who don't understand'. She proposes that novels have the space to flesh out real people, not heroes. In my previous story for the thesis project, Sarayu was working towards becoming the hero.

In the kind of stories that Le Guin is criticising, the enemy is often a cartoonish villain that must be defeated in order to restore balance in the world. In my previous story, the villains were the ☿ gang. They needed to be defeated by Sarayu or Ammu, but that did not really solve the core of the problem in that universe—the underlying issue was a lack of universal access to knowledge in their world. Even if Sarayu defeated the ☿, someone else would take their place.

²² Le Guin, Ursula The Anarchist Library. *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*. 1986. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/ursula-k-le-guin-the-carrier-bag-theory-of-fiction>.

²³ Le Guin, Ursula. 1986

So what happens in a story where the enemy is not an individual character but rather the slow destruction of our world—a firestorm that wipes out half the tree population in a village that has dire consequences for various communities inhabiting this world?

A stylized illustration of a night sky. The background is a dark, textured black. In the upper right, a large, bright yellow and white meteor streaks diagonally across the frame, leaving a trail of smaller, bright yellow stars. Several larger, white, five-pointed stars are scattered across the sky. In the lower half of the image, there are several green, stylized flowers or plants. The central flower is the largest and most prominent, with a white, rounded center and green, wavy petals. It has a simple, curved line for a smile. To its left and right are smaller, similar flowers. The overall style is whimsical and dreamlike, with a focus on light and color contrast.

THAT IS—UNTIL THE STORM
CHANGED EVERYTHING.

This is the premise of my comic *A Village Called Makkoi* (2022). An emphasis on process more than resolution has been the key to this story. It requires all the characters in the story to reconsider what they understand to be true of the world around them and calibrate their goals and how they can be involved in the world outside their own neighbourhoods. Here is a synopsis of the story:

The great river is the source of all life in the village of Makkoi. The Makkoi trees protect the river from external harm and the river nourishes and feeds the inhabitants of the village—maintaining a very delicate ecosystem. When a firestorm destroys half the Makkoi tree population and causes a blight that has spread to the remaining half, the lives of people in the village are threatened. Despite their differences, various communities inhabiting the village of Makkoi have to come together and form alliances in order to repair their home, prevent further harm and secure their collective future.

Left
Figure 6. Page 14, *A Village Called Makkoi*

In the chapter, *The Function of Art*, Fischer introduces Brecht's 'epic' theatre as a radical alternative to 'Aristotelean-drama'—one in which the audience identifies with the main character and experiences their pleasure or misery. According to Aristotle, a good drama is able to liberate the individual from their personal tragedies through this kind of connection with the main character. This is synonymous with the hero's journey model that we previously discussed. While this is an effective storytelling device, Brecht argued that it did not help the audience with identifying an underlying issue. He proposes epic theatre as a way of "presenting in an arresting way"²⁴ the social reality of the cast of characters in an alienated world. This helps establish some distance between the character and the viewer. It not only liberates the viewer from their personal tragedy, it also helps them see the problem objectively and potentially organise to find the tools to liberate themselves. This is how art is able to help the individual viewer overcome their isolation and feel like they belong to the *whole*—this is how we might be able to think beyond our identity bubbles.

In looking more closely at some of my favourite stories, I realised that this tension between stories of individuals and the implicit narratives of the larger things in the world around them was very present. This is why I am drawn to them. This tension made them compelling comics to me.

24 "The Function of Art" Fischer, Ernst. *The Necessity of Art*. Penguin Books, 1981. (10)



Figure 7. Hilda sets out to explore her new neighbourhood in Trollberg after multiple attempts to convince her mother to move back to the wilderness.²⁵

²⁵ Pearson, Luke. *Hilda and the Bird Parade*. Flying Eye Books, 2016.

Luke Pearson's *Hilda* (2015-ongoing)²⁶ series starts off with Hilda feeling alienated when she is cut off from the wilderness—a place where she had a fulfilling and meaningful childhood—when she and her mother move to the city of Trollberg. She is desperately seeking to be “more than herself”, as Fischer might put it. She is seeking to build community, be a part of the “whole”. After moving to Trollberg and being estranged from the wilderness, Hilda becomes withdrawn. She refuses to participate in society²⁷ because she is shocked at how disconnected the other children seem to be to the wilderness around them. She experiences culture shock and this further alienates her from her surroundings. As the story progresses Hilda steps up and is more involved with the city she lives in. This act of “participating in society” helps her make friends and find community. As the story progresses, we learn that there are tensions between the residents of Trollberg and the trolls living outside the city walls. Hilda and her friends work together to repair this relationship—often with people that consider them outcasts and are not friendly towards them. They build more friendships, the more they’re involved in the affairs of the city. They seek to repair relationships between the trolls and the humans in the trollberg. Beneath all of it, all of them genuinely believe that trolls and humans are meant to live together in harmony—no one is a threat to the other. Hilda and her friends are organising around a bigger vision—one that involves creating a more just world.

²⁶ Pearson, Luke. *Hilda and the Troll*. Nobow Press. London, 2015.

²⁷ ‘We Should Improve Society Somewhat | Know Your Meme’. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/we-should-improve-society-somewhat>.



Figure 8. Minotaur discovers that Maithili is neither a human, nor a monster at this point in the story. He's faced with a decision to choose the safe option and abandon her or risk trusting her and forming a friendship signalling a link between these different worlds.²⁸

28 Eipe, Rajiv and Salamander, C.G. *Maithili And The Minotaur: Web Of Woe*. Penguin Randomhouse. New Delhi, 2021.

Similarly, in CG Salamander and Rajiv Eipe's *Maithili and the Minotaur* (2021), Maithili and her friend, the minotaur both believe that the monster world and the human world belong together. Maithili is seen as an outcast because she is the connection between these two worlds but she cannot diffuse tensions in their community by herself. She has to work with minotaur, her classmates, and her teachers—even if some of them don't like her presence in the school and explicitly threaten to get her expelled from school, to repair and maintain harmony between the human world and the monster world.

Both of these stories portray people who are unsure of themselves. As Le Guin might suggest, "instead of heroes they have people in them".²⁹

I hope to tell a similar story with my thesis project. The plot or rather the village of Makkoi drives the narrative of this comic. While the river and the makkoi trees maintain the balance between various communities of organisms in the village, the people in the village also play a crucial role in it. When a critical mass of this ecosystem is destroyed, the precarity of its population is exposed and they have to figure out ways to repair their world together. Various communities in the village—the people in the arcs, the pigeon-whisperers in the valley, the fisherwomen by the bend in the river, and the people in the hill—have to cross physical and social boundaries they have set for themselves in order to be able to work together.

All of these stories share some things in common: there is a strong notion of the physicality of the space—how the characters move around, inhabit, and live in their surroundings is important to the quality of their lives. The force of production or the labour being performed in these stories is the (feminine) work of caretaking³⁰.

29 Le Guin, Ursula 1986

30 Le Guin, Ursula. 1986

In *Bullshit Jobs*, David Graeber provokes us to imagine what kind of a world we might be able to build if we centred care as work instead of production as work: “We can all imagine a better world. Why can’t we just create one? Why does it seem so inconceivable to just stop making capitalism? Or government? Or at the very least bad service providers and annoying bureaucratic red tape? Viewing work as production allows us to ask such questions. This couldn’t be more important. It’s not clear, however, if it gives us the means to answer them.”³¹

Graeber is making this argument in the context of finance capitalism and how work has become attached to self-worth in recent years. I would like to extend his proposal of centering care work as a way of imagining what kind of values we want to create in the physical world we inhabit. This is exactly the kind of work that is left out of fictional stories of the heroic model that Le Guin criticises.

We need stories that focus on this care work. We need fiction that tells stories of people healing, resting, repairing, and caring for our world.

Care work is undoubtedly a collective effort—it is not possible for one individual or one class of people to do what is needed to repair and put the “world back together”³². This sort of care and repair work in urban spaces is common in the global south.

31 Graeber, David. *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. 1st edition. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018. (228)

32 Mattern, Shannon. *Maintenance and Care*. 20 November 2018. <https://doi.org/10.22269/181120>.





Figure 10. Page 26, *A Village Called Makkoi*

03

Provisional Spaces

Samprati Pani imagines streets as extensions of our homes in her deeply personal and insightful essay on the social life of cooperative apartments in the neighbourhood of Patparganj in New Delhi. “Apartment dwellers share a casual intimacy with street vendors, especially the ones in the immediate vicinity of their respective apartments, involving banter, gossip and checking on each other’s family members. I probably know more people on the street outside my apartment than inside.”³³

33 Pani, Samprati. *A View from across the River*. Chiragh Dilli (blog), 2022
<https://chiraghdilli.com/2022/01/29/a-view-from-across-the-river/>.

Let us consider the idea of streets as **provisional spaces**. Streets are sites for production, action, revolution, and in Pani’s anecdote—sites of love and looking after one another. They create a sense of community by making space for things that feel impossible to achieve.

Pani’s observation of this sort of street culture is not unique or specific to Patparganj or even New Delhi, but it perfectly captures how we might think of these kinds of temporary spaces as sites for collective imagination. These spaces are always shifting—temporally, socially, materially, and politically. The food sold on the streets changes with the seasons, people gather on the street to wind down after a long day’s work, the material conditions of the roads change from one election to the next—potholes disappear close to polling day and reappear when the rains inevitably open up the tarmac.

Cities represent our collective conscience. People of all kinds, classes, and castes mingle, commute, produce, and live together in a city. All of them have some kind of personal stake in the larger community around them—where the roads get built, how many buses operate through a neighbourhood that might get children there to the public school across the river, who gets access to clean water and electricity. These are all actions and decisions that come from how we envision being and living together. After all, we create the city “after our heart’s desire”³⁴. A city is a macro, physical space that gradually changes over decades. As we build, rebuild, repair, and maintain the various moving parts of our cities, the street acts as a temporary and immediate site of action.

34 David Harvey quotes Robert Ezra Park in the chapter “The Creation of the Urban Commons”. Harvey, David. *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. Verso Books, 2013.

A city street is also a place full of contradictions. On one hand, minority groups and poor people are constantly ghettoised and pushed into slums. Their lands and homes are encroached upon and “urban villages” are built upon these sites for the amusement and recreation of rich people. On the other hand, people take to the streets in order to agitate and organise about these kinds of injustices. For a brief moment, the streets bring everyone together to look beyond their individual selves—to imagine, demand, and work towards a better collective future. In *The Right to the City*, David Harvey calls this way of being on the streets and engaging in cities *commoning*. A *common* is not particular goods, services, infrastructures or assets, but, “an unstable and malleable social relation between a particular self-defined social group and those aspects of its actually existing or yet-to-be-created social and/or physical environment deemed crucial to its life and livelihood. (73)”

Provisional spaces are vital to this kind of commoning. They are vital to life in a city because they can provide us the time and capacity to envision other ways of being. They can help us find the tools to liberate ourselves. How might storytelling via comics become tools to liberate ourselves too?



Conclusions: Comics as provisional spaces

“These relationships on the street [...] perhaps do little to transform the various kinds of inequalities that are entrenched in the city, but they do make the city a little less cruel, creating tiny breaks, of possibilities, in structures and trajectories of urban development we would like to believe are invincible.”³⁵

³⁵ Pani, Samprati. 2022

I want to propose that fiction storytelling can work as a temporary or provisional space too. I have talked a little bit (via Fischer) about why we feel compelled to read stories. Fictional worlds can help us gain distance from our reality and look at it objectively. The “ties of life are temporarily cast off”³⁶(10); they give us “tiny breaks of possibilities”.

McKenzie Wark likens fiction to “making” in her talk, *Ficting and Facting* at the Riga Biennial in September 2020.³⁷ By engaging in fictional storytelling, we are doing the dual work of taking from fact and representing it to an audience while also engaging in imagining and world-building. This is also a practice of constructing, repairing, maintaining, and caring.

³⁶ Fischer, Ernst. 1981.

³⁷ RIBOCA. Wark, McKenzie. ‘*Ficting and Facting*’, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yblnv9C1IY0>.

“Fiction is from “fictio”, from “fingere” which means to shape, to shape clay for example. [...] What’s weird is that so does fact, or “factum” is an event, it’s a thing that happens. There’s a little more agency in fiction than fact, but they’re both kinds of actions in the world, events in the world.”³⁸

By engaging in fictional storytelling, we are doing the dual work of taking from fact—or events that have happened in the world and reflecting them back to an audience and also engaging in imagining and world-building—constructing, repairing, maintaining, and caring. In her essay, *Maintenance and Care*, Shannon Mattern suggests that in order to navigate a world that is constantly breaking down, we need to “study how the world gets put back together”. In a similar vein to David Graeber, Mattern suggests that everyday work of maintenance, caretaking, and repair of public infrastructure is important to “putting the world back together”. This is the kind of work I hope to do as a cultural worker embedded in a community.

³⁸ Wark, McKenzie. 2020

In *A Village Called Makkoj* (2022), Farah, Sarayu, Esther, Ammu, and the community of fisherwomen are all caught up with the consequences of the blight that has struck the Makkoj trees in their individual lives. All of them feel alienated, isolated, and helpless to act upon the problems they are facing—they are unable to find the tools to liberate themselves from their problems alone. In order to change the fate of their communities and restore the balance in their ecosystem, the river must be free of sickness. In order for the river to be drained of its sickness, the Makkoj trees must be healthy. Various communities in the village are also interconnected in this manner.

In *Maintenance and Care*, Mattern rightfully reminds us that we must not romanticise the notion of maintenance and repair. Care work, in the way it is practised in the Western world, she reminds us, is heavily reliant on poorly paid immigrants and people of colour. In *A Village Called Makkoj*, I have attempted to parallel this by showing how the survival and repair of the trees is heavily reliant on the more marginalised communities outside the hill. The people on the hill are profiting off the labour of these other communities while also actively harming their lives.

In the comic, there is also an underlying assumption of who has the expertise or knowledge to repair their world based off social status that the characters have to confront in order for them to work and build together.

“First, repair emphasizes the need to restore immediate function over the need for substantive material improvement. Second, it is located in an immediate material life-world where what can be quickly accessed and easily used is more likely to be chosen as the “right” material for the job. Third, it does not presuppose any actors. Everyone can, should, and generally does, repair in some form – there are no particular professionals whose “sector”, “domain” or “practice” is repair. Those practitioners with reputation or experience have knowledge that can be accessed – it is not seen as distant, formal or external expertise.”³⁹ (646)

While it is obvious to see in the story that it is hard to upend the system all at once—it is true of organising in the real world too. We definitely cannot do it at an individual level. While having the “right” opinion about something can feel like doing the work, it is probably more productive to locate our efforts in “an immediate material life-world” in the way that Bhan suggests.

Having said all this, I want to turn to Olivia Lang for a second. In her book, *Funny Weather*, Laing reminds us that despite centuries of art occupying space in the revolution, it is not a “magic bullet” that will fix all of our problems. Things have changed because people have been willing to get out on the streets, because they decided to show up. We still need to act by working with people, getting our hands dirty, being people who exist in the world and are affected by various power structures before being people who make pictures in order to get things done. Just like repair and maintenance is collective action, conceiving this image for how we can build a better world cannot be done alone. As Bhan points out, “there are no particular professionals whose “sector”, “domain” or “practice” is repair”—we figure out how to put this world back together.

39 Bhan, Gautam. ‘Notes on a Southern Urban Practice’. *Environment and Urbanization* 31, no. 2 (1 October 2019): 639–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247818815792>.



Bibliography

1. Bhan, Gautam. **Notes on a Southern Urban Practice**. Environment and Urbanization 31, no. 2 (1 October 2019): 639–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247818815792>.
2. Fischer, Ernst. **The Necessity of Art**. Verso Books, 2010.
3. Graeber, David. **Bullshit Jobs: A Theory**. 1st edition. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018.
4. Harvey, David. **Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution**. Verso Books, 2013.
5. Laing, Olivia. **Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency**. Pan Macmillan UK, 2020.
6. Le Guin, Ursula. **The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction**. 1986. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/ursula-k-le-guin-the-carrier-bag-theory-of-fiction>.
7. Lenin, Vladimir Illyich. **What Is To Be Done?** <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/>.
8. Mattern, Shannon. **Maintenance and Care**. Places Journal, 20 November 2018. <https://doi.org/10.22269/181120>.
9. Pani, Samprati. **A View from across the River**. Chiragh Dilli (blog), 29 January 2022. <https://chiraghdilli.com/2022/01/29/a-view-from-across-the-river/>.
10. Sekula, Allan. **The Body and the Archive**. October 39 (1986): 3–64. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778312>.
11. Sunderason, Sanjukta. **Partisan Aesthetics: Modern Art and India's Long Decolonization**. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020.
12. Wark, McKenzie. RIBOCA **Ficting and Facting**, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbInv9C1lYo>.



This paper and the comic, *A Village Called Makkoj*, was made as a part of my MFA thesis project at Washington University in St. Louis, in the MFA Illustration & Visual Culture program in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, in the spring of 2022. It would have not been possible without time, mentorship, support, and feedback from my professors and peers at school. A huge thanks to professors Shreyas R Krishnan, Heidi Kolk, John Hendrix, Dan Zettwoch, Aggie Toppins, Ben Kiel, Danielle Dutton, D.B. Dowd, my peers—Amanda Greene (IVC '22), Candice Evers (IVC '22), Cydney Cherepak (IVC '22), Henry Uhrík (IVC '22), Jillian Ohl (IVC '22), Jodi Kolpakov (IVC '22), Noah Jodice (IVC '22), Paulina Zuckerman (IVC '22), Purvi Rajpuria (IVC '23), Stephen Barany (IVC '22), Tori Forster (IVC '22), my friends outside school—Akhila Krishnan, Esther Moraes, Sudeepti Tucker, Priya Katti, Ajay Giridhar, Sharath Ravishankar, Priya Kodidala, Drishti Khokhar, Siyona Ravi, and Aman Bhardwaj for being generous with their time and kind with their notes.

The body text is set in Degular, designed by Oh No Type Co and the title text is set in Cedar, designed by XYZ Type.

The book was designed and typeset by Kruttika Susarla based on a page design by Ben Kiel with design assistance from Audra Hubbell. Text editing Heidi Kolk. Production and binding was completed by Advertisers Printing, St. Louis, Missouri. This book is printed on Cougar 100lb text.

