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Word + Image: The pedagogical imperative of visual narrative

Abstract:

Briggs (*When the Wind Blows*), Spiegelman (*Maus*) and Satrapi (*Persepolis*) are well known for their biocular ‘verbal-visual conjunctions’ of highly polemic content with the least threatening of narrative forms, the comic strip (Hirsch in Whitlock: 966). With Australian author/illustrators Shaun Tan (*The Arrival*) and Matt Ottley (*Requiem for a Beast*) recently generating contention regarding the intended audiences of illustrated books/graphic novels, it has become pedagogically imperative to consider visual narrative forms as sophisticated sites of active meaning-making. This paper explores the contemporary evolution of the (mirroring, extending and conflicting) relationship between word and image, and the potential influence of visual narrative on prose processes and productions.

Biographical Note:

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Introduction

[I]t's fair to say that illustrated books have undergone something of a renaissance in recent years, both here in Australia and overseas. This is due in part to a good number of new and established artists toiling away in their small studios, consuming ink, grinding pencils and manipulating pixels, paying often obsessive attention to the craft of visual storytelling, and finally succeeding capturing the attention of a growing audience. It seems that picture books have moved a little beyond assumptions of something that is exclusively children's literature, and that graphic novels, or comics with literary pretensions (for want of a better description), are no longer associated only with super-heroics or adolescent power fantasies. Their subjects can be as serious and complex as any other kind of literary form, often with a highly self-reflexive regard for the relation between style and content, and dealing with social, political and historical subjects in an experimental way. (Tan, 2009: 1)

In the Introduction to the Winter 2006 edition of *Modern Fiction Studies* (52.4)—‘the first special issue in the broad field of modern and contemporary narrative devoted entirely to the form of graphic narrative’—Chute and DeKoven state that the ‘explosion of creative practice in the field of graphic narrative... is one with which the academy is just catching up. We are only beginning to learn to pay attention in a sophisticated way to graphic narrative’ (767). While the (reflexive) nature of academic argument situates such discourse as forever ‘catching up’ with what is being produced in the commercial publishing industry—especially, it seems, when it comes to works combining word and image in experimental ways which demand more active reading in the process of meaning-making—it is Creative Writing pedagogy which in fact allows the possibility of the reverse: the (premeditational) construction of innovative student projects which have the potential to further our understanding of graphic narrative forms. In this regard, the primary purpose of this paper is to argue that visual narrative literatures and literacies are imperative to the future of Creative Writing pedagogies due to: the modern historical emergence and contemporary development of visual narrative as a largely underestimated and subversive form of reproduction; the contemporary relevance of the image in society, politics and culture; and, the fundamental concept of visual narrative that sets it apart from straight prose processes and products: the dynamic juxtaposition of word and image to generate mirroring, extending and contesting sites of active meaning-making. In the words of celebrated Australian author/illustrator Shaun Tan, the Creative Writing classroom provides firstly the exemplars and secondly the space to ‘consume ink’ and ‘grind pencils’ in sophisticated exploratory ways.

Just a comic, eh?

While this paper predominantly features the role of the ‘comic’ as a visual or graphic narrative form, this is in part due to the (slowly accumulating) amount of theoretical works treating this medium; more significantly, however, is the notable characteristic that much of modern history's storytelling in visual form shares the comic's central stylistic

and structural attribute: that of ‘sequential art’, or ‘sequential illustration’. Following the lead of Will Eisner’s primary text, *Comics & Sequential Art* (1985), Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993) not only appropriately (pictorially) captures the unfortunate stereotypes, prejudices and narrow conceptions applied to comics, the publication of this seminal text provoked widespread discussion by demonstrating a valid argument for the rich theoretical discourses visual narrative forms create due to their inherent systems (‘sequencing’) of language presentation and multigeneric compositions: from the ‘gutter’ to ‘floating panels’; from illustrative practices that achieve reader empathy with protagonists to the employment of photography to instil verisimilitude, illustrated books contain their own set of acquired and cultivated narrative conventions. Furthermore, the fact that McCloud’s treatise is wholly presented as a comic (aesthetically and structurally), exhibits the flexibility and more broadly applicable (than stereotypically expected) qualities of comics. Apparently, comics are not such ‘a “vulgar” medium and, like pornography, something that brings shame on both artist and reader’ after all (Worden: 891); comics can express intellectual hypotheses as well as tell compelling stories through a complex structure of ‘cross-discursive’ language (Chute and DeKoven: 769).

As Chute and DeKoven point out, William Hogarth (1697-1764) is recognised as being highly influential in the emergence of “sequential art” as a convention of visual narrative: ‘he introduced a sequential, novelistic structure to a pictorial form’ (768-769). Or, as Hirsch, another noteworthy contributor to academic discussions in the field, describes the evident storytelling potentiality of the visual: the ‘discursivity and narrativity of images’ (in Whitlock: 966). Hogarth’s *A Harlot’s Progress* (1731) and *A Rake’s Progress* (1735) each depict the progression (the decline, in fact) of a protagonist via multiple (six or eight, respectively) ‘punctual moments’ (Chute and DeKoven: 769). Importantly, while the image is static, it is the placement of successive dramatic instances which constructs the narrative, certainly reminiscent of Aristotle’s definition of plot (mythos) as the specific arrangement of incidents structured to create a story arc and its related effects (rising tension, character movement, etc.). Furthermore, although Hogarth’s images do not contain written (word) text, one cannot disregard the bearing of each painting’s title in the series, a preliminary example of Hirsch’s theorising of visual-verbal literacy; as Whitlock explains: ‘It is Hirsch who identifies the particular importance of the comics in meditating on the conjunction of visual and verbal texts... and she adopts the term “biocularity”’ (966).

Hogarth’s innovations are particularly apposite to the development of the comic due to the mass production of his artworks as engravings, paralleling a key trait of the comic book industry which separates it from the most often one-off produced ‘artist books’ (a distant relative, though still often comprising of narratives in cross-discursive word and image forms). The means and significance of public dissemination is linked to the comic industry due to the modern historical emergence of broadsheets, principally in Britain from the 1300s to late 1700s (Sabin: 11-12). While Hogarth’s contribution to the establishment of sequential illustration and early experiments into biocularity cannot be

discounted, the production of woodcut illustrations in broadsheets depicting public executions and eventually political satire clearly established a new outlet for experimentation and consumption. And this is where (it is most often argued) the modern comic found its first readership: as cheaply produced and therefore accessible publications, the content of which catered for its working class target audience in the form of strips and singular images featuring subversive humour depicted via an embryonic set of conventions: word balloons, speech lines and bordered panels. And as Sabin notes, ‘there is evidence that these broadsheets were known as “the comicals”, sometimes abbreviated to “the comics”’ (12). Indeed, the subversive tendency of the comicals is what also led to illustrators being attacked, imprisoned and assassinated. As we will soon see, this challenging characteristic of the comic (and subsequently visual narrative in general) is still being demonstrated.

As printing technology developed, so did the visual narrative form, resulting in the mid to late 1800s diversification into publications separate to the broadsheets: serialised narratives such as the violent and lurid ‘penny dreadful’, or the alternative in the *Boys’ Own Paper*. Such histories continue to raise issues pertinent to contemporary discourse on the roles, methods and provocations of narrative; as Anstey and Bull state, ‘Texts are not only sites where imagination and response are situated, but also places of cultural production and reproduction’ (206). In agreement with Chute and DeKoven (768) as well as Sabin (8-9), there is no longer any necessity to substantiate comics—and graphic narrative—as a valuable mode of literary communication (at least in marginal academic and ‘fan’ circles). This is clearly evident from the medium’s historical development. The task now, and particularly in relation to Creative Writing pedagogies, is to further develop the already existing critical apparatus for understanding the nature of images in contemporary cultures and the cross-discursive conventions (and subverted conventions) associated with the form. By allowing students the opportunity to explore this marginal mode of expression, the learning outcomes are threefold: firstly, students learn valuable lessons in understanding narrative as a means of communication in general; secondly, students come to understand the language of images for critical analysis; and thirdly, the result of this combination of learning outcomes encourages students’ own innovative explorations in constructing visual narrative forms.

Startling new lessons in the use of images

The dissemination of images from the Iraq war and from the area around ground zero immediately after 9/11 have been carefully controlled, and these restrictions shape a new and urgent context for the sustained discussion of words and images, of reading and looking... for what is at stake are the fundamental questions about the interpretation of visual images and about their power to relay affect and invoke a moral and ethical responsiveness in the viewer regarding the suffering of others (Whitlock: 965).

From broadcasts of the suffering of civilians and of soldier life in the Iraq war, as well as media saturation of the events of 9/11 and in particular the symbolism of the ‘falling man’ during the World Trade Centre twin towers collapse, to the comprehensively discussed images arising from the treatment of prisoners by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib, it is without question that the power of imagery has become amplified due to the public dissemination (regardless of ‘careful control’) of such photographic representational imagery. Much has already been written on this (Susan Sontag and Judith Butler in particular, amongst others). It is also without doubt that this amplification should subsequently influence contemporary illustration.

The 2005 publication of a cartoon parody of Muslim prophet Muhammad in Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, and the ensuing violent demonstrations in the Middle-east and northern Africa which resulted in approximately one hundred deaths, is a clear indication that the ‘comical’ retains its polemic and often sobering qualities. Similarly, the exhibition of Guy Colwell’s *Abuse* caused a violent public reaction in America. An artistic representation of the Abu Ghraib images, the artwork’s foreground depicts naked and hooded male prisoners with (it is assumed) electrocution devices attached to their fingers and toes while soldiers with American flags on their sleeves leer with teeth and cigarette in mouth. After exhibiting *Abuse*, the gallery was vandalised and its curator physically assaulted (Herel: np). While it is not this paper’s intention to expound a detailed analysis of the highly polemic issues implicit in the above examples, an important link must be discussed here to connect the broader contemporary arguments associated with images to the previously elaborated points on the comic and visual narrative. Chute and DeKoven explain this succinctly:

There are many complex, delicate, and thorny issues attached to the Danish cartoon debacle: the parameters of free speech, the force of religious proscription, and the current global context of dire religio-political conflict. What we would like to underline, however, in mentioning the Danish cartoons, is the power of *drawn images*, which this example shows is undiminished even in our current age of the camera and of digital media. (772)

Indeed, the assassination of Naji Al-Ali, a Palestinian cartoonist whose works were published in a Kuwaiti newspaper and who was shot in the face outside the newspaper’s London offices in 1987, further underlines the continuation of the comic as a subversive politically charged narrative tool of the most dramatic and mortal kind (Sabin: 25).

Significantly, for the memory of Al-Ali and the ‘immortal’ presence of his work, his polemic comic strips have since become iconic to the Palestinian struggle for voice. And many recent commercially published graphic novelists have also been working to the same effect—articulating silenced voices. Influenced by Spiegelman’s successful and renowned *Maus* (1987), Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2000), Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* (2001), Guy Delisle’s *Pyongyang* (2004), and Emmanuel Guibert’s (et al.) *The Photographer: Into War-torn Afghanistan with Doctors Without Borders* (2009) are quality examples of what Tan might call ‘comics with literary pretensions... [whose] subjects can be as serious and complex as any other kind of literary form, often with a

highly self-reflexive regard for the relation between style and content, and dealing with social, political and historical subjects in an experimental way' (2009: 1). Additionally, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2001) saw Spiegelman also attempt to comprehend (via visual narrative) the events of 9/11 and the reactions of a nation undergoing trauma.

Prior to these investigations into biocularity, however, Raymond Briggs's *When the Wind Blows* (1982) caused a reconsideration of the target age groups of comics, or, more accurately, through what means and when (not 'if') individuals are equipped to grapple with the arduous content that Briggs communicates in a largely underestimated narrative medium. As Eccleshare says (394), the picture book format Briggs employs:

... might make it immediately look like a book for teenagers but the comic strip layout of text and pictures does little to soften the intensity of the tragedy that unfolds through the story. Jim and Hilda, a retired couple, try hard to follow the government's instructions about what to do in the event of a nuclear war. Briggs's point was that such guidance was fatuous and would do nothing to help people if a bomb really was dropped. Jim and Hilda are not directly hit by a bomb but they are affected by radiation sickness. Watching them slavishly trying to do as they have been told while all the time turning greener, weaker and with less hair is almost too painful to bear but it is a frighteningly powerful way of conveying the impact of the atomic bomb while also serving as a hard-hitting attack of government policy in supporting a nuclear programme.

Although at first causing a stir, *When the Wind Blows*, as Cech notes, somewhat ironically went on to be 'commended in the House of Commons' and 'recommended by reviewers, in both England and America, as a book that should be read by both adults and children' (203). Indeed, Briggs's text continues to be an exemplar of the cross-discursive potential of the comic style and structure, and is an essential tool in teaching aspects of visual narrative forms.

Although the polemic application of visual narrative has been explored here (and in by no means the warranted extensive manner), of course graphic storytelling need not necessarily be political or religio-political in theme and motivation. Recent publications by Australian author/illustrators Shaun Tan and Matt Ottley (*Requiem for a Beast*, 2007) confirm its wider social and cultural applications, while equally generating contention over their intended audiences and how a reader is asked to engage with these unique visual-verbal conjunctions.

Biocular active meaning-making in the CW classroom

In his paper *Originality and Creativity*, Tan states:

My picture books have in the past been recognised as 'highly imaginative', 'strikingly original' and even 'magical'. There is, however, certainly nothing mysterious about the way they are produced. Each work contains many thousands of ingredients, experiments, discoveries and transforming decisions... (1)

It is statements such as these which highlight the fact that while Creative Writing pedagogies certainly utilise narrative exemplars, the purpose for raising discussion about exemplars is in order to equip students with practicable models for their own creative processes. In this way, it is appropriate for this paper's argument to return to the Creative Writing classroom to address the crafted aesthetics and accidental poetics that visual narrative can provide.

The central practicable concept which may be pedagogically extracted from Tan's (above) statement is the disparity between product ('recognised as "highly imaginative", "strikingly original" and even "magical"') and process ('certainly nothing mysterious about the way they are produced'). In other words, Tan raises issues relative to intended, implied, and actual audience, and the gaps between reader and text, and writer and text. These concepts are central to visual narrative, but even more so is the way that word and image are juxtaposed to generate mirroring, extending and contesting sites of active meaning-making; 'gaps' which a reader is urged to bridge according to individual subjectivities; 'gaps' an author/illustrator purposefully crafts (and this takes knowledge and practice).

The manner in which word and image interact on the page is no longer complementary, as was common with the advent of illustrative or photographic plates in novels; that is, it is no longer acceptable for audiences (from older readers to adults) that an image exists only to complement the text, thus not allowing a space for the construction of new interpretive meaning (the bridge). Contemporary media-savvy audiences certainly demand a more active approach to the consumption of narrative, and this is where contemporary approaches to visual narrative acquire appeal and an innovative eminence. Tan's work—*The Rabbits* (1998) with John Marsden, *The Lost Thing* (2000), *The Red Tree* (2001), *The Arrival* (2007), *Tales from Outer Suburbia* (2008)—reflects this approach conscientiously.

Apprenticed under the narrative guidance of Gary Crew (who also continues to challenge and advance expectations of illustrated narrative in Australian publishing) in the production of *The Viewer* (1997) and *Memorial* (1999), and following the lead from Briggs (Sheahan-Bright: 28), Tan demonstrates a metafictional consideration of audience-text interaction by constructing narratives where, 'A passage between familiarity and strangeness is opened, and the reader cannot help but ask questions in the absence of any explanation' (Tan, nd: 4). This appeal to a reader's 'critical imagination' (3) is fundamental to understanding Hirsch's aforementioned visual-verbal 'biocular' conjunctions, which forms the very basis of how all visual narratives operate. And while Tan's wordless visual narrative *The Arrival* attracted international critical acclaim and, paradoxically, simultaneous confusion for booksellers as to what category/genre the book should be appropriately placed in (children's picture book? art book? novel? let's just put it on the counter...), it is no surprise that he asserts: 'I suspect that much art in any medium is produced without a primary concern for how it will be received, or by whom. It often doesn't set out to appeal to a predefined audience but rather build one for itself. The artists' responsibility lies first and foremost with the work itself, trusting that it will

invite the attention of others by force of its conviction' (Tan, nd: 1). The question we are now left with is not whether visual narrative should become a significant part of the classroom, but in what ways can Creative Writing pedagogy foster the contribution of new voices and approaches to this mode of expression. What new artists can Creative Writing classrooms instil with this same force of conviction?

The pedagogical imperative in conclusion

The intention of the argument set out in this paper is to promote the movement of a marginal narrative form into the Creative Writing classroom. This intention should not be translated (confused) into an assumption that the most innovative and experimental approaches to visual narrative must be therefore assimilated into the mainstream. Rather, visual narrative should continue to provide writers and illustrators with the opportunity to 'flex creative muscles' (Sabin: 8) and further explore and expand the potential for "play" and innovation via a subversive and sophisticated art form which still (for the most part) flies below the mainstream public's radar. According to Todorov, 'A new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres: by diversion, by displacement, by combination' (in Swales: 36). While it has been verified that visual narrative is by no means a 'new genre', the perpetually shifting combinations of immeasurable visual and verbal styles and structures contributing to this form (arguably a 'movement' rather than a 'form'; see Eddie Campbell in MacDonald: np) positions it in opposition to Todorov's statement. That is, visual narratives (comics, graphic novels, picture books, illustrated books... the misnomers and blurred boundaries continue) refuse to be concrete, existing instead in ample fluidity which can only ever be contained by its contributors. Perhaps we can rely on Eisner to set us straight when he says: 'The future of the graphic novel lies in the choice of worthwhile themes and the innovation of exposition... of serious artists and writers who are willing to risk trial and error' (in Larsson: 47). In the very least, this statement positions visual narrative in the most fitting perspective, that of a storytelling movement which prefers to consider: where to next?

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