

# WRITING WITH IMAGES: AN EXPLORATION OF HOW IMAGES SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS IN THE GRAPHIC STORY.

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This paper explores the idea that in the graphic story or comics, drawing is a form of writing and not merely a substitute for descriptive words. It will first examine writing and drawing separately, from a mechanical, historical, utilitarian and cognitive perspective. A proposal is offered that where narratives are conveyed through a series of thematic, stylistic and aesthetically linked images, in juxtaposition, it is a separate medium called juxtaposed image narratives, of which graphic stories are one form. How this form communicates a narrative through the drawing as much, if not more than the written word, is then investigated.

## **In the Beginning was the Drawing.**

Man has used drawing to explore his world since pre-historic times. From his own finger to a variety of hand held implements dipped in indelible substances, man has used the medium to record and convey his thoughts on things of interest. The origins of writing with symbolic marks is a contested history, but as settlement, agriculture and private property developed, writing probably evolved from drawing as a means to record mundane information (especially accounting and inventories) more efficiently (Davies, 2004). The development of phonetic alphabets that limited these symbols to a few representing phonemes and numbers, or logographic writing systems, gave man a tool to convey the gamut of his experience hitherto done orally. Most importantly, it became an external form of memory, one that was durable, easily replicated, and if put on papyrus or clay tablets, portable. For this reason, a written contract with signature and seal has long had far more legal weight than an oral or handshake deal.

By the twenty first century, the written word has become so ubiquitous, that few people recognise that it is a special class of image. At a purely physical level, writing is a form of drawing; both are products of the mind controlling a writing implement in the hand making marks on a support or surface. Despite the common language used, how one writes is different to how one speaks and this is not simply a matter of verbal contractions, speech patterns, slang and dialects, for these can be written phonetically. There is a temporal difference: writing mechanically takes longer than speaking. Usually when one writes, time is taken to compose ones thoughts in order to communicate precisely, whereas speaking is thinking on the run, often unguarded, garbled and conveyed with the physical languages of intonation, inflection, facial expression and bodily gesture. Outside of fiction, these are not spelled out in written communication.

This temporal difference is important because it pertains to our perception of writing and drawing. Human beings have evolved to prioritise sight over the other senses. Our minds process the light information detected by the cones and rods lining the interior of the eye extremely quickly; this it does by parsing the information, seeking edges through contrasts in colour, scale, tone, light and shadow. The mind then fills in the remaining information from memories gained from pattern recognition: leaves tend to be oval or star-shaped, a shade of green except when orange-red in autumn or brown having died and fallen off a tree. A leaf that was sky blue would stop you in your tracks for a second look (Pinker, 1997).

Drawing utilises the same mental processes in reverse, using line and the contrasts of colour, tone and texture to make something visible. The written word relies upon the same physical process: the tonal contrast between marks and its support, the shape of letters, numbers, symbols and punctuation marks put in a culturally defined linear order which construct a meaningful sentence. Like writing is to speaking, reading is physically a slower activity than looking at an image; a reader must focus carefully on the written symbols a word at a time in order to understand it. This is likely a consequence of the far later development of writing in man's history: visual processing is learnt instinctively, but literacy is only acquired after years of training and even that – as we well know – is no guarantee of success. This has profound implications for graphic stories since they use words and images in tandem, to tell a story. First it is necessary to clarify that the graphic story is a medium, not a genre of literature.

## Graphic Stories: The Message in the Medium.

For the purpose of this paper, the medium is defined as juxtaposed image narratives to distinguish it from others that use tandem images and written words in series, such as PowerPoint presentations and advertising (be it in print or motion pictures). Taking firstly the panel – an image contained within a framed space – as the medium's base signifier (Cohn, 2007), these are presented *next* to one another in a space. In the other forms of communication above, the series is presented occupying the *same* space one after the other. For Thierry Groensteen, the graphic story panel defines the form by its 'iconic solidarity', where "interdependent images, that participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated... and which are plastically and semantically over-determined by the fact of their co-existence *in praesentia*" (Groensteen, 2007). This admits into the medium of juxtaposed image narratives such artefacts as narrative fresco cycles found in Italian Renaissance churches; the Sandham Memorial Chapel by Stanley Spencer at Burghclere; the Bayeux Tapestry; instruction manuals such as flight emergency procedure cards and picture books. Claims have been made for hieroglyphs and logographs but they belong to the category of writing (Davies, 2004); a pictogram is not the same as a picture. The exception is where hieroglyphs accompany a mural painting or sculpture. (McLoud, 1993).

The defining characteristic of juxtaposed image narratives is the degree to which their images narrate. By this is meant that a given panel conveys a sense of past, present and future and is not a frozen moment; there is a sense of something happening. This is obvious where something is represented as moving – a person walking, gesturing in some way, doing some prosaic activity, or natural movement like waves crashing on a beach. Though the single image can narrate and possesses a structural relation those in with juxtaposed image narratives, it is the fact of the latter's juxtaposition in series that make for a different encounter, and thus, a separate medium.

Graphic story is a better name for the form under discussion than comics or graphic novels, for these do not comfortably describe all the forms of presentation they can take. A three-page comic is not a graphic novel, which implies a square bound book. The graphic story possesses its own unique signifiers: presence as a printed pamphlet or book containing a series of juxtaposed images within panel borders, often containing balloon shapes with text in them, plus, unique 'cartoon' symbols and other lines suggesting mental states, emotions, indexical lines and so on (Cohn, 2007-2011).

## The Alchemy of Graphic Stories: Making Gold Out of Graphite.

There is an unwritten rule in comics (and other media): show, don't tell, or, more precisely: illustrate, don't write. In essence, this requires the author(s) to use the facility of images to tell the story as much as possible. Robert Harvey suggests that the ideal comic is one where in a given panel, words or pictures alone cannot convey all the information needed (Harvey, 1996). This perhaps unintentionally omits the widely used wordless images in comics, be they a few panels within a text-laden story, such as Chester Browns' *I Never Liked You* (Brown, 1994), and Gregory Mackays' *Francis Bear* (Mackay, 2010), or a wordless graphic stories such as Shaun Tans' *The Arrival* (Tan, 2006); in this, the entire narrative is conveyed by images alone.

Graphic stories are frequently collaborative projects. A Taylor system characterises the major American companies, DC, Marvel, Image and Dark Horse, but also the Franco-Dutch *Bandes Dessinees*, where editors pair up writers with visual artists to work on established intellectual properties. More often than not, a team of specialists are hired to produce the illustrations: penciller, inker, colourist, letterer and sometimes another for layout. The comic script is usually similar to a screenplay or playscript, formatted to list pages and its panels; for each of these, there obtains a description of the setting, characters and action, then the dialogue spoken or narration if any, plus captions spelling out place and time. The script is sent to the penciller/artist who then *adapts* it for images; a work in one medium is being rendered in another. The heart of collaboration lies here: two minds brings different storytelling solutions to the work: one in words, the other in images. This should not be surprising, for just as images and sound are processed the occipital and temporal lobes, the minds output comes from the dominant and minor frontal lobes (Winston, 2003).

It is worthwhile to tease out these differences. We can describe almost any natural object or artefact with words; conversely, mention of a word can evoke its mental image: an object or an idea in the case of nouns; an action in the case of verbs; a quality in the case of adjectives; quantities in the case of numbers. Grammatical and syntactic rules govern their usage dependent upon the language and culture. Added to the Babel of cultural languages is specialist technical jargon; both exclude a majority of people from access to them without translation.

Man-made images on the other hand are universally understood, especially if they are representational. Humanity, irrespective of culture, shares a degree of commonality: emotions, senses, appetites, even humour to a point. Everybody laughs, cries, gets angry, tired, scared. The triggers are in part culturally specific and part the individuals' own rationalisation of the world. Looking at cave art such as that found at Altamira or Lascaux, we can see they depict a menagerie of animals observed at the time. Others depicted human figures alongside, to give paleoanthropologists clues (along with tools and remains dug up from the cave floors) to our predecessors' lifestyle and surmise why they chose to depict these aspects of their culture. The images do not need a Rosetta stone to unlock what they describe, although what they once meant is another matter. A contemporary example is the picture book, which has shown that images are the most efficacious way to teach literacy by associating words to an image of something in the world. By reading these books aloud to children, they learn spoken words have a corresponding visual (written) form. Graphic stories can do the same.

This is the key to the encounter with juxtaposed image narratives and graphic stories. The use of representational images allows readers to engage with people or characters in a manner very similar to the real world where we perceive several forms of language at once: the spoken word, the manner of speaking – tone, inflection – body language and facial expression. Prose can describe these features, but laboriously, whereas drawing communicates them immediately, as we do in experience. Thanks to common humanity, there is a universal set of signs that viewers and readers can understand: a creased brow, red face, shouting, stabbing gestures signifies anger; fear is signified by wide eyes, open mouth, shrinking, hands up, defensive posture, a pale face. In graphic stories, these signs can be assisted by an array of unique signs to make it doubly clear, such as sweat drops, the use of large type to illustrate shouting, although representational, 'realistic' graphic stories will usually aver from these. In life, there are cases where a person deliberately restrains themselves from showing the usual signals of say, anger, but even there, subtle signs prevail: a stony face, monosyllabic replies, stiff posture, cutting off a conversation and walking out. Within a series of panels, graphic stories can replicate this narrative of human experience. It relies on readers to 'read' the images in order to extract maximum content, even if – as in life – this opens the problem of interpreting visual signs accurately.

Returning to the temporal difference in visual processing of image and word mentioned earlier, their juxtaposition in the same panel of a graphic story requires information to be processed at two different rates. Alighting on a page of comics, the eye gathers all the visual information first, acknowledging the presence of text, which is most commonly contained within word balloons; at this stage, they are purely visual elements. The mind then necessarily focuses on the words to process them, but this reading takes place within the context of freshly absorbed and ever present images; the eye is guided by the speech balloon tails into the images to register which character is speaking, noting the facial features and body language to gauge their psychological and emotional state, then the reader moves on to the next balloon and speaker if in the same panel, or the next one if not (Groensteen, 2007). Graphic stories admit these 'silent' languages to be seen in tandem with the written word. A single image can do this, but graphic stories can depict them in series over time, as in life. Even the tone and inflection of voice can be illustrated with the use of changes of typeface, italicising, scale and addition of cartoon symbols (Khordoc, 2001). There is a library of graphic story fonts designed for this purpose, so that robots can have their speech illustrated with a squarish, mechanical font; monsters with a dripping, harsh looking font and so on. These signs have developed over the past century in comics and speculative fiction, gaining familiarity through use.

## **Drawing Words, Drawing Pictures.**

For Barthes, images are polysemous, but the presence of words fixes a narrower meaning (Barthes, 1978). Aside from the question of what happens when there are no words in the panel, it does not account for the ability of images to be unambiguous, or contend with the fact that words are also polysemous, with multiple definitions based on grammatical context, speech patterns, intent, accidental and deliberate misuse. Only a reader, with their mind interpreting the words and images against the backdrop of their memory, personality, background, mood at time of reading, can fix a meaning, which, by fact of being a member of a particular culture and society, with a fairly homogenous set of beliefs and values, is likely to result in a fairly uniform interpretation.

A prose novel or story mostly inhabits the mental space of characters and by proxy, the author via a first or third person voice. Words describe what they hear and see, their reaction and opinions, their decisions and actions. The reader inhabits the world of the protagonist(s), identifying with them in their progress from one stage of life to another. In graphic stories, the reader views what is going on almost exclusively in the third person (though the first person view can be used for effect), yet the reader can also experience the narrative voice, getting a first person insight through the use of prose (Versaci, 2007, Carrier, 2000). Frank Miller used this to tremendous effect in *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller, 1985).

In comics, visual description assumes massive redundancy in panel after panel and usually from multiple points of view. Worlds are illuminated, inhabited; they create a mental map. Much can be conveyed without words: a few cobwebs suggest disuse or untidiness; time of day can be indicated by the colour or long shadows; the symbol of cockerel crowing indicates dawn. Here, drawing is writing, adding to the narrative. At the script stage, a few words that will not appear in the final work are all that are needed for the artist to say much. If an artist is his or her own writer, then their methodology may start with drawing, putting the words in later. By drawing a narrative through its *mise en panel*, characters, symbols, visual metaphors, quotations; writing and drawing become one. If the artist and writer are different people, then the latter has to be careful to include their intent in words; descriptions can become detailed. A script by Alan Moore can expend a page describing a panel, going far beyond what is to be seen, evoking an entire era, mood and background. Eddie Campbell encountered reams of such description when illustrating their famous collaboration, *From Hell*, but as he described it, Moore's evocative language allowed him to create the stark, etching-like images that recreate a vivid feel of the late Victorian ambience.

### **Mise en Panel.**

As with the figure, the key to creating a sense of place and time, or setting in graphic stories is observation based representational drawing, which can convey more than merely describing an object. With the use of different line qualia (from the implement and/or medium used), tone, chiaroscuro and colour, it can express mood, feelings, emotion, in short, impart a psychological connotation akin to the readers own perception. This is where the commonality of experience can be depended upon, though much of this meaning may be culturally structured, using and abusing stereotypes and symbols embedded with social and historical significance. For instance, a dark, empty urban street at night does not evince a secure feeling, especially if there follows a panel of a young woman walking alone.

A painting or single image hanging in a gallery or reproduced in print or on screen, invites the 'long look' (Hughes, 1990). The expectation is a viewer will meditate upon it both as an object and its subject, decoding from its composition of marks, symbols, figure/ground relationships, colours, textures, a meaning that is peculiar to it. Thus, the visual arts medium suits a depiction either representationally or not, of abstract concepts. This could be love, racial prejudice, human capacity for atrocity, or alienation in urban environments. In a graphic story, a panel – which is technically a single image – is juxtaposed with others; this generates an active, quicker reading because the story is following a character(s) with whom the reader has identified and wishes to find out what happens next. This does not mean a single panel cannot be meditated upon, or that abstract concepts cannot be conveyed through the narrative. By replicating and relying on the readers shared experience, abstract concepts become a *subject* for contemplation via proxy thanks to being a narrative.

In the visual arts, pure abstraction works because of the viewers capacity to meditate, but such an image will not work in juxtaposed image narratives, not because a reader cannot contemplate the image, but because a sequence of purely abstract images makes no sense. However, there is nothing to stop an author composing an abstract story whose narrative is

non-linear. An idea can be conveyed by aspect-to-aspect transitions and the use of non-sequiturs; their presence building an idea by association (McLoud, 1993).

Scott McLoud has argued that the basic symbolic smiley face – which is more a concept or idea of a face – allows a viewer to substitute himself or the idea of humanity into it, thus making it a universal and more powerful image (McLoud, 1993). It can be argued the contrary is true: the more detail there is, the closer a drawing represents an actual thing or character person, the greater emotional pull the reader has with it for the character is seen as a person and not a type; one that the reader can care about and desire to spend the time getting to know in the story. That is the art of storytelling. Part of the fascination with the narrative fresco cycles in Italian churches is the depiction of once existing people within biblical contexts.

These qualia of graphic stories also apply to the creation of completely fantastic worlds and imaginary beings, the mental landscapes of dreams, a visual depiction of the imagination as in Alan Moore and J.H. Williams' *Promethea* (Moore, Williams, J.H., 2000). It is not coincidental that the graphic story medium has long been dominated by the genre of speculative fiction, for it can depict things that words themselves may struggle to describe or have much impact. A battle between a superhero and his archenemy seems paltry in words alone.

Aside from pure abstraction, there is little that cannot be depicted with the charcoal as with the quill, the Wacom tablet as with Microsoft Word. Far more can be 'written' with an image than can be said in words because with a few marks, it can access the visual, wordless languages of communication we use in everyday life. It can also replicate these visual signs of ideas by association or symbol, thus proving that whilst every picture – or drawing in this case - may not say a thousand words, it can say a lot.

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