

SLIDE ONE

Plot, picture and practice: comics, picture books and illustrated literary fiction

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Reporting on a January 2012 joint session of the Modern Language Association of America's Division on Children's Literature and the Discussion Group on Comics and Graphic Narratives, co-convenor Charles Hatfield stated, "Scholars of the picture book (Nodelman; Spaulding; Nikolajeva & Scott; op de Beeck) have noted the aesthetics and reading demands of comics. Conversely, comics theorists (McCloud; Varnum & Gibbons) have suggested formal likenesses between [them] —including shared aesthetic resources, the relevance of word/image theory to both, and the growing prominence of comics in children's publishing and reading instruction."

Session contributor Perry Nodelman stated that the formal definitions of each register continually contradict and confound each other, whilst Phillip Nel theorised that differences between picture books and comics result from particular author poesis, generating clustering, but not absolute, habits of form. Developing this idea, Joseph Thomas noted that each registers' governing conventions also dictate and direct the uses to which picture books and comics are put.

Relationships between form and the conditions of production and use of books that utilise text and image also form the axis of a more recent paper by Joe Sutliff Sanders, who writes, "Despite the obvious differences between [picture books and comics], nearly all of the formal terms most commonly used to define one can also easily be applied to the other. Still, in one of the common observations about both forms—that words and images work together to create meaning—lies the first step in a path toward distinguishing the two." (84)

These formal terms include the identification and generalisation of different types of plot transition (page to page in picture books, panel to panel in comics), the distribution of plot events, the frequency of page turns, the distribution and types of information provided by text and images and the shapes, proportions and production materials of both registers, to note only a few.

SLIDE TWO – comic

I should say immediately that this paper will consider only three types of book in which text and image are utilised to present the diegesis: comics for children and adult readers,

SLIDE THREE – picture book

Picture books for children and

SLIDE FOUR – illustrated literary fiction

Illustrated literary fiction for children and adult readers. Although some of the terms of my discussion plausibly find application in all text/image productions, for the purpose of this paper, I will set aside, for example, contemporary digital applications and 16th and 17th century emblem books to focus on the implications of making distinctions between these three.

SLIDE FIVE – page and grid

Both Sanders, Sophie Van der Linden and Natalie Op de Beek independently generalise the formal distinctions between comics and picture books in similar ways, arguing that, despite exceptions, "[...] comics *tend* to use multiple panels per page, with closure between them; picture books *tend* to use full-page or double-page images, with closure coming at the gutter or during the page turn.", for example, as Sanders writes

(79, italics in original).

SLIDE SIX – Sendak and Sloper

However, this type of generalisation leads Nel to think that the registers “[...] differ in degree, rather than in kind.” (445), an idea that discourse analysis easily undermines, and to which I shall return. Formal distinctions themselves are produced and subsequently developed and determined by different habits of reading and use. In a sense, formal analysis necessitates theorisations of discourse because particular forms habituate particular practices and not others.

As Sanders writes, “Picture books have the shape that they do, for example, because their design anticipates a dual readership in which a speaking reader will chaperone the words. They are often horizontal rather than vertical, and even when they are vertical, they tend to be oversized. These shapes make the sharing of picture books easier, so that a speaking reader might spread the book over two laps while performing the words for the listening reader.” (64). They are also designed to be durable, for repeat readings.

American mainstream comics, on the other hand, have historically been produced as soft-cover magazines to be privately handled by an individual reader, notwithstanding the culture of swapping that they inculcated, to be consumed on first reading and disposed of.

In each case, as Nodelman points out, “[...] the structural conventions of these two forms of storytelling [...] imply specific values, specific ideologies, and cultural assumptions [...]” (443). As a case in point, the differences between the practice of solitary comics reading and the shared practice of reading picture books finds its direct corollary in the possibility or impossibility of reading their words aloud. Although there are exceptions, reading comics aloud will not usually produce a plot, because some information crucial to the plot’s sense is derived exclusively from images. Text that indexes information already provided in some part by an image is always strictly superfluous, although there are many examples of comics that both show and tell plot events as a stylistic device.

SLIDE SEVEN – Edgar Jacobs

Rather, the formal arrangement of picture books facilitates reading aloud, by an adult to a child, requiring the text in the book to produce a coherent plot independent of the encompassing depicted diegesis in which it is embedded. As opposed to Jacob’s strictly superfluous, although stylistically masterful, indexical text, for example, images in picture books are often literally indexed, as the read-aloud text produces the plot, by pointing at the images with a finger.

This identification of the relationships between the differing functions of text/image books and their particular forms coalesces in the identification of picture books and comic books as different registers, rather than generic types within some larger register. Identification of function is, for example, one of the primary three steps of register definition, according to linguists Biber and Conrad (7), the other two being the identification of lexical features (which might be shared across registers) and the identification of ‘situational characteristics’ (by which Biber and Conrad mean their poesis, including habits of use, which can also be shared across registers).

According to these markers, picture books and comics certainly share lexical features that submit to formal analysis, but they do not share situational characteristics or functions, which remain formally ineluctable, even if submissive to analysis of the relationships to function and situation of which they are the result.

SLIDE EIGHT – Trollope page with Millais or Thackeray-Doyle

I have left it until now to introduce illustrated literary fiction into the discussion. The identification of register seems like an appropriate place to begin to

glance at illustration and the novel, for example, because its lexical mix, situational characteristics and functions are much easier to describe. For example, it is unusual for the illustrations that contribute to the register to take wordless part in presenting the action of the plot. Rather, plot is the business of the text alone. Lexically, illustrations contribute to the diegesis by presenting appearances rather than actions or, if they do show actions (as they might in adventure fiction), they only index the text's presentation of the action. They never replace it. Of course, in doing this they also show things that are not told in the text, but the possible removal of these never compromises the events of the plot and, indeed, illustrations are often excised in versions and reprints. Discursively and functionally, Illustrated fiction conforms to the situations and uses of text-only fiction, to be read alone in variety and genre by adults and children, possibly returned to, possibly not, as a pursuit of leisure, for entertainment.

Presenting appearances that are untold in the text, then, is the central lexical role of illustrations in literary fiction. In the register, Illustrations are truly para-text in this sense. Although the text remains coherent without them, the appearances they present are functionally denuded and objectified by their removal from the text. Alongside text, illustrations formally constrain the diegesis by making aspects of it visible, as text cannot. What is unsaid in text may be seen in illustration. A common complaint made against the inclusion of indexical visualisations in fiction highlights the constraining of details that remain unsaid by images in which these details are clearly shown (ref?).

Sanders (2013) frames the relationships between showing and telling as a struggle between antithetical lexical domains, which the different forms of text/image books play out in different ways, produced by the habits of different types of use. His central conceit derives from Roland Barthes' (1985:28) notion that in a world burgeoning to the point of terror with what he calls "[...] uncertain signs [...]", we produce meaning through the application of lexical constraints. In illustrated literary fiction, the image constrains what remains unsaid by showing it, providing specific appearances for aspects of the diegesis left out of the text.

SLIDE NINE – Reading a picture book

In the case of picture books, Sanders turns this relationship around, arguing that the words constrain the images in a relationship that he describes as 'chaperoning' (60). He convincingly extrapolates this lexical relationship into the register-identifying domains of situation and function, effectively defining the picture book formally and discursively: "[...] if the book [...] anticipates a reader who chaperones the words as they are communicated to a listening reader, that book is a picture book.", he writes (61), adding: "What is at stake in each step of this process from the narrowing of the images' meaning through the pronouncement [...] of words is inevitably power: the words have power over the images, and the speaker has power over the words." (64).

SLIDE TEN – reading a comic

For Sanders, however, comics produce a different relationship of lexical constraints, both formally or discursively: "[...] if the book anticipates a solitary reader who chaperones the words as they go about their work of fixing the meaning of the images, that book is a comic; [...]" (61), he writes, adding that comics are, "[...] for readers who read themselves, which means that the solitary reader chaperones the words." (63).

Sanders enables a broad theorisation of the situations of reading in which the power relationships implied by constraining words play out, including the historic antipathy of librarians towards comics and the proliferation of adult conceptions of childhood through the uses and forms of picture books. However, as his subject is solely the lexical constraints offered by comics and picture books, he does not take the opportunity to explore the implications of the idea of lexical constraint in cases of images

constraining words, such as the text in illustrated literary fiction or, indeed, the diegetic text occupying a unique place as dialogue or sound effects in comics.

SLIDE ELEVEN – comic sound effect

In these cases, other theorisations of images are required, than what Sanders describes as Barthes' sense of images as awesome and polysemic: "The sea of possible meanings is terrifying", he reports, being "[...] sublime in the Burkean sense that it is too enormous to be comprehended." and necessitating "[...] language's ability to reduce the range of meanings in an image." (60).

Comics theorist Phillipe Marion grounds one such alternative theory of images relative to text by applying conventional language-derived narratological conventions to drawn images in particular. Replacing the 'speaking' narrator of text with the neologism 'graphiator', he establishes graphic trace (the mark on the page) as the enunciative unit, grounding the words that appear in comics in a theoretical system dominated by the style of drawings (Baetens date). For Marion, images are as bounded and constraining as words, contra-Barthes, presenting specific, complex diegeses that words are unable to describe completely. The style of the mark takes its place alongside narrative voice, literary stylistics and the focalisation of movie.

SLIDE TWELVE – Medway

As an example, briefly consider a demonstration that I made in 2010, designed to show the possible effects of visual style, the bones of the image, upon text. Following Marion, in the demonstration I self-consciously attempted to draw a page made by one comic artist, encoding the presence of a particular 'graphiator' in the style of another comic artist, in order to gauge the effects of this change in 'graphiation' upon plot and text. These pages are from *Teen Witch*, a 2007 comic by artists Jim Medway. Note the way in which Medway's drawing style creates a specific diegesis to which text conforms and note in particular the meaning of the word 'Princess' uttered by the mother of a teenage girl in a restaurant in Greater Manchester. Generically, Medway's pages are 'funny animal' pages, and the style of his drawing concurs with this.

SLIDE THIRTEEN – Mignola

This page is by Mike Mignola, from his 2000 short story compilation *The Right Hand of Doom*. Mignola's page is firmly within the fantasy/horror genre of comics and his style of drawing is also utterly expected.

SLIDE FOURTEEN – Medway as Mignola

These are the pages that I drew from Medway's pages script in the style of Mignola. There is much to discuss here, but I would like to draw your attention again to the word 'Princess'. The text is identical in Mignola style as it is in Medway style, as is the plot. The change in drawing style, however, changes the meaning of the word completely. In Medway's original, 'Princess' is a term of affection, a pet name used by a mother for her daughter. In Mignola style the teenage girl could plausibly, quite literally be a princess. The word is a proper title used in a diegetic environment, created by the style of the image, in which princesses are as likely as not to be found.

Formal analysis of the relationships between text and image in comics, picture books and illustrated literary fiction of necessity leads to analysis of the ways in which their respective forms are put to use. Arising in turn from an analysis of register according to Biber and Conrad, mutually framing form and discourse, the relationships between images and texts in these distinct situations opens to theorisations that go beyond definition and allow for more far-reaching insights into narrative and style.

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