



Defining Graphic Novels The Contentious Case of Wordless Novels

Mémoire

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Résumé

Malgré la longue et riche histoire des bandes dessinées, leur définition continue de stimuler le débat parmi les experts. Ces derniers ne parviennent toujours pas à s'entendre sur la composition d'une bande dessinée, certains choisissant de mettre l'emphase sur l'usage de phylactères ou de lignes de mouvement, tandis que d'autres insistent plutôt sur la présence d'éléments à la fois graphiques et narratifs. Une définition impeccable est peut-être improbable, mais un problème mérite toutefois d'être adressé : il s'agit bien sûr de la constante exclusion des romans graphiques sans texte. Cette catégorie d'œuvres est parfois mentionnée, mais se révèle plus souvent ignorée par les experts. En effet, les définitions courantes persistent à représenter les bandes dessinées comme un indéniable mélange de texte et d'images. Ce mémoire cherche donc à démontrer la nécessité de définitions plus inclusives, afin d'incorporer les romans graphiques sans texte. D'abord, en explorant l'histoire du médium et le rôle du texte dans la création et la lecture des romans graphiques, nous réfuterons les idées préconçues qui ont apporté à l'élément textuel de la bande dessinée une allure de nécessité. Puis, à travers l'analyse des romans graphiques sans texte *The Arrival* de Shaun Tan et *The System* de Peter Kuper, nous rendrons évidente la nature facultative du texte dans le processus de création d'une histoire de bande dessinée. Finalement, avec le support d'exemples provenant des romans graphiques *The System* de Peter Kuper et *Asterios Polyp* de David Mazzucchelli, nous analyserons le rôle de l'image dans le développement de la complexité narrative d'une histoire de bande dessinée, afin de prouver qu'une image n'est pas intrinsèquement plus simpliste qu'un extrait de texte. Les romans graphiques sans texte méritent tout autant l'attention académique reçue par les bandes dessinées avec texte, et devraient ainsi être reconnus dans les définitions courantes du médium.

Abstract

In spite of comics' long and rich history, their definition remains today a significant source of contention in the field. Scholars cannot seem to agree on what constitutes comics, with some of them stressing the importance of conventions such as speech balloons or motion lines, and others focusing on the pictorial and narrative elements of the form. A perfect definition may be impossible, but one issue that needs to be addressed is the current exclusion of wordless graphic novels. While occasionally acknowledged, these works remain mainly ignored, as most working definitions present comics as a combination of text and image. This thesis intends to show that there is a need for more inclusive definitions of the medium, in order to incorporate wordless graphic novels. By first exploring the wordless ancestry of the medium and the role of text in creating and reading graphic novels, this thesis refutes the foundationally baseless assumptions about the form that have made text so widely accepted as a defining element. Then, through an analysis of Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* and Peter Kuper's *The System*, both of which are wordless graphic novels, this thesis demonstrates the superfluous nature of text when it comes to narrative in this medium. Finally, through readings of Peter Kuper's *The System* and David Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp*, the thesis considers the contribution of the image to the complexity of graphic novels with and without text, in order to prove that images are not more simplistic in nature than text. The case is thereby made that wordless novels are as worthy of academic attention as graphic novels with text, and deserve acknowledgement in definitions of the medium.

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Introduction

In 1967, Salvador Dali famously said, “comics will be the culture of the year 3794. So you have 1827 years notice... This will be the birth of Comics-Art, and on this occasion we will hold a grand opening with my divine presence on March 4th, 3794 at precisely 19.00 hours” (qtd. in Beaty v). Dali humorously predicted the rise of comics in the academic and artistic worlds, although, thankfully, his 1827 years of notice proved excessive. In the 1980s, a wave of critically acclaimed graphic novels – including in particular Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986), and Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1986) – made a splash on the literary scene, proving that comics could, in fact, be serious and sophisticated (Gordon 179). The positive reception of these works paved the way for more creators to experiment with the form; today, comics are taught in university courses, analyzed in scholarly essays, included in artistic exhibitions, and read by adults and youth alike. The journey to such recognition was, however, not an easy one. Despite two centuries of existence and history, the fact that comics only gained the respect of scholars and critics in the late 1980s renders evident the many assumptions and prejudice that have crippled and stunted its development for so long.

One crucial source of debate and contention in the field has been the medium’s terminology. Scholars today still fail to agree on the terms to use when discussing comics. In order to avoid confusion in this thesis, the introduction should first outline the terms that will be used and how they should be understood. The first terminological question to answer is: are comics a genre or a medium? The difference between the two terms may seem subtle or insignificant, but is in fact important to the way we approach comics. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines a medium as “a channel or system of communication, information or entertainment” and as “a mode of artistic expression or communication” (“Medium” n. pag.). A genre, on the other hand, is defined as “a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form or content” (“Genre” n. pag.). In simpler terms, a medium is a broader, more encompassing form of communication, delimited only by a few distinctive features, whereas a genre refers to a smaller category of works with a more specific type of content or style. Genres are commonly accepted as a category within a medium, like how novels or poetry are viewed

as genres in literature. Douglas Wolk, following that same line of thought, defines genres as “kinds of stories with specific... subjects and conventions” (*Reading* 11); likewise, he defines media as “forms of expression that have few or no rules regarding their content other than the very broad ones imposed on them by their form” (11). He views genres as much more specific and restricted than media. He cites Westerns, Regency romances and film noir as examples of genres, while prose fiction, sculpture and video are, to him, examples of what a medium is (11). How broad or how specific a medium or a genre is may differ from one scholar to another, but the key idea here is that a genre is a subcategory of a medium.

When the form first gained academic recognition, it was received as “a new genre” of literature (Tabachnick 1; Ghosn 12). Its close relation with textual literature played a significant role in its legitimization; it is, after all, the use of the term “graphic novel” that first allowed narratives such as Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God* (1978) to be considered separate from the “lesser regarded ‘comic book’” (Holston 12). It therefore made sense, at first, to view these new visual narratives as a genre of literature. However, as the form continued to evolve and produce more and more valued works, it became evident that comics were not merely a subset of literature, but rather a completely separate form. More and more scholars now advocate for the recognition of comics as a medium, not a genre (Holston 11; Wolk, *Reading* 11). Wolk even claims that the “genre/medium confusion is an error of ignorance” (12), referring to how it implies a limited perception of what comics can accomplish. As Barbara Postema also explains, “comics exist in many forms and genres” (Postema xiv), which means that they are unlikely to be a genre. Instead, they are a medium that includes a variety of genres. Their annexation to textual literature – through being called a literary genre – is also a symptom of the perceived superiority of text over image, which will be explored in more depth in Chapter 1 of this thesis. Therefore, as comics are now commonly accepted as a medium, they will be referred to as such in the present study.

Once we have agreed that comics are a medium, the following question remains: should we call them comics or graphic novels? To some, the two terms are interchangeable (Zhao 61; Tan, “The Accidental” 2). To others, however, the distinction is crucial, as one term connotes quality, while the other implies mainstream and commercial content aimed

at fast consumption and profit. Wolk exemplifies that view when he states that “the cheap way of referring to them is ‘comics’ or ‘comic books’; the fancy way is ‘graphic novels’ (or ‘graphic narratives’ or ‘sequential art’)” (*Reading* 61). Renowned publishers hold on to the term “graphic novel” to elevate the works they publish to the same respectability that comes with text-only novels (Versaci 196). Likewise, some have even argued that comics were an underdeveloped and primitive form until they flourished and transformed into the modern graphic novel (Holston 11). This approach is nevertheless problematic, for the simple reason that the distinction between comic books and graphic novels is often based on a subjective perception of quality and prestige, and not on any concrete differences in content or form (Marshall and Kovacs vii). While it is understandable that scholarly analysis would only be conducted on works that demonstrate a certain level of depth and artistic value, it is much less sensible to view sophisticated or “serious” comics as an entirely separate medium from mediocre or juvenile comics. In textual literature, a poorly written novel is still a novel. In cinema, a subpar film is still a film. Hence, in comics, an unsophisticated or shallow graphic novel should still be considered a graphic novel. If the terms “comics” and “graphic novel” are to be used distinctively, let it be on the basis of differences in format or range, not prejudice against the medium’s earlier works.

In this thesis, then, the term “comics” will be used as a term meant to encompass the entire medium, while “graphic novel” will refer to a more specific category of comics. In fact, graphic novels may be viewed as a genre of comics, not unlike how novels are a genre of literature. This approach is in line with Ariela Freedman, who prefaced her article “Comics, Graphic Novels, Graphic Narrative: A Review” with the following explanation: “I follow Spiegelman and McCloud’s example in using the word ‘comics’ as an umbrella term to refer to the medium, though I also use ‘graphic narrative’ and ‘graphic novel’ to refer to formats and genres when appropriate” (30). The main distinctive qualities of a graphic novel – as opposed to other types of comics, like the comic strip or the comic book – acknowledged in this thesis are the length and narrative structure of the work. A comic will be referred to as a graphic novel if it is a longer, “extended narrative” that “may go on for hundreds of pages” (Goldsmith 185). For instance, Art Spiegelman, creator of *Maus*, calls his works “comic books that need bookmarks” (qtd. in Versaci 1). The narrative should also be complete, “presented with a definite beginning, middle, and end, as opposed

to comic strips that appear weekly or comic books in which a cast of characters has infinite ongoing plotlines” (Short and Reeves 416). Graphic novels, unlike comic books or comic strips, are longer and depict a fully structured narrative, although they may sometimes come in multiple installments or volumes. Meanwhile, comics are the medium that comprises graphic novels and all other genres. This is how the terms “graphic novel” and “comics” will be used heretofore.

In some rare instances, the term “bande dessinée” will also be introduced, particularly when looking into the Francophone side of the field. The terms “comics” and “bande dessinée” were coined in different parts of the world, and therefore in different cultural and social contexts. Consequently, they arguably bear different connotations. Nevertheless, they are commonly used as the translated equivalent of one another, to refer to the medium of comics – as opposed to the genre of graphics novels, which in French would be termed “romans graphiques” (Ghosn 10; Groensteen, “Définitions” 36). Thierry Groensteen exemplifies this approach when he details the evolution of the term “comics” in this way: “Le mot *comic* caractérise les dessins rassemblés dans ces pages, en explicitant leur vocation humoristique. Mais, par un glissement sémantique lourd de conséquence, l’épithète ne tarde pas à être substantivée et par désigner la bande dessinée comme telle” (“Définitions”¹⁸, italics Groensteen’s). In other words, if “comic” (or “comics”) used to refer to a more specific – and more strictly humoristic – type of content, it now encompasses the same works as does the term “bande dessinée.” The two terms will therefore be used as both referring to the medium of comics, or to works of comics in general. Some scholars cited in this thesis occasionally choose to use the term “bande dessinée” in their English essays or books, typically because they are in this particular instance reviewing French works (Miller 75; Stein and Thon 7), or sometimes to acknowledge the medium’s potential genesis in Francophone Europe in the early nineteenth century – a theory which will be examined more closely in Chapter 1. Either way, this thesis will continue to use the term “comics” to refer to the medium under study here, except in some instances when it discusses French works or cites scholars who employ the term “bande dessinée.”

The next terms that may cause confusion are “image” and “picture.” In a thesis that explores the relationship between pictorial and textual elements, these two terms will

understandably be used frequently, but can they be used interchangeably? According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, an image is defined as “a reproduction or imitation of the form of a person or thing” or as “a visual representation of something: such as... a likeness of an object produced on a photographic material” (“Image” n. pag.). Meanwhile, a picture is defined as “a design or representation made by various means (such as painting, drawing, or photography)” or as “a transitory visible image or reproduction” (“Picture” n. pag.). Both terms can refer to the type of pictorial content found in comics, which is usually drawn. Pictures, however, come with an expectation of realistic representation to which an image is not bound. Indeed, the term “picture” is used to refer to photographs or film – for instance, with “moving pictures” (“Picture” n. pag.) – whereas an image is rarely expected to portray reality exactly as it is. The connotation of an “image” as only having a “likeness of an object” allows for the style of the creator to be considered with more depth. As a result, the term “image” will be most commonly used in this thesis.

Finally, to conclude this overview of terminology, I will often discuss the idea of “reading” images, even when no words are involved. While this may seem unusual in terms of diction, numerous scholars have already discussed reading images in comics. Barbara Postema, for instance, claims that “pictorial images are scanned and require reading, just as literary images do” (Postema 14); she sees no difference between reading a text and reading a wordless image. Others, such as Carmen M. Martínez-Roldán and Sarah Newcomer (189) and Rocco Versaci (14), share this view as well. Even in the field of painting, Ann Demeester, while discussing seventeenth-century Dutch painting, explains that it “expressed joy and sorrow, surprise and anger, fear and disgust in ways that could be read” (6). She therefore shows that reading images is not an expression limited to the study of media that sometimes involve text, such as comics. According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, “to read” denotes “receiv[ing] or tak[ing] in the sense of (letters, symbols, etc.)” or “interpret[ing] the meaning or significance” (“Read” n. pag.). This means that symbols – or codes – other than letters can be read. Roland Barthes’ conception of multi-layered messages in photographs (36) demonstrates that images have a literal and a symbolic message, separate from their linguistic message, if text is even present (37). By decoding an image’s non-textual signs and connotations, a reader can uncover its meaning, which is a process not unlike that in which a reader would decode words in a sentence to

make sense of it. Hence, this thesis will discuss the “reading” of images in graphic novels, regardless of whether they include words or not.

Of course, the terminology of comics has not been the only source of contention in the field. The very introduction of comics into academia and scholarly analysis has been a strenuous process. For the better part of the twentieth century, the medium was perceived as a juvenile form of art, despite the fact that comics were not initially designed for young audiences. The two artists most commonly cited as the creators of the form, William Hogarth (1697-1764) and Rodolphe Töpffer (1799-1846), produced sequential art – “histoires en estampes,” as Töpffer called them – that was intended to be funny, but with implications of satire and even cynicism, which only adults were meant to understand. Hogarth’s harsh criticism of social morals in his art elicited controversy (Kunzle, *The Early Comic* 298; 338), because his stories depicted themes of a graphic – and often sexual – nature, from prostitution to adultery, and from greed to tragic deaths. Following in his footsteps, Töpffer created, almost a century later, his 1833 *Histoire de Monsieur Jabot*, a comedic story that, while bordering on the slapstick in its approach, was also a satirical representation of a future that he perceived as industrial and mindless (Smolderen 6). This means that the very first etchings of the medium were designed for appreciation by older audiences. Even with later iterations of the form, the modern comic strip as we know it today is believed to have come to fruition in the 1880s with *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday*, a serial known to attract a predominantly adult audience (Gibson 105). The belief that comics are inherently simplistic and childish is thus not rooted in fact, but rather in the prejudice that developed in the twentieth century.

The medium’s shift towards more kid-friendly themes began, in fact, in the later part of the nineteenth century, and flourished in the early twentieth century. While sexual themes were predominant in sequential narratives of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the following period saw these themes replaced with slapstick humor and “cleaner” storylines (Kunzle, *The Nineteenth* 1). It was in the early 1900s that content became overtly produced for children, particularly with the release of *Little Orphan Annie* in 1924 (Gardner 246). The three following decades witnessed the gradual infantilization of the medium, which culminated in the infamous *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) by Fredric Wertham, a psychiatrist who claimed that comic books, which he viewed as

primarily violent and vulgar, were a root cause of juvenile delinquency (Wertham 118). This demonization of the form led to the application of strict measures of censorship in the United States, including the Comics Code Authority, which restricted the type of content that could get published (Nyberg 85). By striving to make comics appropriate for all ages, the Code forced the medium into juvenile and redundant conventions, hence reinforcing the already existing belief that comics were childish and unworthy of sophisticated adults' attention.

And this development was not only felt in the United States or in the English-speaking world as a whole: even Francophone scholars record a dismissal of comics – or *bandes dessinées* – in twentieth-century Europe. French scholars Laurent Dubreuil and Renaud Pasquier write in the French magazine *Labyrinthe* that the medium of comics was at that time considered a pariah, or to use the same French term they use, a “voyou”: “Le Voyou serait alors... le visage de la bande dessinée, celui que lui a donné l’histoire” (16). The *bande dessinée*, as a younger art form, is what they call the bastard son of literature and painting, which neither wants to recognize (13). If the general public's attitude towards comics in Francophone Europe is believed to have been overall more positive than in Anglo-America, the prejudice, especially among scholars and critics, was nonetheless present. In the early 1970s, Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle claimed that one would be hard-pressed to find more than 10 decent scholarly works written on comics in France, despite the form being quite old already by that time (6). The deplorable perception of comics – and its many variations around the world – was therefore not just an American issue. This prejudice and dismissal of the form was felt internationally.

Comics however gradually regained traction with mature audiences around the 1960s with the underground movement in the United States, spearheaded by such names as Robert Crumb, Clay Wilson and Victor Moscoso, and later continued by Art Spiegelman, Dan O’Neil and many others (Filippini 8). The works that these cartoonists created were called “comix,” as in “X-rated” (Sabin, *Comics* 7), and re-introduced themes of sex, drugs and violence, in addition to other subversive themes, such as political satire (Round 340). They opposed the strict Comics Code Authority, but their influence became so substantial that mainstream creators eventually followed suit with more mature stories (S. Weiner, *Faster* 28), to the point that the Code was reviewed in 1971 and 1989 to be less restrictive (Nyberg

xii). It is arguably due to the groundbreaking contributions of this subversive movement that the first critically acclaimed graphic novels were published in the late 1970s and 1980s. Will Eisner's 1978 *A Contract with God* is believed to be the first graphic novel of that streak, but the "Big Three" of the 1980s – *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Maus*, and *Watchmen* – are allegedly the ones to have truly solidified the graphic novel's rightful place in academic settings (S. Weiner, "How" 7). Despite the Code only becoming officially defunct in 2011 (Rogers n. pag.), the medium of comics had re-conquered a more mature and sophisticated audience by the end of the 1980s.

Today, while comics still suffer from the occasional scholar's mocking scoff, it is now a legitimate form in the academic world. One of the first major academic conferences on comics – the *1st International Conference on the Graphic Novel* – was held in November 1998 at the University of Massachusetts (O'English et al. 174), and more and more conferences of this type are now organized every year, from the 2002 *Will Eisner Symposium* at the University of Florida (O'English et al. 174) to the *International Graphic Novel and Comics Conference* held every year in the UK since 2010 (*The International* n. pag.). A growing number of academic journals about the medium have been created, including the journals *Image [&] Narrative* (2000), *ImageText* (2004), *Mechademia* (2006), *European Comic Art* (2009), *The Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (2010) and *The Comics Grid* (2012), among many others (Hague 1). Comics have even found their way onto the syllabi of university courses (Tabachnick 14). In fact, the artistic and academic value of comics has grown so significant that Jimmy Beaulieu claims that those who do not understand it in 2007 display a scandalous lack of culture (6). At last, comics have earned their place in academia.

Now that the opposition against the medium has mostly faded, one may ask: now what? What is the next step – or new critical approach – in the study of comics? Now that the recognition of the medium's academic and artistic worth is no longer the main issue, a new challenge has risen: that of its definition. According to Ian Hague, the field of comics studies "must now look to determine their identities and their purposes. This does not only mean asking, 'Why study comics?' but also, 'What are we studying?'" (172). Answering the question of what comics are is not as simple as it might sound. In spite of comics' long and rich history, their definition remains today a significant source of contention in the

field. Scholars cannot seem to agree on what constitutes comics, with some of them stressing the importance of conventions such as speech balloons or motion lines (Carrier 4; Sabin, *Adult* 5), and others focusing on the pictorial and narrative elements of the form (Ciment and Groensteen 15; Miller 75; McCloud 9). Despite the vast and varied array of definitions that exist, scholars such as Aaron Meskin (376) and Bart Beaty (34) assert that most of them, if not all of them, are flawed. Whether they are too vague, too specific, or outright misguided, they fail to set clear and unequivocal criteria for what constitutes and does not constitute a comic. Comics are taught, studied and exhibited, but they remain a theoretical conundrum.

Multiple scholars have qualified the definitional project as unnecessary. Samuel R. Delany, for instance, claims that “the assertion that you cannot discuss any topic in literary studies until you have defined it is both practically and theoretically untrue” (261). To him, defining comics is superfluous and does not actually help to facilitate a conversation about them. In line with Delany’s argument, other scholars, such as Douglas Wolk and David Carrier, assert that comics can easily be recognized and understood without a formal definition. In his 2007 book *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*, Wolk states that “if you have picked up this book and have not been spending the last century trapped inside a magic lantern, you already pretty much know what they are, and ‘pretty much’ is good enough” (17). Similarly, in his 2000 book *The Aesthetic of Comics*, Carrier writes that comics are “an art form almost all of us understand without any need for theorizing” (2). In other words, according to these scholars, defining comics is not just complicated, but is also not a necessary requirement in order to conduct a proper study of the medium. People already know what they are. Therefore, why should anyone mind if the working definitions are currently imperfect?

There are a few answers to that question. First of all, a medium’s definition reflects both its historical and cultural perceptions, be it among scholars or regular consumers. For a long time, as Roger Sabin explains, the definition of comics in the *Oxford English Dictionary* was “a children’s paper... having as its express aim to excite mirth” (*Adult Comics* 1). This definition matched the common belief of the time that comics were a juvenile form of entertainment, primarily aimed at young audiences and created not for artistic purposes, but rather for commercial ones. As the medium gained more recognition

and respect in the early 1990s, the definition was then changed to “a children’s periodical (or)... similar publication intended for adults” (1). While still limiting, this revision was already less dismissive of the form’s potential. Definitions are therefore glimpses into theorists’ current comprehension of the medium.

But more than that, definitions can sometimes influence the popular opinion. Indeed, according to Jim Haendiges, it is in part the work of a small group of theorists that made the legitimization of comics and the broadening of its audience possible (211). The specific approach that enabled this change was to define comics as “sequential visual narratives,” thus connecting them to older and more distinguished forms of visual storytelling (211). In a way, broadening the definition changed the perception of comics as mediocre entertainment, and unlocked the possibility of critical studies on the medium as art. Thus, the act of defining a medium is pertinent and important when it comes to studying a form with such historically contested value as comics.

A perfect definition may be impossible, but one current issue that needs to be addressed – and that *can* be addressed – is the exclusion of entire subsets of the medium due to the inadequate delimitation of the form’s parameters. One such type of comics that particularly suffers from the restrictive approach of most working definitions today are wordless graphic novels. While occasionally acknowledged, these works remain largely ignored in the field of study, as most working definitions present comics as a combination of text and image. From Gabriele Rippl and Lukas Etter, who refer to graphic narratives as “a medium that is able to tell stories through the combination of word and image” (194), to Viviane Alary and Danielle Corrado, who consider comics a mix of discourse, image and narrative (9), definitions that include text or dialogue as one of its core components abound. When acknowledged, text-free works are described as “special cases” (Stein and Thon 4), exceptions that confirm the otherwise necessary presence of text. This approach disregards the many sophisticated and compelling wordless novels published every year, from Eric Drooker’s *Flood!* (1992) to Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* (2006), and thus marginalizes some new experimental and intellectually challenging works.

This thesis intends to show that there is a need for more inclusive definitions of the medium, in order to incorporate wordless graphic novels. By first exploring the wordless

ancestry of the medium and the role of text in creating and reading graphic novels, this thesis will refute the foundationally baseless assumptions about the form that have made text so widely accepted as a defining element. Then, through an analysis of Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* and Peter Kuper's *The System*, both of which are recognized as wordless graphic novels, this thesis will demonstrate the superfluous nature of text when it comes to narrative in the medium. Finally, through readings of Peter Kuper's *The System* and David Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp*, the thesis will analyze the contribution of the image to the complexity of graphic novels with and without text in order to prove that images are not more simplistic in nature than text. The case will thereby be made that wordless novels are as worthy of academic attention as graphic novels with text, and deserve acknowledgement in definitions of the medium.

The idea that comics can be wordless and still have academic value is certainly not new. In 1973, with the first volume of his *History of the Comic Strip*, David Kunzle defined comics as an art form where the image is predominant. His complete definition includes the following elements: "1). There must be a sequence of separate images; 2). There must be a preponderance of image over text; 3). The medium in which the strip appears and for which it is originally intended must be reproductive, that is, in printed form, a mass medium; 4). The sequence must tell a story which is both moral and topical" (*The Early Comic* 2). The first two criteria that Kunzle offers are in line with the argument I will be making in this thesis, in that they qualify the image as more effective than text when it comes to distinguishing comics from other media. This idea reinforces my claim that wordless novels have a rightful place in the medium, and should therefore not be excluded from its definitions. Unfortunately, the last two criteria in Kunzle's definitions have proven problematic and arbitrary. There is no reason to believe that comics created for a limited audience is any less a part of the medium, and many modern experimental comics have shown that the subject matter does not need to be moral nor topical to be of value. As a result, Kunzle's definition has been heavily criticized over the years and scholars have regularly brushed it off as inadequate (Groensteen, "Définitions" 44; Carrier 4; Hague 13). What it does show, however, is that this discussion on the role of text in comics has been going on for at least four decades.

More recently, in 1993, Scott McCloud published his now renowned *Understanding Comics*, which set out to establish comics as a medium worthy of academic attention (140). In the book's first chapter, McCloud proposes the following definition, which reprises the most pertinent components of Kunzle's previous attempt, and sheds the more problematic ones: "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). According to McCloud, what constitutes comics is the presence of images in a purposeful sequence, not text or dialogue. He therefore unquestioningly allows for the possibility of wordless graphic novels, and in fact clearly states that "it doesn't *have* to contain words to be comics" (8). By not imposing restrictions on the subject matter or distribution method, his definition also proves to be more inclusive and overall more applicable than Kunzle's earlier attempt. It is for these reasons that McCloud's definition will be used as a frame of reference in this thesis's argumentation about adequate parameters for the format and aesthetics of comics. His definition is, after all, one of the most popular ones available, often cited by many scholars of the field, including Charles Hatfield (20), Sarah Ziolkowska and Vivian Howard (155), Thierry Groensteen ("Définitions" 56), Stephen Weiner (*Faster* 50), and Ian Hague (13).

Yet, despite the popularity of McCloud's definition, numerous scholars remain unconvinced that text is optional in the formula of comics. For one, Robert C. Harvey, in his 2009 essay "How Comics Came to Be," criticizes McCloud's definition on the ground that it is "simply too broad to be useful as anything except as a springboard to discussion" (25). According to Harvey, "words are clearly an integral part of what we think of when we think of comics" (25), and he adds that comics are "words as well as pictures" (25). In other words, omitting text as a defining element of comics only leads to incomplete definitions, which are too broadly framed to delimit accurately the boundaries of the form. To him, the blending of images and words is at the heart of a graphic novel's creation of meaning, a process that would be impossible without either of the two. Harvey's essay therefore exemplifies the common argument that text and image are both essential to graphic literature, thereby excluding wordless graphic novels. Other scholars, such as David Carrier, Frédéric Duprat, Virginie François and Roger Sabin, also support this

argument by conceptualizing comics as a mixture of image and text, or image and dialogue (Carrier 7; Duprat 2; François 17; Sabin, *Adult* 6).

In line with this view, Gabriele Rippl and Lukas Etter even further challenge Kunzle's and McCloud's idea of narrative in comics as being image-driven. In their essay "Intermediality, Transmediality, and Graphic Narrative," they identify text and image as two different media (194) that comics combine. As a result, they reject the idea of comics as a medium on their own, and instead regard comics as inherently "intermedial," in that they combine two media: words and pictures (194). They also add that this intermediality is the "vital element of storytelling" in comics (197). This statement implies that taking one of the two elements away leaves the format incomplete and unable to produce complex narratives. They acknowledge the existence of wordless novels, but do so while also specifying that the absence of text affects the ease of reading (211). The less text a work has, the more "narrativizing activity" is required on the part of the reader, which means that readers need to put more effort into making sense of the story and message within the image (202). Admittedly, this does not automatically mean that wordless comics have no artistic value, seeing as music is also listed as one of the art forms requiring the most significant amount of narrativizing activity (202), which does not render music any less valuable as art. It does mean, however, that, for Rippl and Etter, wordless comics have less narrative potential than textual literature. Together with the scholars cited above, they represent the counterargument that this thesis will challenge.

In the process of invalidating that approach, this thesis agrees with scholars such as Thierry Groensteen, who argue in favour of image-driven definitions and reject text as a defining element. In his 2012 essay titled "Définitions," Groensteen refutes Harvey's claim that broad definitions like McCloud's are incomplete and problematic, showing, instead, that the definitional project in the field is moving in that very direction: the acceptance of more inclusive and encompassing definitions to enable the consideration of more experimental and unusual works (28). Resisting that evolution is the mark of an outdated approach to studying comics. With this in mind, Groensteen ultimately recommends the use of Ann Miller's definition as a model, because it focuses on images and narrative instead of text (66), which evokes McCloud's definition. In both his essay "Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization?" and his book *The System of Comics*,

Groensteen again qualifies as problematic and damaging to the medium the assumption that comics are a hybrid of text and image (*The System of Comics* 3; “Why Are Comics” 7). He instead believes in the primacy of the image, and speaks of comics as an arrangement of “visual codes” (*The System of Comics* 3), which sometimes involve text, but not always. It is this primacy of the image, as theorized by David Kunzle and later reinforced by Thierry Groensteen, that this thesis will demonstrate, particularly in the area of narrative complexity. The aim is to prove the inessential nature of text in definitions of comics.

To demonstrate my thesis statement, the methodology and theoretical framework will be spread out over the three chapters that constitute this thesis. In Chapter 1, I will show that definitions relying on text are unfounded, despite being the most popular approach to date. To do so, I will compare the points of view of different scholars on the matter of comics history, creation and reading experience; I will thus highlight the dissonance between definitional attempts and historical facts. The first theories about the ancestry of the form will come from Stephen Tabachnick, Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, Frédéric Duprat, and Danièle Alexandre-Bidon. According to Tabachnick, Duncan and Smith, painter William Hogarth initiated comics through his satirical sequential paintings (Tabachnick 2; Duncan and Smith 20). Duprat and Alexandre-Bidon, on the other hand, suggest that the form originates from medieval storytelling techniques. The common denominator of all their theories is that what they propose as the origin of comics is always image-driven.

Then, as I look into the historical influences of other media on the comics form, I will invoke the theories of scholars Mel Gibson, David Kunzle, Rocco Versaci and Thierry Smolderen. While Gibson argues that comics draw inspiration from cinematic techniques (100), Rocco Versaci shows that the medium follows similar patterns as those found in significant movements in painting (6). Likewise, Kunzle and Smolderen also demonstrate influences from the field of photography (Kunzle, *The Nineteenth* 351; Smolderen 104). Again, the pattern reveals how the most recognized influences emanate from visual media, not textual ones.

To this initial working framework, I will add the theories of Benoît Peeters, Jan Baetens, Gilles Ciment and Thierry Groensteen to show that, beyond the historical

argument, the role of text remains minimal in the modern processes for creating and reading comics. Peeters provides examples of famous creators, including Hergé, who have been known to let their story be shaped by the drawings instead of through a formal script (“L’Écriture” 40-41). Baetens also presents an argument in favour of image-driven creative processes, claiming that heavily text-driven ones are damaging and often deliver subpar works (79). As for Ciment and Groensteen, they prefer to focus on the reading experience, arguing that the image is both the first and last thing a reader analyzes, and that the meaning behind a comics panel is communicated through the illustrator’s style, more than through the text (12). As a result, these theorists help demonstrate that it is neither historically nor aesthetically sound to include text as a necessary component of the form.

In Chapter 2, I will make a case for replacing “text” with “narrative” in the working definitions of comics, so that the medium may be refigured as the collaboration between image and narrative. To support this argument, I will invoke Marie-Laure Ryan’s theory of narrative, as outlined in her essay “Toward a Definition of Narrative,” published in the *Cambridge Companion to Narrative* (2007). According to Ryan, narrative is a spectrum, meaning that some works may be “less” narrative than others, while still maintaining their status as a story (28). She also provides a set of eight criteria, which function as a type of checklist. I will apply these criteria to close readings of passages in Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* and Peter Kuper’s *The System*, the goal being to demonstrate that wordless novels can meet all criteria even without text.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I will contest the conception of wordless novels as inherently simplistic and prove that narrative complexity is possible without text. Paul A. Crutcher, in his essay “Complexity in the Comic and Graphic Novel Medium: Inquiry Through Bestselling Batman Stories” (2011), provides a strong theoretical basis for the conceptualization of what complexity means in visual narratives. With his analysis of Batman comics, he leads us to three of the four criteria outlined in Chapter 3 of this thesis: the seriousness of the subject matter (64), the multiplicity of storylines (65), and character interiority (66). In addition, Barbara Postema contextualizes, in *Narrative Structure in Comics: Making Sense of Fragments* (2013), the fourth and last element of complexity: reader involvement. These four criteria will be analyzed through the close reading of multiple samples from Kuper’s *The System* to prove the unequivocal complexity of

wordless narratives. A similar study will then be conducted using David Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp*, a graphic novel with text, to assert that narrative complexity is still not tied to the written word.

Chapter 1

Text in Comics: Why Current Definitions Do Not Make Sense

Although comics only started gaining academic recognition in the 1980s, the definitional project within the medium has been underway for nearly two centuries. Defining a medium presents many challenges, and scholars such as Thierry Groensteen assert that it is an enterprise that never ends, due to the medium being in constant evolution (“Définitions” 50). This may explain why definitions never seem to satisfy and continue to create so much contention among scholars after all this time. However, as established in the introduction, one significant issue with most current definitions of the medium is that their boundaries are too exclusive; they fail to acknowledge the existence and importance of wordless graphic novels. Such definitions that insist on including text as a defining element need to be reevaluated, since they communicate key misconceptions about the role of text and image in comics and graphic novels. This chapter will discuss the illogical nature of such conceptualizations of the medium through an overview of the history of definitions, an exploration of the wordless ancestry of the medium, and an analysis of the role of text in the creative and reading processes of the medium.

The predominance of text in definitions of comics is not a recent issue. In fact, the very first definitions indicate an early tendency to view text and image as both necessary in comics. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Rodolphe Töpffer not only created what is now seen as the first modern comics (Groensteen, “Définitions” 40), but he also contributed what was to be the first etching of a definition for this new medium: “Ce petit livre est d'une nature mixte. Il se compose d'une série de dessins autographiés au trait. Chacun de ces dessins est accompagné d'une ou deux lignes de texte. Les dessins, sans ce texte, n'auraient qu'une signification obscure; le texte, sans les dessins, ne signifieraient rien” (Töpffer 334). For Töpffer, both text and image were essential to his work. If one of the two components were to be taken out of the book, the meaning would be altered, if not entirely erased. The definitional project of comics thereby began as a conceptualized mixture of image and text.

In the 1940s, nearly a century later, not much had evolved. Scholars such as Robert L. Thorndike still treated comics as an inseparable composite of both image and text

(Thorndike 110). It was in the 1970s, however, that there began to be an open-mindedness about the idea of wordless comics, as some tentative definitions began considering text as an optional component of the form. In 1972, Pierre Couperie, an influential critic in France, claimed that comics were a narrative made from images that are “multiple,” “static,” and “juxtaposed” (10), and specified that “neither the framing nor the use of speech balloons is an absolute criterion” (10). To him, forms of visual narrative that did not include text could also be comics. A year later, in 1973, David Kunzle proposed a similar definition of the medium, one that recognized the existence of wordless works by asserting that comics were a sequence of separate images, in which the image had predominance over text (*The Early Comic* 2). His definition, however, was later criticized for excluding too many valid works (Meskin 369), as it also required comics to be created for mass reproduction and to have a topical and moral story (Kunzle, *The Early Comic* 2). His idea of the image’s predominance over text was also criticized as vague and unclear (Groensteen, “Définitions” 44) in that he fails to explain precisely what he means by it. For these reasons, his proposed definition was often disregarded, even though its premise represents progress in terms of including wordless works.

In spite of these first attempts at a more inclusive definition, the textual component persisted in the field’s conceptualizations of the form. In 1972, Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle claimed that comics are the formation of a story through text-image relations and particularly the use of speech balloons (10). In 1976, Maurice Horn asserted that comics are “not a medium of graphic narration,” since “the narrative in the strip is not conveyed visually, but expressed in both pictures and words” (9). With such affirmations, text was once more considered essential, and over a decade later, the position of scholars was mostly unchanged. In 1985, Eisner was still arguing that the makings of successful comics were strongly tied to the level of intimacy between text and image (13), a surprising statement for a man who defined comics as broadly as “sequential art” (5) or “a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols” (8). Four years later, Henri Filippini defined comics as a series of drawings containing a story, and in which characters interact with text inserted in speech balloons (Filippini 5). In that same year, Georges Farid wrote that comics are a whole composed of iconic and linguistic signs (Farid 105). At that point, the text-image

conceptualization appeared too ingrained in the popular thinking of the form to be discarded.

In the 1990s, however, Scott McCloud diverted from this path by publishing his groundbreaking *Understanding Comics* (1993), which revolutionized the way we now look at comics. In it, he offers a definition that contests those problematic approaches at defining the medium. His claim that comics are “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9) offers a useful frame to differentiate comics from other similar media. At the same time, it remains inclusive enough to allow wordless graphic novels, among other particular works, into the medium. Being inclusive was important to McCloud; in an interview with Paul Williams, he says that “in using such an expansive definition my primary purpose was... to draw a more expansive map, so that everything from stained glass, to sculpture, to painting, to photography, to scrolls might be a viable option for comics artists” (qtd. in Williams 241). With this book, McCloud provided the field with a strong case for a more inclusive approach at defining the medium, along with a sensible canvas for further development of the medium’s definition.

Yet, as the introduction has already made clear, few contemporary definitions reflect McCloud’s inclusive approach. Wordless graphic novels still suffer from a lack of acknowledgment in recent definitions of comics, as most scholars who have produced them in the last two decades have repeatedly assumed the presence of text to be necessary. David Carrier, in *The Aesthetics of Comics*, includes the speech bubble as part of his definition of comics (4). Virginie François concurs; she claims that comics are, above all else, an art that mixes words and images (17). According to them, both text and image need to be present to constitute comics. In his contribution to *A Comics Studies Reader*, Robert C. Harvey not only agrees, but is also adamant that words and pictures are both essential components of comics: “words are clearly an integral part of what we think of when we think of comics: words as well as pictures” (25). Even Frédéric Duprat, who initially appears open to the idea of wordless works (2), defines the medium as a composition of page, panels and speech bubbles (1), or, more simply, as a mixture of text and image (2). In all of these definitions, text is portrayed as a crucial component of comics, in a way that continues to evoke early to mid-twentieth century definitions.

In fact, this assumption that text is essential even makes its way into the work of scholars who do not formally attempt to define the medium. The textual component is overwhelmingly present in scholarly essays and articles about graphic novels, and is typically discussed as foundational. Gene Yang, for instance, in “Graphic Novels in the Classroom,” avoids offering any strict or overly specific definition of graphic novels. It becomes quite evident, however, that he does not acknowledge the existence of wordless graphic novels when he refers to the medium as one that, “by combining image and text,” bridges “the gap between media we watch and media we read” (187). Similarly, Dale Jacobs speaks of comics as “multimodal” texts, referring here to the interplay between words and images as two complementary modes of expression from which he believes comics derive their complexity (21). While Jacobs makes an interesting argument against those who see comics as childish and simplistic, his claims imply that complexity can only be attained if text is present. Sarah Ziolkowska and Vivian Howard also speak of the medium as multimodal, as they argue that comics require readers to have capacities pertaining to both words and images (164). The assumed presence of text in graphic novels is, in fact, so overwhelmingly affirmed, that when the existence of wordless graphic novels is acknowledged, it is treated as an exception. For instance, after having laid out the presence of both image and text as a correct assumption to make about comics, Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon speak of wordless novels as “special cases” (4). If wordlessness is the exception that confirms the rule, then the rule, it would seem, is that text is needed in the creation of complex graphic novels.

While a significant number of scholars persist in abiding by that rule, others have followed in McCloud's footsteps and have offered inclusive definitions in the last decade. Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, for instance, offer in their 2009 book *The Power of Comics: History, Form & Culture* the following definition: “a volume in which all aspects of the narrative are represented by pictorial and linguistic images encapsulated in a sequence of juxtaposed panels and pages” (4). While both pictorial and linguistic elements are mentioned in this definition, the two of them are seen as part of an entity that is called the image (4). This allows for the possibility of a wordless novel, since the one defining element is the image, which has the potential of being both pictorial and linguistic, or just one of the two. This implies that images have their own language, one that is just as potent

as those that use words. Following a similar approach, Thierry Groensteen defines the medium as a narrative species with a dominant visual component (Ciment and Groensteen 15), thereby acknowledging the possibility of wordless works. One of the most pertinent definitions is found in Ann Miller's 2007 study of French *bandes dessinées*: “As a visual narrative art, *bande dessinée* produces meaning out of images which are in a sequential relationship, and which co-exist with each other spatially, with or without text” (Miller 75). This definition adheres to McCloud's main ideas, and is recommended by Groensteen (“Définitions” 66), who concludes that it best conveys the primacy of the image, while also acknowledging the optional presence of text. After all, as Jan Baetens explains, graphic novels are a form of “visual storytelling” (Baetens 79), and good visual storytelling can only come from the proper exploitation of the “narrative possibilities of the images themselves” (80), rather than from text. It is in these theorists' footsteps that this thesis follows. In the next sections, then, I will continue to probe the reasons for this exclusion of wordless novels in order to question its rationale.

On the Wordless Ancestry of Comics

The first main argument against the exclusion of wordless graphic novels in definitions of the medium draws its evidence from the history of comics, which is filled with examples of influential wordless works. Töpffer might be seen as the first modern comics artist, but he certainly did not invent the form. Even if we recognize that his work set the standards for the form in modern times – something with which not everyone agrees – the medium of comics has many ancestors who produced visual sequential art before him. According to Stephen E. Tabachnick (2) and Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith (20), comics actually began with William Hogarth's sequential paintings in the eighteenth century. Their claim is reasonable, seeing as Töpffer himself cited Hogarth as a main inspiration for his work (Chute and Dekoven 769). Interestingly, Hogarth's paintings presented narratives that were essentially wordless. His first famous set of wordless sequential paintings, produced in 1732, was titled “A Harlot's Progress,” and exhibited a satiric overview of a young woman's arrival to London. In this narrative, the young woman is recruited by a “Madame;” becomes the companion of a rich Jewish man; then is

unfaithful to him; is arrested and imprisoned; and in the end dies from syphilis. This morally charged story is told through six dynamic paintings, and, more importantly, without a single word – except, of course, in some of the plates that accompanied these paintings. In reality, Hogarth did not view text as a relevant component of his craft. His 1753 manifesto *The Analysis of Beauty* argues that the essence of gracefulness and beauty is initiated by the following principles: fitness, variety, uniformity, simplicity, intricacy, and quantity (Hogarth 23). He also adds that the beautiful drawing or painting produced by these principles is made up of an intricate arrangement of thin, curved lines (21). In other words, beauty is made of drawn lines, not words. Text is simply not a part of the equation in Hogarth’s creative process, as evidenced by the two other narrative sequences for which he is famous: “A Rake’s Progress” (1735) and “Marriage à la mode” (1743), which both follow a format similar to that of “A Harlot’s Progress.” Hogarth’s contribution to the medium’s foundation highlights the wordless nature of comics’ origins, despite the later introduction of text into the form by Töpffer.

Of course, not everyone agrees that Hogarth’s paintings are the starting point. Other scholars such as Frédéric Duprat and Danièle Alexandre-Bidon argue that comics – or similar forms of sequential art – are even older, dating back to medieval times. Duprat claims that the eleventh-century Bayeux Tapestry, which depicts in a series of thirty-five embroidered scenes the conquest of England by William the Conqueror, is the first manifestation of the comics form (2). Meanwhile, Alexandre-Bidon asserts that the first manifestations of the form abounded, instead, between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, especially in secular books, in which could be found narrative sequences conveyed visually, in a way that very much resembles comics today (11). Others, including scholars from the American Institute of Graphic Arts, go one step further, tracing the origins of the form all the way back to prehistoric art in cave wall paintings (Paltani-Sargologos 24). Nonetheless, all of these proposed ancestors, while very different, have one thing in common: none of them heavily relies on words to carry their narrative, if at all. When words are present, it is in a way that is shallow and redundant with the image; it is the pictorial component that provides more information about the story. While the exact origin of comics remains subject to debate today, wordless narratives have undeniably been around for longer than

comics with text. As such, it raises questions about the relevance of text in modern definitions of the medium.

Even if Töpffer's mixture of text and images were to be considered the point of origin of the medium, the fact remains that graphic novels as a genre of comics are ancestrally linked with wordless works. Indeed, the early twentieth-century woodcut novels of artists Frans Masereel, Lynd Ward, Laurence Hyde, and Giacomo Patri are seen as the very first manifestations of the genre. Their books – most of which were published between 1910 and 1950 – are composed of a sequence of engraved, wordless images, resulting in a complex, often spiritual narrative. David Beroná calls them the “original graphic novels” (225), and asserts that they have inspired the “flare for metaphorical narrative” that is found in various graphic novels today, especially wordless ones (225). Examples of works that Beroná sees as the offspring of woodcuts are Peter Kuper's 1997 graphic novel *The System* and Eric Drooker's 1992 *Flood! A Novel in Pictures* (225). Beroná is also not the only one to see woodcuts as the first graphic novels; even Stephen E. Tabachnick, who is among those who believe that text is a crucial component of the form, states that graphic novels emerged with Frans Masereel's 1919 wordless novel *Passion Ate Journey* (2). The very first graphic novels were thus free of text, and artists such as Peter Kuper, Eric Drooker, Thomas Ott, Shaun Tan, and many others continue to create wordless novels today.

In fact, when it comes to the roots and influences of the form, the contribution of textual art to the development of comics is minimal. Most of the medium's influences come from arts and media of a visual nature, including cinema. According to Mel Gibson, comics scholar and consultant, comics draw some of their methods from film, more specifically in



Fig. 1. The establishing shot, from Shaun Tan, *The Arrival*, pp. 6-7.

the way visual spreads or points of views are sometimes structured or angled like cinematic “shots” (100). The example she provides is that of the “establishing shot,” which in film typically comes in the form of a long shot, aimed at setting the context of the scene or to connect characters with surrounding influences. These shots are often used in the opening of Hollywood movies to introduce the

environment of the narrative. In the comics world, this translates into double spreads that situate the characters in a meaningful landscape or environment (100). Examples of this can be found in Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, particularly when the main character is portrayed in the middle of the dictatorial and tyrannical atmosphere of his home land (6-7; see fig. 1), or is situated in the lonely and isolated atmosphere of his trip across the ocean (14-15). In this way, comics bear more similarities with cinematic methods of storytelling than with textual literature.

Film is, of course, not the only form of visual art to have influenced the development of comics. Gibson adds that the medium may at times be influenced by paintings in the way that it depicts scenes (100), a claim that Ciment and Groensteen (27), Gassiot-Talabot (23) and Gaumer and Moliterni (iv) also support. Impressionism is an artistic movement often cited as a significant influence and inspiration in the development of comics creators' style in the nineteenth century (Kunzle, *The Nineteenth* 14; Versaci 6). Even today, comics images are likened to movements such as expressionism or realism (Versaci 6). If comics draw their use of angles and points of view from film, they have to turn to painting for their "composition, perspective, shading, and (if the publishing budget allows) color" (Versaci 14). The way a comics panel is constructed is in many ways reminiscent of how a painting is brought together. According to Gilles Ciment and Thierry Groensteen, individual panels from a comics page, when analyzed individually, become like small paintings (14), in which the specific organization of motifs is meaningful (19). Shaun Tan probably again provides the best examples of painting-like arrangement of details in his graphic novel *The Arrival*. Tan openly refers to his larger panels as "paintings" (qtd. in Ling 45) and explains that he wants "everything to be structurally sound... like a good argument" (qtd. in Ling 44). From his choice of sepia tones to the presence of supernatural creatures to symbolize either dictatorial or foreign environments, everything in the composition of the image is calculated and arranged in a way that is reminiscent of nonsequential paintings. The influence of painting on comics is therefore arguably more important than that of textual media.

Photography, another important visual medium that evolved alongside comics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has also contributed to the development of cartoonists' techniques and style (Gibson 100; Roux 26; Ciment and Groensteen 28). For David Kunzle

and Thierry Smolderen, a considerable contribution to comics creators' understanding of human and animal movement was the work of photographer Eadweard Muybridge and physiologist of movement E. J. Marey, who provided, in the 1870s, accurate representations of the phases of movement in humans and animals, their most famous one being of a horse running (Kunzle, *The Nineteenth* 351; Smolderen 104). Representations of movement before them – if, for instance, we turn to George Du Maurier's drawing that superimposes three phases of a jumping horse – were often inaccurate in their positioning of the subject's limbs (Kunzle, *The Nineteenth* 351). Thanks to the photographic mapping of Muybridge, comics creator A. B. Frost was able to produce a comic strip, published in December 1879 in *Harper's New Monthly*, portraying a German man attempting to pronounce the English sound "th" with an accurate "activation curve" for the movement of the face (Smolderen 109).

More than a century later, the influence of photography can still be seen in the level of realism that some comics creators inject into their work – although, as McCloud explains, more iconic representations have their benefits (McCloud 49) – or in their choice of colours or tones. Borrowing some of its techniques from painting, Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* is also said to juxtapose the "supposed realism of the photograph" with fantasy, so that the reader may be "presented with other imagined worlds from which the central character and those he meets originate" (Gibson 107). Some of Tan's drawings are inspired by photography, either through realistic depictions of human faces, or through the depiction of actual photographs within the panels (see fig. 2). These similarities even extend to the colour palette, with sepia tones "meant to reference old photography" (Ling 45). The integration of photographic elements therefore abounds in comics today, making it another important influence. Whether it is film, painting or photography, the medium of comics is so embedded in visual art forms and media – as

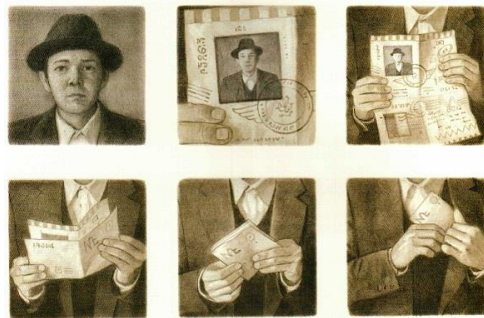


Fig. 2. Imitations of photographs within drawn panels, from Shaun Tan, *The Arrival*, p. 30.

opposed to textual literature – that it appears particularly unjustifiable to force text into definitions of the form.

The point here is not to pinpoint who was the very first comics or graphic novel creator, nor what was the most direct influence, since, as Douglas Wolk makes it clear, “[t]here's not much to be gained from that kind of ancestor seeking” (*Reading* 29). However, what this brief overview of the potential ancestors of the form shows is that comics quite clearly originate from a mainly visual form of artistic expression, to which words were a later addition. Wordless works have laid the foundations for the medium, and it is not thereby logical to make words essential in a medium shaped by wordless works.

Unfortunately, despite the fact that wordless graphic novels are still being created and published today, a significant number of scholars continue to believe that, while the ancestors of the comics medium and graphic novel genre were wordless, the form was made whole by the introduction of text. For one, Tabachnick claims that graphic novels “came to full fruition” when they started using both images and words in the 1960s and 1970s (2), which implies that graphic novels were previously part of an incomplete form. This dated argument – scholars Henri Filippini and Georges Farid defended it back in 1989 – seems to say that wordless comics or graphic novels are part of an obscure, primitive past beyond which we have moved by creating graphic novels that contain both image and text. Nonetheless, the wide array of wordless graphic novels being published every year belies the prejudiced foundations of that argument. Some of those novels, like Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* and Peter Kuper's *The System*, even receive the recognition of academic institutions through being awarded prizes, taught in classrooms and studied in academic essays (Pantaleo and Bombphray 174; Bellorín and Silva-Díaz 210). Wordless graphic novels are neither more primitive nor less advanced; they are worthy members of the medium.

On the Creative Process of Comics

History is not the only plane on which images appear to precede text, or at least surpass it in terms of pertinence. The creative process attached to the production of a graphic novel is another space where text fails to establish its relevance as a defining element. It is rather images that play a crucial role in the creation of a graphic novel, to the point where text often appears secondary, complementary, or outright superficial at times. This might come as a surprise to those who assume that creators write a script and then

draw it, and that text thus represents the foundation of the process. Annie Baron-Carvais is among such people, as she describes the creative process in a team as first starting with the scriptwriter, who structures the story and then explains to the cartoonist how the drawings should reflect that vision (62). While admittedly true for numerous comics – Baron-Carvais provides one example from a 1977 number of *Superman*, which was created in that order (62) –, that conception of the process is limiting and generalizing. It does not take into consideration the wide variety of creative processes that different creators have developed for themselves. In the case of some creators' work, images do precede words. Belgian comics artist Hergé, for instance, was known to shape his characters and stories as he drew them, the best example being the character of Madame Laijot, who was first drawn as a man, and then became a woman after a few sketches (Peeters, “L'Écriture” 40-41). According to Peeters, it is the movement of the graphic intervention that made the discovery of this character possible, more than any script could have (“L'Écriture” 40-41). Similarly, Michaël Matthys, a rising star of the comics world, has used images and other visual content as the starting point of his creative process. His graphic novel *La Ville Rouge* is based on images that he recorded with a camcorder in an attempt to recreate the desired atmosphere that words could not (Dessy 205). While such an approach may feel unnatural at first, Jan Baetens believes that creative processes that are too heavily text-driven and that deny the image its needed freedom are damaging and rarely produce works that are worthy of critical acclaim (79). The assumption that text is the foundation of the creative process is thus ill-informed, as the image proves to be just as foundational as text can be, if not more.

In fact, even in cases where text precedes the image, or at least plays an important role in the early stages of the creative process, the image remains the central element. Peeters explains that scriptwriters need to write stories according to the style of the cartoonist who will put it into images (“L'Écriture” 42). He adds that it is not simply about writing a story, but about coming up with a project that is specifically designed for graphic purposes (“L'Écriture” 41). Hence, even if words technically precede the actual drawings, the visual element of the work actually comes first in the ideation process because it informs the writing of the script. Interestingly, Tan explains in an interview with Chuan-Yao Ling that “text so often precedes illustration” (qtd. in Ling 46), and he mentions that

The Arrival was not initially wordless (46). Yet, despite text being the starting point and an important part of the early creative process, it rapidly became dispensable, which resulted in the wordless piece that we know today (47). Text became superficial, and its removal was inconsequential, probably even beneficial in that particular case. Text as a starting point does not mean that it is the foundation of the form and of its creative processes. With this in mind, it is unfounded to consider wordless novels as exceptions rather than integral parts of the medium.

On the Reading Process of Comics

After the creation of a graphic novel comes its consumption by readers. Evidently, during the reading process, images play a crucial role. If no existing research appears to objectively examine which component – image or text – influences readers the most during the reading process, several scholars make educated attempts at answering that question. Ciment and Groensteen, who have been studying and writing about comics since the 1980s, say the images are the first contributors to the reading experience. They assert that images are what lead readers to buy a particular graphic novel: they leaf through it in the bookstore, and look at the art, before deciding whether to buy it or not (12). Even when the actual reading begins, Ciment and Groensteen claim that the graphic dimension remains dominant, and that it is through the given style that a story is communicated to the readers (12). If another illustrator, with his or her own style, were to pick up the story and bring it to life, the story would be received and understood differently because of the intrinsic connection between the story communicated and its pictorial representation (12). Their argument is supported by Jean-Paul Jennequin's analysis of a panel from David Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp*, presented later in their anthology; in this close reading, Jennequin shows that the artist's choices of character positioning, proportions, colours and visual symbolism affect the reader's decoding of the story and of the character's personality (61). Text thus acts as a secondary component, adding to what is already communicated through the image.

According to Wolk, on the other hand, readers look at both images and words at the same time (*Reading* 129), instead of pictures first. This means that, sometimes, images are

the first contributor, and at other times, text and image mix to a point where they are equally important in the reading process. Arguments around how much of the narrative weight the image carries in fact vary significantly; no scholar, however, seems to argue that text comes first in that process. Text is not always present. When it is, it can play a very important role in the unfolding of the story for the readers. But, when it is absent, the remaining image is perfectly capable of functioning on its own. Even Wolk, despite his case for equal importance of both components in the reading process, concedes that images are the “most immediate aspect of comics,” through which the vision of the artist is communicated (*Reading* 125). Just as it does in the creative process, the image predominates over text in the readers' experience of a graphic novel.

Why Text Is *Still* Considered Important

If text plays such a minor and sometimes superficial role in the medium, why is there such insistence placed on including it in definitions? It might very well derive from a deep-seated fear of being considered an unworthy medium, which was sparked in the mid-twentieth century. In the 1940s, the publication of articles about the negative effects of comic books began to create a hostility towards the medium that reached its apex in the 1950s, with the publication of Fredric Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent* (Duncan and Smith 39). The book denounced comics as a cause of illiteracy, juvenile delinquency, and “unwholesome fantasies” (Wertham 118), among other worrisome effects; its message was rapidly socialized via popular magazines. This movement terrified an entire generation of parents, and subsequently, of publishers who supplied comics to those now stricter parents' young children. A series of censorship measures followed, including the 1954 Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America, which restricted the type of content that could be made available to the public, and especially to children. Many publishers who specialized in objectionable genres, such as horror or crime, were forced out of business (Duncan and Smith 40). The Comic Book Act was then passed in 1955 by the state of Washington, and required a license to sell comic books (41). The message was clear: comic books were bad for children, because they were generally distasteful. The repercussions were felt well beyond the borders of the United States, all the way to Europe, where the

perception of comics – or *bandes dessinées* – also faltered in the twentieth century (Dubreuil and Pasquier 13). The reputation of comics was severely tainted, and the effects were long-lasting.

In fact, some of the effects of this oppressive era can still be felt today. Even as critically acclaimed graphic novels have brought to the medium the academic recognition that it deserves, the prevalent discomfort around comics remains visible in the way scholars now approach comics. The fact that so many of them insist on calling sophisticated comics “graphic novels” to separate them from mediocre ones rather than to indicate clear format distinctions (Wolk, *Reading* 61) shows that the fear of being associated with the “lowly comic book” (Wolk, *Reading* 63) is still rampant. The young academia of comics is eager to move away from this prejudiced past, which may explain why text remains such a crucial component of modern definitions and analyses of the medium. Textual literature was, for a long time, seen as superior to any form of graphic literature, and considering comics' traumatizing history of prejudice and rejection, it is understandable that scholars of the field would try to link comics to this higher form of literature. Indeed, the medium strongly suffered from what Brian McFarlane calls “the ingrained sense of literature's greater respectability” (8), for literature is by convention inextricably linked to the written word. A graphic novel that is devoid of words would, in the eyes of certain scholars, lose its literariness. This would be an unimaginable option for those in the field of comics scholarship who still feel that their link with literature is what makes graphic novels a more legitimate form than other comics.

That is, obviously, an incorrect understanding of what makes comics – or graphic novels – sophisticated. Jan Baetens insists that graphic novels are not any less “literary” for their inclusion of images (79), especially if the adjective refers to works of intellectual and academic value. To him, these pictorial elements constitute comics' strength as a medium (81), and forcing words unto a form that has such visual potential might “[prevent] the comic or graphic novel from becoming a token of real literature” (79). Text, among other similarities with the traditional novel, is thus not what makes a graphic novel more academically valuable than the others. Yet, the idea that text has more potential than images in terms of depth and complexity remains firmly ingrained. Scholars still fear that images are too simplistic to be used on their own, except in children books. Tabachnick, for

instance, speaks of comics as the combination of the “abstraction and complexity of words” with the “eye-catching, immediate appeal of images” (4). This statement implies that words bring complexity and depth to the work, while images contribute an easily marketable appeal. For Tabachnick and others sharing this mentality, it seems difficult to envision images as capable of producing complex meaning. When creators like Alan Moore claim that a wordless panel is read a lot faster than one with words (39), it is wrongly interpreted as meaning that images are easier to understand, and, as a result, more simplistic. It would seem that such scholars believe that comics were legitimized in spite of their use of images, rather than because of it.

The insistence on considering text as a defining element results from a wide array of dated misconceptions about the role of text and of image in comics. One may believe that, now that graphic novels are taught in universities and discussed in academic conferences, they are fully recognized and freed from any prejudice. However, this chapter has so far brought to light a few assumptions that still exist and that continue to prevent the recognition of wordless graphic novels. These will continue to inform and sustain the arguments made in the next two chapters.

Chapter 2

Narrative as the Missing Piece of the Definitional Puzzle

Benoît Peeters writes that “une page formée d'une série de dessins ne suffit pas à garantir qu'on se trouve en présence d'une bande dessinée” (*Case 39*). Scholars who have attempted to define the medium agree that the presence of images is insufficient to qualify a work as comics. Not every image – or series of images – is comics, and if images alone do not suffice to define comics, text appears to be the easy solution towards a more complete definition. This is the first main assumption that leads to problematic definitions focused on text: scholars tend to identify text as the other component that, when combined with the image, creates comics. However, while at first glance the addition of text seems to transform a simple image into comics, this is not the missing piece of the puzzle. It is something else, which experts have already recognized as an important component of the form, but have also often failed to prioritize over text: narrative. It is narrative that, when combined with images, creates comics. Unfortunately, too many definitions still ignore narrative as a defining element; when they include it, text is usually included as well. In order to understand why narrative has not yet replaced text in definitions, this chapter will explore the main arguments against the inclusion of narrative – or replacement of text by narrative – in definitions of comics. I will then refute these arguments through an analysis of narrative in two wordless graphic novels: Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* and Peter Kuper’s *The System*. These analyses will demonstrate that narrative is a more reliable defining element than text because it is consistently present in comics, and because it does not require text to take form.

The perception of narrative as an important component of the definition of comics is, in reality, already well established. When explaining that there is more to comics than just the image, Peeters also suggests narrative as the appropriate complement to the image; he refers to the “articulation narrative” of the panels on a comics page (*Case 39*). For him, the solution to the incompleteness of image-based definitions is not text, but rather the presence of a narrative structure. He is not the only one to think so: Henry John Pratt believes that “it is plausible to assume that comics is a predominantly narrative medium” (Pratt 107), making clear the important role that narrative plays in comics. Even scholars who generally assume the presence of text to be necessary have begun to consider narrative as an

important component of the form. For instance, merely a page after establishing comics as a combination of images and words, Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon describe the narrative nature of comics as “largely self-evident” (5). Even though they do not seem to recognize the inessential nature of text, they still hint at the obligatory nature of narrative. With this wave of scholarly interest in comics' use of narrative, it becomes increasingly plausible that narrative – rather than text – is the key to turning simple images into comics.

If narrative is getting such recognition already, why do so many scholars still feel the need to include text in their definition of the medium? There are many reasons for it, but two appear most prominent. The first one, unsurprisingly, is an underlying assumption that text is required to create narrative. Bronwen Thomas brings this assumption to light when he explains that it “is difficult to imagine a narrative that does not include some kind of representation of speech” (80), thereby hinting at the common belief that it is through dialogue that narrative is introduced into a comics image. This idea might derive from a misreading of the concept of narrative discourse, which Seymour Chatman defines as the “expression plane” that contains the narrative, as opposed to the “story,” which refers to the content (Chatman 97). When discussing narrative in textual literature, discourse is, with good reason, generally theorized as closely linked to the written word (Bridgeman 53). As explained in the previous chapter, the common perception of textual literature as a higher form of expression led comics to being theorized in similar terms, in an attempt to gain more credibility by association. As a result, the conception of “discourse” as “text” was transposed into the analysis of comics, despite not fitting the narrative techniques of this graphic form. If text is considered a crucial component of narrative, it may appear irrelevant to replace text with narrative in definitions of comics, since one implies the other. Chatman, however, makes clear that discourse is not intrinsically linked with the written word, and that “*narrative* as such is independent of medium” (97, italics Chatman’s). The assumption that text is implied by the mention of narrative is thus a misconception. An analysis of narrative in Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* and Peter Kuper’s *The System* later in this chapter will prove this point.

The other common argument for the rejection of narrative as a valid component of the definition of comics relies on the existence of nonnarrative comics. Aaron Meskin, for instance, mentions that “it seems easy to imagine a non-narrative sequence of spatially

juxtaposed pictures that we would classify as a comic” (372). He further asserts that the connection between these pictures “need not be narrative – it could, for example, be thematic or character based” (372). The presumed existence of nonnarrative comics means that including narrative into the definition would exclude them. As Stein and Thon explain, however, this argument originates from a misunderstanding of and reductive approach to narrative (6). According to the two scholars, a vast array of thematic or character-based connections can constitute narrative, even if common expectations that readers have towards a “plot” or “story” are not initially met (6). This would mean that what Meskin refers to as a “non-narrative sequence” (372) may in reality be a narrative sequence, only in a way that differs from the stories we are used to reading. In fact, according to Marie-Laure Ryan, narrative is too often used as an exact synonym for “story,” whereas they are only “partial synonyms” (22). This limited conception of narrative might explain why many scholars remain hesitant to replace text with narrative in definitions of the medium. An overview of a more appropriate conception of narrative today and of its application to two wordless graphic novels will exemplify the need for a broader understanding of narrative and reinforce its relevance in the definition of comics.

Many scholars, like Wallace Chafe, believe that “you know a narrative when you see one (or hear one)” (53), but this chapter so far has already shown that the parameters of “narrative” are not as obvious as one might think. The key to a thorough definition is to exclude what is not narrative, while not excluding anything that is (Hatfield 19). According to Marie-Laure Ryan, most definitions in the field are incomplete and need to be more explicit in their outline of “the set of cognitive operations” that produce a story (28). She rejects the conception of narrative as a “strictly binary feature” (Ryan 28), which would justify categorizing works as either narrative or nonnarrative. Instead, she suggests that some works may be more narrative than others, and an appropriate narrative theory should reflect that by allowing varying degrees of narrativity. Some narratologists have already theorized narrative in those terms, including Werner Wolf (192) and Marie-Laure Ryan herself (28). Following their initiative, narrative needs to be defined in a more flexible manner in order to encompass its many variations and iterations.

In the forthcoming analysis of Tan's and Kuper's graphic novels, I will use Ryan's approach, as outlined in her essay “Toward a Definition of Narrative” in *The Cambridge*

Companion to Narrative (2007). To avoid undesirable exclusion, her approach turns narrativity into a spectrum, along which various works rank in terms of having different levels of narrativity. Those levels are based on how many of the eight narrative criteria they fulfill. These eight criteria are in turn categorized into four dimensions:

Spatial dimension

(1) Narrative must be about a world populated by individuated existents.

Temporal dimension

(2) This world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations.

(3) The transformations must be caused by non-habitual physical events.

Mental dimension

(4) Some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world.

(5) Some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents.

Formal and pragmatic dimension

(6) The sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure.

(7) The occurrence of at least some of the events must be asserted as fact for the storyworld.

(8) The story must communicate something meaningful to the audience.
(Ryan 29)

A work is not required to include all of these elements for it to be narrative, but it must fulfill at least some of them.

For instance, a number of significant literary works forego ending with closure, and instead point towards different possibilities without any sort of resolution. In an article in *The Guardian*, Lee Rourke cites examples by famous authors ranging from Beckett, Kafka and Joyce, to Woolf, Gass and Foster: “those novels without end, steeped in ambiguity, those novels stay with us... Much like real life does, novels without endings reveal to us the ambiguity that is crucial to our own desire to simply find out things for ourselves” (n. pag.). Failing to meet one criterion in Ryan’s list does not disqualify these works as

narratives. In fact, the unpredictability of this authorial choice can make the narrative more powerful and memorable. All it means is that the more criteria it meets, the closer it gets to the “narrative” end of the spectrum, as opposed to the “nonnarrative” end. As long as it stands somewhere on this spectrum, it is a narrative. With this approach, narrative is understood in a broad enough sense so as to include its many forms and iterations in comics. To this end, each of these criteria will be explained and analyzed using Tan’s and Kuper’s graphic novels as examples.

Wordless Narrative in Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival*

The first of the two problematic assumptions about narrative outlined earlier is that text is such an important component of narrative that replacing it with narrative in the definition of comics is irrelevant. If that assumption is true, a wordless work should fare poorly in an analysis of its narrative traits. In other words, if text is so important, a graphic novel such as *The Arrival* should fulfill only some of Ryan's narrative criteria, if any. The following analysis will explore the narrative traits of Shaun Tan's wordless graphic novel, following Ryan's approach, in order to prove that the absence of text does not inherently affect the narrativity of the work.

The first dimension of narrative, according to Ryan, is the spatial dimension. This includes the first of the eight criteria: “Narrative must be about a world populated by individuated existents” (29). With this requirement, Ryan intends to exclude “representations of abstract entities and entire classes of concrete objects” (29) in favour of living beings who demonstrate a certain form of individuality. This is, in a way, what some would call “characters.” The term “individuated existents” does not only apply to human beings, as a narrative can easily focus on non-human characters. Nevertheless, human characters have the obvious advantage of practically never qualifying as abstract entities or concrete objects. All characters in *The Arrival*, with the exception of their otherworldly pets, are

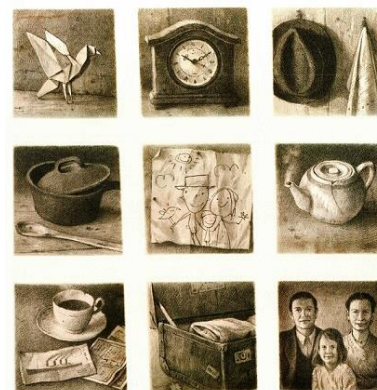


Fig. 3. A comparison between inanimate objects and individuated existents, from Shaun Tan, *The Arrival*, p.1.

human. Their qualification as “individuated existents” is made clear through a comparison with concrete objects in the very first sequence of panels, in which eight similar panels, all portraying lifeless and insentient items, are followed by one panel representing a family of three, the protagonist with his wife and child (see fig. 3). A sequence of inanimate objects alone would most likely not qualify as narrative, but the introduction of characters, or “individuated existents,” turns a simple graphic enumeration of items into a narrative. It is the presence and recurring involvement of these people in the novel that transforms a simple sequence of images into a story about characters.

The second and third criteria form the second dimension of narrative: the temporal



Fig. 4. The metaphorical monsters, from *The Arrival*, p. 10.

dimension. These criteria dictate respectively that the “world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations” (29), and that these transformations “must be caused by non-habitual physical events” (29). With these two requirements, Ryan makes sure to eliminate “static descriptions” (29) that never move forward in time, along with transformations “caused by natural evolution (such as aging)” (29). In other words, there must be some events worthy of mention, triggering the narrative and pushing it forward. Again, *The Arrival* successfully meets those criteria. The main transformation that drives the plot of the

graphic novel is the protagonist's migration towards a new country in the hope of escaping what appears to be a dictatorial government in his homeland. There is nothing “habitual” about such a major uprooting, and it is not caused by natural evolution. It is rather the consequence of oppression and poor living standards, as depicted metaphorically with monsters (see fig. 4) sifting through the streets menacingly, leading the protagonist to leave his family and seek a better place for them to live. Other transformations come in the form of new meetings, new jobs, new discoveries and learnings. If, after so many transformations, one still doubts the temporal nature of the novel's representations, the sequence on pages 106 and

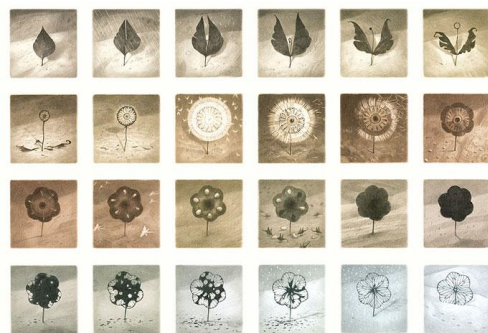


Fig. 5. The passage of time, from *The Arrival*, pp. 106-107

107, portraying the changing seasons through images of a tree at different stages of the year, makes the passage of time clear (see fig. 5). This latter representation of time is of a rather habitual nature – the natural process of the changing seasons is, like aging, a natural evolution – but, when combined with the other unexpected events of the story, they present readers with a world that is situated in time and that experiences both habitual and non-habitual transformations.

Ryan's third dimension of narrative is the mental dimension, and it encompasses criteria four and five. Number four states that “some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world” (Ryan 29). With this requirement, Ryan excludes “scenarios involving only natural forces and non-intelligent participants” (29). For instance, the mere report of a storm is unlikely to be considered a narrative, but the account of an “intelligent agent” experiencing the storm displays narrative elements. Characters in *The Arrival* are examples of such intelligent beings, and their mental dimension is established through representations of their thoughts and emotions. Characters’ thoughts, for example,



Fig. 6. The young woman’s memories, from *The Arrival*, p. 57.



Fig. 7. Confusion and frustration expressed through body language and facial expression, from *The Arrival*, p. 28.

are made visible to the reader through visual depictions of their memories, particularly in the form of flashbacks. On pages 55 to 57, for instance, one finds the escape story of a refugee, whom the protagonist meets on public transportation. It is displayed in a slightly different format, with darker tones and panels shaped like old photographs, to indicate that we are breaking away from the natural flow of the plot (see fig. 6). What we see are snippets of memories from the young woman's mind. More accurately, we see the protagonist’s mind translating into mental images the story that this stranger tells him. It is a glimpse into the minds and thoughts of the characters, a process repeated on pages 66 to

73, and 89 to 95, where the tragic memories of other people who cross the protagonist's path are narrated visually. This mental dimension is then reinforced by the depiction of a wide array of emotions expressed through the characters' faces and body language as they encounter various ordeals in the storyworld. From sombre resignation as the protagonist prepares to leave (5) to confusion and frustration when he fails to communicate with people in the new land (28; see fig. 7), or from solitude as he goes through the effects of cultural shock (30) to genuine happiness when he forms new meaningful friendships (76-77), emotional reactions are diverse and nuanced. The protagonist, like other characters in the novel, is thus an intelligent being who thinks and reacts emotionally to situations he faces, thereby proving the existence of a mental dimension in the narrative.

The fifth criterion then suggests that “some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents” (Ryan 29). With this, Ryan eliminates accounts centered solely around mental events, for instance through internal monologue (29). While the mental dimension of characters is important, a balance between mental and “real” events remains crucial. The mental life of characters in *The Arrival* is well established, but their actual actions remain at the forefront of the narrative. Immigrating to a new country is a decision that is both meaningful and intentional on the part of the protagonist; the entire narrative revolves around that specific action. There are many other examples of purposeful actions, like the search for an apartment (39-41), a job hunt (81-87), and the mailing of a letter with money for his family to facilitate their own immigration (104-105). Other events may be accidental or at least unintentional, like meeting new people (52; 61; 88), stumbling upon his future pet in his new apartment (43), or losing his first few jobs (83; 85), but their occurrence nevertheless contributes to creating that balance between the mental dimension and “real life.” Hence, not only are some of the events represented in the book purposeful actions that intelligent agents perform, but the story also avoids relying solely on mental events.

The final dimension of narrative according to Ryan's theory is the formal and pragmatic one, which includes criteria six, seven, and eight. The sixth criterion states that “the sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure” (29). With this criterion, Ryan excludes series of unconnected events or problem-solving measures that present no outcome (29). All major events and transformations in *The Arrival* are interconnected through cause-and-effect relations, and, as such, reach an outcome. It is

because of the oppression experienced in his homeland (6-7) that the protagonist migrates



Fig. 8. Parallels between the beginning and the ending, from *The Arrival*, p. 3 & p. 118.

to a new country. As a result of that important move, he goes through different administrative procedures upon entry (27-30) and looks for an apartment (39-41) and a job (81-86). Because of these actions, he makes new encounters (54; 64; 88) and discovers new aspects of this strange culture. It is also because of his new job that he manages to send money to his family, so that they may finally join him (111). All events

have causality, and ultimately come to a conclusion when the family is reunited (113). Parallels are drawn between the beginning and the ending, as the family is seen in similarly arranged kitchens on pages 3 and 118, with the drawings pinned on the wall, the hat hung on the mantel, and the origami animals used as decoration (see fig. 8). The atmosphere, however, is strikingly different, with the family appearing much happier on page 118, thus showing that, while their story has been one of many ordeals, all these challenges have led to the improvement of their lifestyle. It is possible to conclude, then, that unity, causality and closure are all present in the graphic novel.

The seventh criterion, also belonging to the formal and pragmatic dimension, requires that at least some of the events “be asserted as fact for the storyworld” (29). Ryan explains that this is to exclude any text “entirely made of advice, hypotheses, counterfactuals, and instructions” (30). *The Arrival* is none of those. Fiction and hypothesis do not connote the same notions. According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, a hypothesis is “an idea or theory that is not proven but that leads to further study or discussion” (“Hypothesis” n. pag.). Fictional events might not have any basis in reality, but what Shaun Tan does is not merely to evoke incomplete ideas meant to lead to further discussion; he creates an entire storyworld within which every event and occurrence is considered real. The strange new city in which the protagonist now meanders is far from any reality we know, but it is the reality of that storyworld. The protagonist himself is fictional, but inside of his world, he is real, and so are his actions and the situations he faces. If the entire journey was framed as a thought or a dream, the argument might be

different, mainly because, being restricted to mental events and lacking closure, it would also fail to meet the fifth and sixth criteria. This, again, is not the case with *The Arrival*. The events in Tan's story are plausible in the world of the story, even if not in our nonfictional world, meaning that they are neither hypotheses nor counterfactuals. Seeing as the novel ends with the protagonist's daughter helping another newly arrived young girl (122), one might argue that their story may be used as prescription, advice, or even instructions for future immigrants. Still, even if it may have that purpose with some readers, it is not limited to it. The story is filled with anecdotes and even elements of fantasy that have nothing to do with prescription, advice, or instructions, but have all to do with the communication of a complete narrative. *The Arrival* is thus narrative in that it allows for the assertion of most of its events as facts inside of the storyworld; as such, it goes beyond the limitations of hypothesis, counterfactuals, advice or instructions.

Finally, the eighth and last criterion on the list is that “the story must communicate something meaningful to the audience” (Ryan 29). Here, Ryan excludes what she calls “bad stories” (30). While she recognizes that this is the most controversial and debatable point on her list, she also believes it is crucial (30). She explains that narrativity is not an automatic property, “but rather a dimension relative to the context and to the interests of the participants” (30). This is why an account of events such as “Mary was poor, then Mary won the lottery, then Mary was rich” (30) would not meet that requirement in most contexts, except if Mary were an acquaintance of the person hearing it. Does the context of reception in *The Arrival* allow it to meet the interests of the readers? According to Tan himself, his graphic novel is a tale about the sense of belonging (“Comments” n.pag.) or of perturbed identity (qtd. in Ling 45) to which anyone can relate at some point in their life. His story might be one of immigration and cultural adaptation, but the message is meant to be universal enough to connect with a wide range of readers from different backgrounds. To further deepen this connection with real individuals, the portraits of nameless faces covering the inside of the book's front and back covers are reproductions of actual photographs of immigrants, because he wanted to “honor the real people” (Foster 71). His approach is geared towards both appealing to the readers' sensibility and communicating a message that could be understood by anyone. It must have been a successful strategy, because no critic appears to read Tan's graphic novel as anything but a narrative. It was

meaningful enough to the readers for it to be received as a narrative, meaning that the last criterion was also met in the process.

All four dimensions of narrative are thus present in *The Arrival*, and all eight criteria are fulfilled. On the spectrum of narrativity, Tan's graphic novel is not even somewhere in the middle, where there would be room for debate. *The Arrival* is, according to Ryan's approach, completely and undeniably narrative. If a wordless graphic novel can fare so well as a narrative, then text has no legitimate place in the definition of narrative, or in that of comics for that matter. Narrative does not automatically imply text, which means that replacing text with narrative in the definition of comics is not insignificant. However, while Tan's graphic novel definitely proves the inadequacy of text as a defining element, one graphic novel is not enough to confirm the consistent presence of narrative in comics. As explained earlier, the second reason why certain scholars reject narrative as a defining element is the alleged existence of nonnarrative comics, and *The Arrival* is not one of those. Its narrativity is rather easy to establish and non-academic readers would probably not require such a detailed analysis to accept it as a narrative. Not all graphic novels benefit from such blind narrative acceptance. To prevent doubts about the relevance of narrative in definitions of comics, a look at a different graphic novel with less obvious narrative traits is in order.

Fragmented Narrative in Peter Kuper's *The System*

Because they seemingly go against typical expectations towards narrative, graphic novels like Peter Kuper's *The System* may not be as conclusive in their narrativity. Indeed, by following a wide array of characters whose storylines constantly intersect and rarely correlate throughout most of the novel, the book's narrative qualities appear more debatable than those of *The Arrival*. Does Kuper's graphic novel challenge narrative as a defining element of comics, or is it simply narrative in a different way than what readers would normally expect? Once again reverting to Ryan's approach, my analysis of narrative in this dialogue-free graphic novel will affirm its narrativity and reinforce the need for a broader understanding of narrative as an essential component of comics.

First, for *The System* to have a spatial dimension, it needs to establish the presence of individuated existents in its storyworld. While the graphic novel is filled with human existents, their “individuated” aspect at first appears less evident than in *The Arrival*. In fact, the number of characters is so high that individual storylines become more difficult to distinguish from one another. Despite their number, these existents *are* nonetheless distinct from one another. They are followed only one at a time, and their reoccurrence in the different sections of the book allows for the recognition of important distinguishing traits, both in terms of their physical appearance and of their pursuit of personal goals. We have the black-haired stripper trying to make a living for her son and herself; the detective attempting to correct a tragic mistake of the past; the corrupt cop who uses his authority to steal money from young drug dealers; the politician caught in a sex scandal; the red-capped young man regularly visiting his sick father; the intimidating man with an eyepatch building a bomb; the ponytailed businessman involved in fraud; and the young skateboarder working to hack into the businessman’s accounts, to name but a few. Every character, albeit nameless in a crowd of countless others, is given individual importance through a series of moments focusing only on him or her. Even if there are many more existents in *The System* than in *The Arrival*, they remain individuated, which means that the requirements for the spatial dimension are met.

Next, in order to assert the temporal dimension, *The System* needs to depict significant transformations that are caused by non-habitual events. While immigration informs the temporal dimension in *The Arrival*, the process in *The System* is less evident. Transformations are often lost in the hectic succession of events and characters; and, yet, they are there. Sections 1 and 2 of the graphic novel begin with a murder (19; 51), and section 2 includes two more (Kuper 71; 75) before it transitions into section 3. These crimes gradually increase the level of tension in the storyworld and affect the lives of many people. Individual characters also face their own personal transformations: for instance, the sick father of the red-capped young man falls into a critical state (54); the politician caught in a sex scandal commits suicide (72); the fraudulent businessman's plans are brought to an end by the young hacker emptying his account (73); a tragic subway accident kills the bomber (93); the corrupt cop gets arrested (97); and the detective redeems himself by solving the case of the two murdered strippers (100). All of these events come from non-habitual

causes and significantly alter the trajectory of these existents. Furthermore, every section is equivalent to about a day in time, typically beginning in the morning and ending at night, with the exceptions of part 1, which begins at night and ends the following night, and the epilogue, which begins in the morning and ends while the sun is still high in the sky. Thus, *The System* is situated in time, if the non-habitual transformations were not sufficient proof already.

To establish the mental dimension, *The System* needs to ensure that its characters

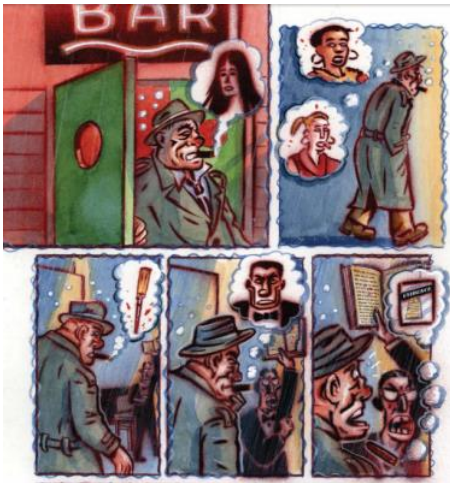


Fig. 9. Thought bubbles, from Peter Kuper, *The System*, p. 100.

have a mental life and emotional reactions towards the different states of the world in which they are situated. Seeing as the existents who populate the storyworld of the book are so numerous, their individual mental life is evidently more superficially tackled than in *The Arrival*. This does not, however, mean that it is absent. Characters' mental lives are most obviously hinted at with the use of thought bubbles, which is the case on page 100, where the detective is seen reflecting on the victims of recent murders and on the different clues he has gathered.

This internal reflection is made visible to the reader through images of the victims' faces and of the clues appearing inside of the thought bubbles (see fig. 9). A similar process

occurs on page 60, where a singer performing in a subway station is seen lost in a visual representation of what the song means to her: the beauty of wildlife's natural music (60-61; see fig. 10) and the tragic destruction of the jungle by capitalist industries (62). Like the detective's thought bubbles, this interpretation entirely belongs to the singer's mental life, for none of the commuters passing her by (59; 62) are seen transposed into this tropical environment; we only see her, with her eyes closed, implying that the



Fig. 10. Visual representation of the internal experience of a song, from *The System*, pp. 60-6.

images we see are those she herself sees playing in her mind. Some commuters are in fact portrayed as completely unaffected by her performances (27), again hinting at the internal nature of her song's visualization. Of course, the detective and the subway station singer are not the only two characters showing signs of mental activity, as every character is portrayed reacting emotionally to the world around them. From the crowd angrily protesting against the racial murder that occurs in section 2 (88) to the fraudulent businessman expressing satisfaction and pride at executing his suspicious plans (73), emotional reactions abound. At one point, in the span of one single page (55), we see the black-haired stripper showing worry upon learning that yet another murder has occurred in the city, and then delight at spending quality time with her son (see fig. 11). Despite the abundance of characters, the first facet of the mental dimension of narrative is carefully established.

However, balance is key, and this is why the following criterion on Ryan's list requires mental events to be complemented with purposeful actions performed by the

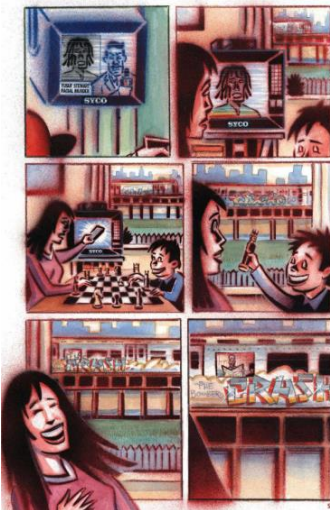


Fig. 11. From worry to delight, in *The System*, p. 55.

intelligent agents involved in the narrative. Despite the clear establishment of a mental dimension, the story remains driven by external events. An important political figure creates a fake sex scandal to destroy his opponent (109); a gang kills a black man out of racial prejudice (51); a man in black clothes builds a bomb (76); a fallen detective solves the stripper murder case (102); a friend of a brutally murdered drug dealer helps the police arrest corrupt cops (97); and a young hacker steals money from a fraudulent businessman (73). All of these actions are intentional, and even when the events are arguably accidental, they stem from conscious decisions on the characters' part. For instance, the subway crash from page 93 is the result of the driver repeatedly choosing to drink on the job (27; 59), failing to consider the possible consequences until it is too late. Most importantly, all of these events are anchored in the storyworld's reality, outside of the mental dimension, thereby establishing that needed balance.

For *The System* to exhibit a formal and pragmatic dimension, it must first link its events with causality, unity and closure. This is the crucial point where *The System* might be expected to fail, as the individual storylines at first glance appear to evolve separately, and in a particularly fragmented manner. However, while characters rarely get more than a few panels at a time and transitions are often abrupt, events are still coherently connected to one another. In the detective's storyline, to give just one example, the man's dark past (20) leads him to seek redemption by solving an important murder case (26). This motivation forces him to study clues very attentively (81; 87), which causes him to make the connection between one particular clue and a suspect who would not have seemed suspicious otherwise (100). Because he interrogates this man right away (100), he identifies the real murderer in time to save the black-haired stripper from being the next victim (102). His intervention incites the murderer to run away and subsequently get hit by a car (103), thereby eliminating the threat for good. The cause-and-effect relation between these events is clear. We thus have what Ryan calls a “causal chain” of events (Ryan 29).

That causal chain of events, as mentioned before, also needs to be “unified” (29). Unity in Kuper's graphic novel is more complex, considering that the different chains of events might at first appear entirely independent of one another. Nevertheless, causality occurs across storylines more than once and unifies them. Indeed, sometimes, the paths of two seemingly unrelated characters clash. For instance, on pages 92 and 93, the drunk subway conductor, seen drinking on the job more than once throughout the book (27; 59), causes a tragic accident that kills the bomber before he can complete his plan. There was no connection between the two men before, but in one single instance, their fates collide.

This event then also affects the homeless man's storyline, as his dog finds the bomb and brings it to him (94). This, in turn, affects everyone living in the city, as the dog, while in the underground tunnels of the city, inadvertently triggers the bomb (114). The black splash panel that follows lets us infer the characters' fate: either death or severe injury (see fig. 12). After



Fig. 12. The final scene from *The System*, pp. 114-115.

over a hundred pages of independent storylines evolving in parallel to one another with sparse moments of correlation, the lives of all characters are brought together with one transformation that affects all of them. In the words of Seth Tobocman, “everyone is connected but nobody notices it” (qtd. in Kuper iii). Even if chaos first appears to drive the transition from one panel to the next, narrative unity remains present. Hence, despite its complexity, Kuper's climactic narrative unpacks what Ryan would call a “unified causal chain” (Ryan 29).

Closure is achieved as every character's chain of events reaches an individual outcome, before the final page brings all of them to one unified resolution. For instance, the corrupt cop gets arrested (Kuper 97); the fraudulent businessman's suspicious plans are stopped by the young hacker (73); the detective becomes a hero again after solving the case of the serial killer (110); and the red-capped young man's sick father gets to go home and spend time with his son for the first time in what must have been years (111). The homeless man's chain of events is the only one that seems uneventful, as he is usually seen in-between other characters' storylines, without anything major ever happening to him (17; 21; 24; 29; 30-31; 65; 94-95). In the end, however, his purpose is revealed, for he is the one person who brings the entire narrative to its ultimate conclusion (114). Ryan’s sixth criterion is the requirement that should have been the most difficult to meet in this specific graphic novel, considering the hectic arrangement of storylines. Yet, as demonstrated, Kuper's story has all three elements: closure, causality and unity.

To reinforce this formal and pragmatic dimension, *The System* also establishes its events and context as facts inside of the storyworld; this is the seventh criterion. Just like *The Arrival*, Kuper’s graphic novel is not solely composed of hypotheses, counterfactuals,



Fig. 13. A headline confirming previous events as facts, from *The System*, p.52.

advice or instructions. The establishment of some of the events as facts is mostly facilitated by the inclusion of newspaper items in many scenes – one of the rare and brief appearances of text, which will be addressed more closely later in this chapter. Headlines slipped into panels often refer to events that were presented earlier in the book, thereby confirming their occurrence. For instance, on page 52, the fraudulent broker reads a newspaper in which the

headline refers to the racial murder that took place on pages 50 and 51 (see fig. 13), which reaffirms the factual nature of its occurrence. Readers, however do not need those written headlines to accept the events of the book as facts within the storyworld. Kuper's narrative is closer to our own world and reality than is the otherworldly storyworld of Tan's *The Arrival*. *The System* is inspired from the New York of the 1980s and 1990s (Tobocman, qtd. in Kuper iii). This connection to the "real" world makes it even easier to believe in the truth of these events, even within fictional parameters. Within the storyworld, the events really happen to the characters that populate it, because we see these characters experience the consequences of these events. For instance, after the murder of a stripper (19) and of a young black man (51), the black-haired stripper begins to display signs of concern and worry (67; see fig. 14), and with reason, seeing as a second colleague of hers is killed soon after (75). Following the death of the serial murderer who was after her, she is seen leaving town with her son, now relieved of her anxiety (109). Another example is how, after his father's recovery, the red-capped young man is seen happily enjoying time with his now healthier father (111). With or without newspapers to confirm them, the story's events are presented as real and as having consequences on the existents populating the storyworld. As a result, they are accepted as factual.



Fig. 14. The stripper's concern, from *The System*, p. 67.

Finally, criterion eight requires the story to speak to the audience in a meaningful way. According to David Beronä, and most of the critics cited in the opening pages of Kuper's graphic novel, it does. Beronä claims that, with *The System*, Kuper manages to "touch our lives" with his intense portrayal of social injustices (225). KirkPatrick Sale (qtd. in Kuper iii), Seth Tobocman (qtd. in Kuper iii), and Bill Plympton (qtd. in Kuper iv) all praise Kuper's novel for its portrayal of life in New York, a city that they know well, but that they still get to rediscover through Kuper's narrative. Sale even states that readers "will never see the city the same way again" (qtd. in Kuper iii). In light of these reactions to the graphic novel, it is safe to say that it has spoken meaningfully to its audience. Anyone who has lived in a large city, or has any awareness of the social injustices that can be found in it, can relate to the story and enjoy it. In fact, Kuper came up with the idea in a very

common, everyday-life situation: he was in the subway one morning, on his way to a work assignment, and started wondering about the unknown lives of his fellow commuters (Kuper 11). His novel is about how city people cross paths every day and live in a system that connects them all together, despite them potentially never becoming aware of each other's individual existence. In spite of its more complex structure, *The System* is generally read and recognized as a narrative, which means that readers receive his intended message and perceive its meaningfulness. *The System* therefore meets as many criteria as *The Arrival* does, despite being more subtle in terms of how it displays certain narrative traits.

There is, however, one more potential issue with this argument in favour of narrative replacing text in the definition of comics. While *The Arrival* is entirely devoid of words – at least, of words in any human language we know – *The System* has two storylines that rely rather heavily on text. Kuper's graphic novel is completely dialogue-free, which is why it is widely recognized as wordless, but the presence of newspaper headlines and of words on computer screens or pieces of paper still contributes to the development of certain characters' story. This concerns only a minority of the numerous wordless storylines running in parallel, but one may still ask the question: is the presence of text, even if minimal, the reason why *The System* meets as many narrative criteria as *The Arrival* despite displaying a more hectic and seemingly less organized sequence of events? A look into the formation of narrative in the two concerned storylines is in order, to shed light onto this question.



Fig. 15. Appearance of text in the storyline involving the businessman and the hacker, from *The System*, p. 73.

The first concerned storyline is the one involving the fraudulent businessman and the young hacker. The financial transactions that are at the core of the plot are communicated by text on a computer screen, as the businessman (38; 41; 73), and later the hacker (73; see fig. 15), log into the wealthy man's online bank account. Text on a piece of paper (64) also reveals that the businessman is plotting against someone else. Without these brief appearances of the textual component, some important information about the progression of

the plot would indeed be missing. The storyline, however, remains highly image-driven. If the text is removed, some pieces of information are missing; but, if the image is taken away, readers are left with a few disconnected words that would barely meet any of Ryan's narrative criteria. At best, it would fulfill the first dimension – the spatial dimension, requesting the presence of individuated existents – since some characters' names are mentioned in these brief textual instances. The other three dimensions – temporal, mental, and pragmatic – would however be absent, which means that merely one criterion out of eight would be met if the image was taken away. It is through the images that all seven other criteria are fulfilled, confirming that text's contribution is actually minor. Furthermore, the erasure of that particular storyline would not affect the narrativity of other storylines, which sometimes intersect with it but do not rely on it. The presence of text in that storyline is thus not the reason why *The System* managed to rank so high on Ryan's narrative scale – it already did without it.

The second storyline where text plays a significant role is that of the sex scandal involving a politician. The entirety of the storyline is revealed through news headlines. The characters involved – the victim of the scandal, Muir, and his opponent, Rex – are never seen outside of newspaper photographs or television screens accompanied with text (see fig. 16). In this case, the removal of the textual component would reduce the storyline to a



Fig. 16. Text in the politicians' storyline, from *The System*, p. 58.

few meaningless and decontextualized appearances of the characters in the media. This time, the pictorial component only helps to fulfill the first criterion – the presence of individuated existents – but fails to contribute to the seven others. Narrative would be practically absent without the news headlines moving the storyline forward. Contrary to the previous example, it is the text that provides the narrative elements of this particular storyline. That being said, the other storylines again do not rely on this one, just as they did not rely on that of the businessman

and the hacker. Muir and Rex are in fact the only characters that never physically cross paths with others. Despite their headlines showing up in panels belonging to other characters' storylines, their scandal story does not directly impact anyone's life. At best, it contributes to setting the chaotic mood of the overall narrative. Even if text is essential in

that particular storyline, it is not essential to the overall narrative of the book, which would remain narrative without the intervention of this textual storyline. This confirms again that narrative, even in *The System*, does not imply or need text when it is conceived.

In conclusion, not all comics are equally narrative, but the latter remains a recurring component that does not need text to take place, and that is more consistently present in comics than text. The analyses of narrative in Tan's *The Arrival* and Kuper's *The System* make this observation evident. Comics that fit none of Ryan's narrative criteria are arguably not comics in the first place. It is thus clear that text is not the missing piece of definitions, nor is it the component that complements images to create comics. That missing piece is narrative, and text does not have to be present for a work to be a part of the comics medium.

Chapter 3

Text Versus Image: The Real Source of Complexity

As has now been made clear, text is merely optional for the creation of narrative, which means that wordless graphic narratives are entirely valid. Yet, to this day, a handful of scholars, including Will Eisner (127) and Stephen Tabachnick (9), continue to imply that wordless narratives are doomed to simplicity, as if complex themes or structures were entirely out of reach whenever text is absent. If narrative does not require text to take form, it apparently still needs it to achieve a certain level of depth and complexity. This, of course, is merely another assumption that prevents the field from rejecting text as a defining element of comics. This chapter will refute that argument by exploring what these scholars mean by “complexity,” and by analyzing how these characteristics are actually present in dialogue-free narratives such as Kuper’s *The System*. To further prove the irrelevance of text for complexity, these same elements will be studied in David Mazzucchelli’s *Asterios Polyp*, a graphic novel with text. This latter analysis will show that, more often than not, complexity is achieved visually rather than textually, even when text is involved. As a result, although text can contribute to a work’s depth and sophistication, it is just as optional in that context as it was for the construction of narrative.

Before assessing whether a work is “complex,” one must look at what the word means in the first place. Terms like “complexity,” “sophistication” and “depth” tend to be used freely in scholarly analyses, and rarely come with a clear definition. Hence, when Stephen Tabachnick speaks of “the depth and subtlety that we have come to expect of traditional novels” (2), or when Dale Jacobs speaks of words’ ability to create an “environment for meaning making that is extremely complex” (22), readers are expected to understand what those terms mean. With such a vague, unspecified definition of the term, it is contentious to claim the absence of complexity in certain works, particularly in wordless graphic novels. In order to prove that depth and sophistication are not tied to text, let us first examine what, according to scholars, really leads to complexity. Based on the theoretical contributions of scholars Stephen Weiner, Paul A. Crutcher and Barbara Postema – also supported by scholars Hillary Chute, Faith Balisch, Rocco Versaci, Lisa Zunshine, Silke Horstkotte, and Scott McCloud –, these commonly accepted markers of complexity can be summarized into the five following elements: literariness, seriousness

of the subject matter, multiplicity of storylines, character interiority, and reader involvement.

The first element, literariness, is highly problematic, and cannot sustain any consistent analysis of complexity in comics. “Literariness” is one of the most commonly used qualifiers of sophistication in a work of comics, and typically means that a work uses a format similar to that of famous works of textual literature. In many cases, it is a graphic novel’s ability to distance itself from mainstream superhero comics that both grants it value and makes it worthy of analysis. For instance, according to Stephen Weiner, part of the success of Neil Gaiman’s graphic series *The Sandman* is due to the readership “[growing] tired of superhero fantasy” and thus shifting to “literary fantasy” (Faster 46). Graphic novels about superheroes, with the exception of Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*, Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and a select few others, are perceived as simplistic and academically unworthy. Graphic novels that depart from the tradition to pursue more original storylines are deemed to be literary, in that they emulate the way textual literature structures narrative. This has led experts to view “literariness” as an element of complexity. This approach, however, merely relies on the assumed superiority of textual literature, and implies that graphic novels that draw from such a “higher” form of literature are more intellectually stimulating. As has been shown in earlier chapters, this is a flawed approach at defining literary worth. Jan Baetens clearly states that “good visual storytelling, i.e., storytelling capable of competing with the best practices in literature, has to exploit the narrative possibilities of the images themselves” (80-81), as opposed to relying purely on the presence of the written word. Literariness or resemblance to textual literature cannot be accepted as a legitimate component of the definition of artistic sophistication, as it bears too many problematic assumptions about the form.

Fortunately, the four remaining criteria appear much more valid and relevant. The first of these four is the seriousness of the subject matter, and can be understood as twofold: the mature nature of the themes and the work’s nuanced and realistic approach to those themes. Indeed, one of the main reasons why certain graphic novels such as *Maus*, *Watchmen* and *Asterios Polyp* have been deemed academically worthy is because of their “adult” themes, far from mainstream comics typically aimed at younger audiences and offering a more sensationalist approach. Hillary Chute, for instance, claims that what has

“raised the profile of literary comics” are the authors who have provided us with “stories that are serious in scope and heavy on style” (459). It is the uncensored stories tackling controversial themes with a certain degree of authenticity that tend to warrant academic attention. Paul A. Crutcher illustrates this idea by explaining that what makes certain Batman narratives sophisticated is their avoidance of stereotypical hero vs. villain dichotomies, like in *Hush*, in which Batman is “trying to negotiate a deeply human but astoundingly complex task with a woman he likely loves” rather than “leading an arch villain to a police car” (65). Faith Balisch builds upon that idea, and adds that, while a sophisticated work’s themes may not always be adult in nature, they will however address social issues in a way that provides more depth and relevance than stereotypical storylines created for purely commercial purposes. She provides the example of Lynn Johnston’s *For Better or For Worse* series, that regularly tackles themes such as homosexuality and coming out, bullying at school, changing roles for women, dysfunctional families, and many other topics that were once unusual in comics, but particularly relevant for the families it was meant to represent (248). The themes in these narratives are more serious, which not only means that they target older audiences, but also that they are more nuanced and relatable.

Another equally relevant criterion, according to scholarly analyses of “sophisticated” works, is the multiplicity of storylines in a narrative. In his discussion of complexity in cinema, David Turgeon defines the term as a narrative in which not every detail has to play a crucial role in the resolution of conflicts, and in which there are both minor and major stories, sometimes even embedded into one another (99). Instead of merely progressing from introduction to resolution, complex narratives are more elaborate, often diving into detailed analyses of characters’ lives and layering different simultaneous storylines in the process. To this, Paul A. Crutcher adds that the key to complexity is for comics to allow for “multiple atmospheres, multiple times, even multiple versions of characters and narrators simultaneously” (62). Here, Crutcher refers to Rocco Versaci’s claim that sophistication partly comes with “multiplicity of perspectives and layering” (Versaci 23). In other words, this multiplicity can occur in many different ways. One narrative may achieve it by following more than one independent character in parallel to one another, while another narrative will instead revisit a same situation from different angles or perspectives. By presenting a different time period in parallel to the narrative’s present

time, even flashbacks can match that definition. Several scholars, including Lisa Zunshine and Silke Horstkotte, have mentioned multiplicity of storylines in their analyses of graphic narratives by renowned comics artists such as Art Spiegelman (Zunshine 128) and Neil Gaiman (Horstkotte 34), highlighting this as contributing to their success. One can therefore say that complex narratives are those that interweave multiple storylines or timelines.

Character interiority is the third characteristic of what scholars conceptualize as complexity in graphic novels. Lisa Zunshine explains that “sociocognitive complexity” in a work of literature is cultivated “by representing mental states embedded within mental states” (121), which can take the form of elaborate thoughts, feelings, and sometimes dreams. The more layers and subtleties are found in this representation of characters’ interiority, the better it is for the creation of narrative complexity. Paul A. Crutcher believes that this complexity is achieved by “delving into... the duality of persona” and by creating characters who “cross myriad temporal, visual, and setting ranges while paradoxically remaining coherent” (69). This means that sophisticated storylines must include characters with intricate, three-dimensional personalities, whose interior thoughts and feelings are made available to the reader. In other words, external action does not suffice, as complexity comes from exploring characters’ minds and souls. This is exactly what Marie-Laure Ryan calls the “mental dimension” (29), a look into what the eye should usually not be able to see.

Finally, the fourth and last characteristic to consider is the level of involvement of the reader in decoding the narrative. Indeed, a number of experts associate a work’s complexity with how much involvement is required from the reader to interpret its meaning. McCloud, for one, asserts that “participation is a powerful force in any medium” (69), and that even “filmmakers long ago realized the importance of allowing viewers to use their imaginations” for their work to be worthwhile (69). If a story is simple enough to be understood at first glance, with nothing else to unpack – such as symbols, alternate interpretations, cryptic analogies –, it is unlikely to be considered deep or sophisticated. It is therefore important for a visual medium like comics to involve readers in the process of creating meaning if the work is to achieve complexity. This complexity can be achieved in many different ways. Postema cites Julie Doucet’s *My New York Diary* as an example of

comics with abundant details, where everything from the roaming cockroaches to the eclectic collection of items laying on the floor connote different information about the characters' lives (Postema 7). Conversely, the minimalistic approach (McCloud 83) encourages reader involvement through omission and ambiguity instead, and invites them to fill in the gaps; Postema calls this approach a “code of economy” (2). Either way, the reader's skills of interpretation must be deployed for a graphic novel's complexity to be recognized.

Complexity in comics is therefore reliant on the seriousness of the subject matter, the multiplicity of storylines, character interiority, and reader involvement. While neither of these criteria automatically imply the presence of text, many scholars have argued that words are necessary for these characteristics to appear in a narrative. Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, for instance, claims that the image cannot translate notions or facts that are in any way intellectually advanced (39), thereby denying the possibility for serious themes to be portrayed in text-free narratives. Kai Mikkonen argues that split verbal focalization – a way of introducing parallel storylines – is a technique where the relationship between the visual and verbal perspectives become “quite complex and dynamic” (103), which implies that text is an important component of the creation of multiple storylines. Even the involvement of the reader in the absence of text is questioned. As Stephen Tabachnick explains, comics are often believed to “detract from ‘real’ reading” in that “they are easier to absorb than text unaccompanied by images” (9); this would mean that the role of readers is less dynamic when images are joined to the text, and maybe even less so when text is absent.

Yet, of the four characteristics outlined here, character interiority in wordless narratives is the one scholars are most dubious about. According to Will Eisner, it is “the dialogue which gives voice to the thought processes” (127), meaning that thoughts cannot be made available to the reader without the use of dialogue or words in general. As Brenda Bellorín and María Cecilia Silva-Díaz explain, the common belief is that “[m]ental processes—such as perceiving, thinking, longing, remembering, and feeling— usually call for verbal representation since they cannot be depicted visually” (210). Readers are used to exploring this mental dimension with words; by putting words on the feelings, dreams or aspirations of characters, an author allows the readers to probe the mind of these fictional individuals and uncover new sides to their elaborate characterization. It is more difficult to

envision how one may portray such intangible concepts without the use of text. As a result, when a sequence is wordless, readers may only expect to see what is normally visible and palpable. Does this mean that complexity cannot be achieved without text? To elucidate that question, the four criteria outlined here will be analyzed in Kuper's *The System* and Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp*.

Complexity in Kuper's *The System*

A number of articles have already discussed *The Arrival*'s sophistication, and more specifically its integration of the previously mentioned elements of complexity in its narrative. Brenda Bellorín and María Cecilia Silva-Díaz, for instance, analyze how Shaun Tan manages to portray interior emotions and intentions without the use of text (213-214). Carmen M. Martínez-Roldán and Sarah Newcomer, in turn, explore how he interweaves different storylines within his main story (190) and how he engages readers in the formation of multiple interpretations (190). Scholars agree that *The Arrival* is a complex graphic novel, despite its lack of text. Some, like Stein and Thon (4), may choose to view Tan's graphic novel as one of the exceptions of the form, but the following analysis will prove that complexity in wordless novels is in fact quite common. It will examine how all four elements of complexity take form in *The System*, a graphic novel in which most storylines are wordless. In the process, it will also show how, just like in *The Arrival*, complexity or sophistication in Kuper's narrative is not about text.

The first question to ask is whether Kuper's graphic novel includes adult themes in its narrative. This is an easy one, as it is clear very early on that its target audience is not children and that the themes that are addressed are tailored to more mature readers. The first page of the first chapter takes place in a strip club, and contains graphic representations of nudity, which introduces the theme of sex before anything else in the story. The main stripper that we see in that first page is brutally murdered merely two pages later (19), quickly leading readers from insinuations of sex to implications of death and crime. The novel opens with themes obviously inappropriate for young audiences, and hardly gives readers any time to breathe before following this up with depictions of drug transactions (22), police corruption (23) and three more murders (51; 70-71; 75). Such graphic content

and mature themes make it rather clear that this novel is aimed at an adult and more “serious” audience.

Furthermore, these mature themes are also depicted in a way that is both nuanced and

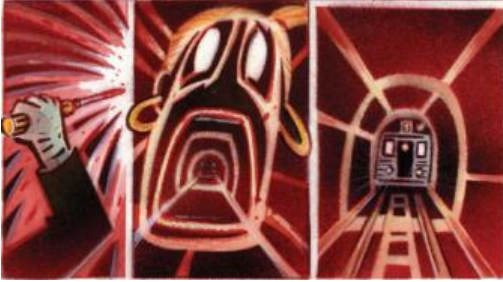


Fig. 17. The first murder in *The System*, p. 19.

grounded in reality, which is important for a graphic novel to be sophisticated. Graphic scenes of violence and nudity can sometimes be used for the mere purpose of appealing to the masses and selling more copies, but in Kuper’s book, not every scene depicting violent encounters is graphic. The first (19) and fourth (75) murders

are in fact drawn from angles that prevent a clear view of the action (see fig 17). Readers get a glimpse of a weapon, a shot of a screaming face, maybe a drop of blood or two hanging in the air, and not much more. In both cases, the violence is more implied than portrayed. There is, in fact, meaning behind whose death is graphic and bloody, and whose death is not. The characters whose death is more graphic typically have close ones who suffer greatly from their loss, such as the young black man whose girlfriend’s tears make the front page of every newspaper the next day (51-52; see fig. 18), or the drug dealer whose friend is still mourning him in the epilogue (110). Those who die through implication, however, are lonely and quickly forgotten. Incidentally, both of them are strippers, social outcasts with no known family. As extravagant as their display of nudity is in previous passages, their death scenes are particularly sober. Their actual deaths are not worth showing, as their existence ceases to matter as soon as they disappear. Kuper’s calculated use of graphic elements – such as nudity or blood – is a statement about social stratification and the dehumanization of certain groups of people; it shows who “deserves” attention and who does not, as well as it highlights the “forgotten” ones in society. In the words of Seth Tobocman, *The System* is a narrative in which “[c]lass and caste are portrayed in stark pantomime” (qtd. in Kuper iii). This means that adult themes in the novel are not merely there to shock or to sell, but are in fact nuanced in a way that makes the story more meaningful.

Kuper's narrative also touches upon subjects that, while not necessarily adult in nature, are more "serious" because of their relevance to the current social climate. One great example of this is the theme of urban individuality that defines most characters, almost to the point of social alienation. According to Matt Ashare, Kuper's characters "act out the ironies of postmodern civilization on a daily basis" (qtd. in Kuper iv), with one such irony being how people in big cities cross paths regularly without ever noticing each other. Even though no words are used to bring urban individuality to the mind of readers, it remains quite evident in other ways. The first murder scene (19), for instance, is quickly followed by sequences of unknowing people: the detective reading old newspaper cuts (20); workers at the back of a garbage truck (20); a happy couple walking down the street (21); and the drug dealer's friend drawing in a notebook (21-22). These



Fig. 18. The graphic depiction of the black young man's murder, from *The System*, p. 51.

people's lives are unaffected by the death of a young female stripper, which highlights both the individuality and alienation of citizens of this fictive New York, and even implies the social erasure of women of a "lower profession" such as erotic dancers. A few pages later, a singer performs at the subway station as passers-by ignore her (27). This scene reinforces how isolated characters can be, despite constantly standing in crowds of people. Characters like the young hacker, on the other hand, disrupt that social tendency, as is seen on page 34 (see fig. 19), in which he skateboards carelessly through the streets and makes himself impossible to ignore. People are visibly shocked by his refusal to conform to the quiet cohabitation of individual citizens. All of these characters inhabit the same environment, but expect minimal interaction; characters such as the hacker cause mayhem by refusing to conform. This is a comment on the way social interactions occur – or in fact, do not occur – in big cities, and no words are needed for that social commentary to be communicated.

Reverting to such imagery shows that *The System* is able to address serious – and thus complex – issues and themes, even without the use of words.



Fig. 19. The hacker disrupting the social order, from *The System*, p. 34.

The second characteristic of complexity, the presence of multiple storylines, is evident in *The System*. At least seventeen storylines can be identified in the entire narrative, and potentially more, depending on one's interpretation. The detective, for instance, has his own storyline; while it is connected to that of the black-haired stripper whom he saves at the end, he is more than once seen individually dealing with his own personal issues, such as his guilt relating to a past professional mistake (20; 72). The stripper has her own storyline as well. She is often seen in contexts unrelated to the detective; for instance, when she spends time with her

son (31; 35; 55) or when she is at work (68; 74; 99). Likewise, the young drug dealer and his friend have their own storyline, even though it happens to be connected to that of the corrupted cop. The homeless man, yet another character, is often seen sharing panels with other individuals (24; 28; 64), but with only very few meaningful interactions (see fig. 20); that is, until the very end, when his actions seal everyone else's fate (114). All storylines share the narrative space, with some characters receiving more attention than others, but all of them play a part in the portrayal of a large city's chaotic atmosphere. Kuper's novel is about individuals whose journeys create a whole from which the narrative emerges. Even the religious man screaming on the streets, who is only seen a few times in the background of panels, almost as an afterthought, turns out to be very important near the end, as his presence helps the detective solve the murder case (100). All of these interwoven storylines contribute to form a complex narrative in which no words are needed.

Character interiority, however, is initially more difficult to identify in Kuper's narrative. This is not surprising, considering that we are used to thoughts and feelings being

externalized with words. Nonetheless, feelings abound in the story. Bellorín and Silva-Díaz explain that “images tend to have a greater degree of specificity,” simply because “the detailed look of a character can be depicted in a condensed manner that leaves almost no space for ambiguity” (212). Such a statement is especially pertinent when applied to *The System*, in which facial expressions play a crucial role in the portrayal of feelings. One emotion that occurs often is fear. It first appears on page 54, when the young man with the red cap witnesses a patient



Fig. 20. One of the homeless man’s scarce interactions, from *The System*, p. 24.

fall into a critical state at the hospital, where he is visiting his father. The fear on his face, as portrayed through a widened, shocked stare and gaping mouth, clearly implies his worry that his dad will not recover from his sickness and will at some point reach a similar critical state (see fig. 21); this fear foreshadows the father’s near-death experience that happens later on page 83. Facial expression is enough to



Fig. 21. The red-capped young man’s fear, from *The System*, p. 54.

understand the fear the character feels. Similar occurrences can be found on page 55, when the black-haired stripper watches news of the racial murder on TV and worries for her family, or on page 69, when the drug dealer’s friend sees the suspicious car approaching and realizes it is too late to save his friend from a fatal shooting. It happens again on page 75, when another stripper gets killed, and on page 101, when the black-haired stripper faces the murderer. Every time, it is through facial expression that the character’s feelings are communicated, whether it is fear, happiness, despair, or worry, to name only a few. Importantly, words are not needed in any of these situations.

Character interiority is also about the depiction of thoughts. The latter are more difficult to portray than emotions, since facial expressions are no longer enough to convey this information; this challenge, however, does not stop Kuper from communicating characters’ thoughts in various instances. The best examples of Kuper’s depiction of thoughts are scenes which were already examined in the previous chapter. The first one is the scene on page 100, in which the detective is seen walking out of the bar with five thought bubbles hanging over his head, all containing pieces of the puzzle he needs to solve

(see fig. 9). Thought bubbles with pictures instead of words inside them are a simple, yet effective way of depicting thoughts without the use of text, as readers understand right away what is on the detective's mind. The second example is found on pages 59 to 62, where the subway station singer's song is transformed into a visual tale of animals in the jungle, amongst which the singer is seen standing (see fig. 10). For a moment, this person no longer finds herself in a subway station, but rather inside the experience of her song, which is displayed for the privileged eyes of the readers, but invisible to anyone else inside the narrative space. The personal experience of a song is not only abstract, but also restricted to the interior of a character's mind, and Kuper has found a way to exteriorize that experience, without words.



Fig. 22. The drug dealer's death, from *The System*, p. 71.

Even death, as experienced and visualized inside the characters' minds, is brought out onto the visual space of the page. On page 71, the drug dealer dies, shot by an unknown enemy in a passing car. One panel at a time, we see the bullets transform into stars, and then into planets, as the brick wall becomes the outer space that surrounds them. Gradually, one planet turns back into an eye, before we see a shot of the character bleeding out, and dying (see fig. 22). This glimpse into the mind of a character as he experiences his own death is an exceptionally intricate and complex depiction of a concept belonging to the mental dimension; yet, Kuper manages to bring this portrayal to life in just one page. A

similar occurrence takes place again on pages 84 to 86, as the father of the red-capped young man has a near-death experience. In one panel, the old man is seen lying in his hospital bed, unconscious, as his son cries by his bedside (84). In the next, he is seen floating above the surface of his mattress, under his son's shocked expression (84). As the sequence progresses, he is seen floating away from his bed and flying out the window (84), above the cityscape and towards the sun (85). Paralleling the previous death scene, the sun becomes the son's eye, and the old man becomes a tear on his cheek (86; see fig. 23). Miraculously, the father comes back to life and wakes up, to the joy of his loving son (86).

This time, the experience may have been the son's rather than that of the actual dying man, since it is into the former's eye that the sun morphs. The son also reacts with surprise to his father's soul leaving the room, which he should not be able to see if it were a depiction of the father's dream-like experience. Either way, we are once more presented with a sophisticated depiction of death as processed through the mind of a character. Glimpses into the mental dimension of characters allow for the presence of character interiority, and, subsequently, of complexity within the narrative, even in the absence of text.

The fourth and last element of complexity, reader involvement, is not only present here, but it could be argued that wordless narratives in fact involve readers more than textual ones. With comics in general, readers are believed to have more control over the flow of the story than with a purely textual work of literature. Will Eisner explains in his book *Comics and Sequential Art* that “there is absolutely no way in which the artist can prevent the reading of the last panel before the first” and that all the creator has is the “tacit cooperation of the reader” (40). In other words, the creator cannot force readers to follow a certain order, but there tends to be an understanding between author and reader that is usually respected. This pact is especially pertinent when there is text in the panels, seeing as the audience is more likely to read the words from left to right, and follow the text balloons as guidance throughout the page. Dialogue and textual narration enable creators to maintain a level of control that is limited, but nevertheless existent. When text is absent, on the other hand, it is much easier to browse the panels in an unconventional order, either out of curiosity, confusion, or outright rebellion against the norms. The “tacit cooperation of the reader” may still apply, but is less assured.

In Kuper's *The System*, the panel arrangement and page design encourage readers to go through the panels in their “natural” order, but the level of complexity of the narrative and of its storylines' entanglement almost makes it necessary to move back and forth between the pages, in an attempt to seek details that may have been missed when reading



Fig. 23. Depiction of a near-death experience, from *The System*, p. 86.

previous pages for the first time. The drunk subway driver and the religious man on the street are good examples of such storylines that call for an unusual reading flow. Both characters initially appear negligible, until the drunk driver causes a tragic subway accident (91-93) and the religious man's acolyte turns out to be the murderer (100-102). When their seemingly insignificant existence is revealed to be a catalyst of significant narrative events, readers may be tempted to go back to previous pages, seeking those earlier appearances in order to reassess if anything was foreshadowed but missed the first time around. This phenomenon in the book is certainly not a coincidence, since Kuper himself asserted that, with wordless books, "there's a read you get if you go through it, and there are reads that are about seeing other details" (qtd. in Houp 129). Wordless narratives offer readers more freedom in the way they roam the pages, but can also make them work harder in order to piece together the story's fragments, which engages them more and implies a higher level of complexity. If textual literature has the power to be cryptic and laborious to decode, so do wordless narratives, in their own way.

Reader involvement is further heightened by the presence of multiple possible interpretations, among which the reader must choose. According to Martínez-Roldán and Newcomer, wordless graphic novels are "well suited to inviting multiple interpretations" (190) because they incite readers to read "between the pictures" (196) and to use the gutters – the space between the panels – "to fill in those spaces with their own questions and experiences" (196). What the two critics assert is that wordless narratives leave just enough room to the imagination for readers to be able to fill in those gaps with their own interpretations. This is indeed the case in *The System*, as most of the storylines leave readers with unanswered questions, which they can answer with their own idea of who those characters were before the beginning of the narrative, and who they will be after it ends. For instance, we never quite understand the whole reasoning behind the bomb-making. We see the bomber mingling with suspicious-looking people (42), visibly plotting and celebrating a plan they seem to have put in motion (43; see fig. 24), but the specifics are unclear. This information is not absolutely crucial to the story, since the plan is never carried through because of the bomber's death in a subway accident, but this is the kind of gap that readers get to fill in with their own interpretation of the situation. Similarly, it is unclear how the hacker knows the businessman enough to hack into his account and steal

his money (73). What readers need to know for the narrative to make sense is that the hacker steals the money from a fraudulent man and later buys himself a motorcycle with



Fig. 24. The bomber's mysterious plan, from *The System*, p. 43.

it, which allows him to upgrade from his skateboard and break social conventions with an even more disruptive approach. The other details surrounding these events are inessential, and their vagueness again allows readers to get involved into the decoding of the narrative. It is thus by allowing back and forth reading and encouraging multiple interpretations that Kuper engages readers, and further complexifies his dialogue-free narrative.

An analysis of complexity in Kuper's *The System* shows that Will Eisner is right when he says that "images without words, while they seem to represent a more primitive form of graphic narrative, really require some sophistication on the part of the reader" (Eisner 24). It is common to assume that images are more simplistic than text, since the latter has earned a nearly unshakable reputation as a sophisticated system of communication (Tabachnick 4; Jacobs 19; Pierre 4); but this assumption is inaccurate. Kuper's *The System* explores serious subject matters in nuanced ways, dives into multiple simultaneous storylines, and develops characters' interior planes, all while involving readers in creating meaning. Wordless narratives can have as many characteristics of complexity as narratives with text do, and the absence of words has no impact on the work's level of sophistication. In fact, not only is complexity possible in wordless novels, but, even in graphic novels with text, elements of complexity tend to be introduced through the image, more than through the text. Building upon that idea, the next section will examine those same four criteria of complexity in *Asterios Polyp*, a graphic novel with text. Through this analysis, I will show that the image plays a more significant role in the creation of its narrative's intricacies.

Complexity in Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp*

David Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp* is widely recognized as a complex, sophisticated graphic novel. Douglas Wolk, in a review for *The New York Times*, describes

it as a “dazzling, expertly constructed entertainment... It demands that its audience wrestle with it, argue with it, reread and re-examine it” (“Shades” n. pag.). It also incidentally uses text in its storytelling. Just as it was easy to assume that images are inherently more simplistic, it would be easy to assume that text in Mazzucchelli’s novel significantly contributes to the introduction of characteristics of complexity into the story. While this may be true in some cases, it is most definitely not true for all criteria. In *Asterios Polyp*, complexity is cultivated through images as much as through words, if not more.

The first characteristic to evaluate is the subject matter’s level of seriousness and the means by which it is introduced. In Mazzucchelli’s book, the graphic theme of sex is at times introduced through words, while at other times it is introduced through images. For instance, in the first pages of the narrative, readers understand that a pornographic movie is playing because of the speech bubble filled with moans, which leads the reader’s gaze across the apartment, towards the bedroom (see fig. 25), and ultimately to a television screen (5-6). Similarly, later in the novel, Asterios has a conversation about sex with peers at a party (56; see fig. 26), as made clear by the dialogue. In both cases, it is text that introduces the theme.



Fig. 25. Sounds from an adult movie playing in the bedroom, from David Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp*, p. 5.

In other cases, however, it is the image that undertakes its depiction, particularly on page 20, in which a simple discussion of Asterios’ family ancestry is made sexual by giving the mother’s portrait an egg shape and the father’s a sperm shape, which both collide to portray the union that resulted in Asterios’ existence (see fig. 27). At a later point in the narrative, a female student is seen flirting with Asterios, and while his dialogue indicates a polite rejection of her offer (39), the image instead depicts nudity in a postcoital setting (40), leading the interpretation of the scene in a completely different direction, a much more graphic and adult one. It is



Fig. 26. Asterios’ crude conversation, from *Asterios Polyp*, p. 56.

Asterios’ existence (see fig. 27). At a later point in the narrative, a female student is

seen flirting with Asterios, and while his dialogue indicates a polite rejection of her offer (39), the image instead depicts nudity in a postcoital setting (40), leading the interpretation of the scene in a completely different direction, a much more graphic and adult one. It is

unclear whether this sexual encounter actually occurs or is the fruit of a fantasy, but the sexual thematic is here introduced by the image, rather than by the text.

As explained earlier, seriousness of subject matter not only depends on how graphic the themes are, but also on how nuanced and relatable the overall approach is. In *Asterios Polyp*, the image plays a crucial role in establishing that nuance. For instance, in that same scene on pages 39 and 40, where Asterios has – or fantasizes about – a sexual encounter with a student, the visual depiction of the protagonist’s thought process brings a new layer of



Fig. 27. A simple explanation of genealogy, or a representation of the reproductive act? From *Asterios Polyp*, p. 20.

meaning to an otherwise gratuitously graphic scene. What the scene actually does is portray Asterios as a misogynistic man whose interactions with women are constantly tainted with lust and sexual attraction. What we see in this scene is the internal conflict that he faces whenever he finds himself in a situation where he knows that this attitude will be inappropriate. While the dialogue remains professional, the image instead offers a stark

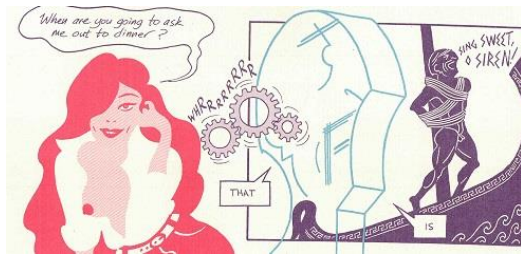


Fig. 28. Asterios tempted by the student/siren’s charm, from *Asterios Polyp*, p.39.

contrast between the young female student, portrayed with warm tones, curvy lines and partially uncovered breasts, and Asterios, depicted in cold tones and rigid geometric shapes; he is even shown to be metaphorically bound to a pole, at the mercy of sirens (see fig. 28). This contrasting depiction shows that

Asterios knows his sexual thoughts are inappropriate when talking to a student, but he also believes that these feelings of lust are out of his control; a woman’s beauty is too tempting and bewitching to be resisted.

Throughout the novel, Asterios is often portrayed with the same cold tones and geometric shapes (see fig. 29), hinting at his orderly and rigid personality that sees women as distractions. Asterios, at least at the beginning of his story, struggles to respect women as human beings instead of as objects of sexual temptation. That is, until he reaches a turning point with Hana, with whom he discovers more equitable intimacy on page 127, where they are drawn in the same tones and drawing style (see fig. 30). Their positions mirror one another's and they hold hands, neither of them expressing dominance. In that moment, they are equals. What the depictions of sex in the graphic novel therefore communicate are the evolution and gradual nuancing of a man's problematic perception of women. This is not nudity for the sake of nudity. Mazzucchelli leverages his mature themes to communicate nuanced and realistic themes, which is made possible mainly by the image.



Fig. 29. Hana vs. Asterios, from *Asterios Polyp*, p 41.

Asterios Polyp also broaches other subjects that, while not necessarily adult, are serious in nature and relevant in the current social and political context. Admittedly, a number of these themes are introduced through dialogue, particularly during Ursula's numerous one-sided lectures. On pages 136 to 139, for instance, she denounces crimes against Native Americans, a subject that is still relevant today. Ursula explains that "once all this land was wild, and inhabited by a truly free people" (136), before they were stacked into reservations, or, as she prefers to call them, "concentration camps" (136). It is through her words that the serious concepts of racial violence and discrimination are introduced and commented on; conversely, the image reflects none of this discussion. Another social issue that Ursula raises in a similar lecture is the modern concept of gender. On pages 176 and 177, she denounces the binary conception of gender as either female or male, which she explains is "sort of an anthropocentric point of view," since "the natural world has plenty of variation on what we think of as male and female" (176). This subject is again relevant in a time when



Fig. 30. Hana and Asterios, no longer so different, from *Asterios Polyp*, p. 127.

...like a shadow of the living world.

transgender identity has entered the political terrain, gaining more traction in the public eye and becoming increasingly accepted (Fausset; White n. pag.). When looking at these examples, one could readily assume that social issues and topical themes are only introduced through text in *Asterios Polyp*.

However, such an assumption would disregard many other themes that are in fact introduced through the pictorial component of the graphic novel. The best example would be the theme of dysfunctional marriages, which is certainly relevant today, with increasingly common divorces (“Marriage” n. pag.). It is the visual representation of the



Fig. 31. Asterios and Hana meet for the first time, from *Asterios Polyp*, p. 63.

main couple’s differences that most clearly communicates this theme. Asterios and Hana are very different from one another, as made clear by the use of distinct colours and shapes to portray them. In the scene where they first meet (63), their appearances are at first in opposition to one another – Asterios in blue geometric shapes, and Hana in pink checkered lines –, but the shapes and colours merge as the characters talk and start to feel a connection between them (see fig. 31). By the time

we reach the last panel of this sequence, both characters are drawn in a mixture of blue shapes and pink strokes, meaning that their differences may in fact complete each other. In later passages, their life together is portrayed in mixtures of blue and pink, as a representation of the compromises they make every day for their relationship, but also as a reminder of how they never fully learn to adapt. Throughout their relationship, they hold on to the mentalities and differences that will lead to their demise. In the fight scene that marks the end of their marriage (226-229), their appearances become distinct again, as Hana recovers her pink checkered strokes, while Asterios becomes again an assemblage of blue shapes. Their differences can no longer be reconciled (see fig. 32). The dialogue may explain that they are divorcing, but by then, the dysfunctions of their marriage have already been made clear by Mazzucchelli’s use of colour. This topical theme, as opposed to the themes Ursula voices, is ultimately introduced through the image, not text.

Asterios Polyp mostly follows one main character throughout the novel, but does so by alternating between the past and the present, which creates two core storylines that run in parallel to one another. This is the second element of complexity – multiplicity of storylines – and while both timelines have text, the distinction between the two settings is made visually, again through the use of different dominant colours for each time frame. For one, purple is the colour that ties everything together as it is used in every section of the book, but the other ones are used to help readers identify what stage of the characters’ lives is depicted in every



Fig. 32. Asterios’ and Hana’s irreconcilable differences, from *Asterios Polyp*, p. 229.

scene. For instance, when the narrative conjures up events from the past, arrangements of the colours blue, purple and pink are used; coincidentally, scenes from the past are mainly from a time when Asterios and Hana were together. The present time, as a separate storyline, comes in shades of yellow and purple. Because of this distinction, we know that the present time really begins on page 8, when a fire forces Asterios to leave his apartment and dive into a new journey of self-discovery (see fig. 33). The moments before that are still part of an apathetic in-between phase from which he gradually distances himself throughout this narrative. After page 8, both the past and the present share the narrative space, at least until page 295, when Asterios finally decides that it is time for him to go back to Hana. At that point, all colours are unleashed: blue, green, yellow, purple, pink, and more (see fig. 34). We understand that a new stage in their lives begins then. This clear division of the time frames through dominant colours shows that the image plays a much stronger role than text in the introduction of multiple storylines.

Character interiority, the third characteristic of complexity, is also image-based in *Asterios Polyp*. In the book, characters whose personality is almost entirely depicted through dialogue and written narration tend to be caricatures, more flat than round; they are arguably there only to serve as plot devices or vehicles for certain messages. The first example is Willy, whose extravagant personality often seems exaggerated and whose main purpose is to break Hana and Asterios up as a couple. His demeanor can be summarized by his overt flirtatiousness with Hana, from calling her “my dear” (190) or “light of my life” (195), to offering her inappropriate statements such as “stroke me like that and I’ll show you a special relationship” (191). He



Fig. 33. The present-time storyline (in tones of yellow and purple) begins when the fire alarm sets off, from *Asterios Polyp*, p. 8.



Fig. 34. The colour scheme after page 295, from *Asterios Polyp*, p. 417.

is mostly present to spark Asterios’ jealousy, with no other apparent narrative purpose. The other example is Ursula, who generates self-reflection both for Asterios and the readers with her lectures, but who remains very one-dimensional in her personality. She discusses very serious issues and plays a relatively important role in bringing Asterios to the realization that he needs Hana in his life, but she herself remains shallow. Neither Willy nor Ursula are developed with depth; we know almost nothing of their past, of their motivations, or of how they are outside of those specific situations. Their longer lines of dialogue do not provide any significant glimpse into their character interiority.

Asterios and Hana, on the other hand, are much rounder characters. Incidentally, their mental dimension is brought to the readers' attention through the pictorial component much



Fig. 35. The empty silhouette of his unborn brother, from *Asterios Polyp*, p. 25.

more often than through words. Deep-seated loneliness, for instance, is a feeling that follows Asterios around throughout the novel. This is to be expected, seeing as his twin brother died before birth (21), leaving him with a sense of incompleteness for the rest of his life. While the origin of this feeling is explained through words, the severity of how it affects Asterios is communicated through the image. On pages 24 and 25, an empty silhouette follows him, as he walks aimlessly in the rain after the loss of his home (see fig. 35). On page 172, a shadow is seen in the car window next to Asterios, right after Ursula asks him if he has siblings. These visual instances recur throughout the novel, and his loneliness, while initially caused by the absence of his brother, eventually turns into his missing Hana's presence. We can see on pages 236 to 243 a series of everyday moments spent with Hana, gathered in a disorganized collage of panels, and succeeded by a blank page, with Asterios sitting alone, in the midst of nothingness (see fig. 36). The sequence has some dialogue in it, but it

remains inconsequential to the actual purpose of the passage: illustrating Asterios' chronic loneliness. It defines him in a way that brings a new dimension to this otherwise arrogant character. Again, it is through the image that this glimpse into the character's psyche is possible.

through the image. On pages 24 and 25, an empty silhouette follows him, as he



Fig. 36. Asterios surrounded by nothingness after Hana's departure, from *Asterios Polyp*, p. 243.

Insecurity is another core aspect of the two main characters' personalities, and it is the image that, once more, brings this aspect of interiority to light. Hana is insecure, and while that is explained in the narration (60), the image communicates the feeling more genuinely by showing her constantly standing next to the spotlight, but never quite under it (see fig. 37). People never give her the spotlight, and she is not confident enough to step into it on her own. Even the written narration later uses that visual imagery to explain why she found Asterios interesting: he made her feel like she was “staring into the spotlight”



Fig. 37. Hana shying away from the spotlight, from *Asterios Polyp*, p. 61.

(63). He made her believe she was worthy of the attention, like she no longer had to worry about being good enough. This is how and why she fell in love with him, until he starts overpowering her in conversations and other situations, erasing her again. Even the way Asterios speaks over her is portrayed visually, by showing his speech bubbles covering hers, hiding what she is saying (see fig. 38). The text in the bubbles is mostly irrelevant; what matters is the placement of the bubbles and what it says about how Asterios makes

Hana feel insecure again.

Unlike her, Asterios at first appears to be blatantly arrogant. Dialogue generates this perception: for example, on page 56, when he openly shows off his sexual jokes and theories. Images reveal how his arrogance is actually a mask for his insecurities. In fact, his facial expression remains almost the same throughout the novel, which makes it seem like an unmoving mask that he wears to camouflage his true feelings. He presents an arrogant exterior, but, like Hana, he has complicated feelings towards the attention of others, as exemplified again by the spotlight imagery. To him, the spotlight



Fig. 38. Asterios speaking over Hana, from *Asterios Polyp*, p. 86.

symbolizes success, and he is anxious without it. He needs the attention to feel validated,

which explains why he keeps stealing the spotlight away from his wife (see fig. 39). Unlike Hana, who worries about being undeserving of the spotlight (61), Asterios is ready to do just about anything to steal it, even if it means ruining his relationship. In a silent dream on pages 255 to 261, we see him hide his face behind his arm to protect himself against the threat of Willy (257). In fact, he hides his true face until it is too late and he has lost Hana



Fig. 39. Asterios stealing the spotlight, from *Asterios Polyp*, p. 149.

for good (see fig. 40). He was too afraid to be genuine, and it cost him his marriage. This duality between arrogance and insecurity is essential to the unfolding of the story's mental dimension, and yet it is not explained in the text, only through the image.

Finally, the last criterion of complexity, the reader's involvement in the meaning-making process, is present here as well. If the image in *Asterios Polyp* is taken away from this story, one is left with rather

shallow and static dialogues. But if text is taken away, readers are still left with images filled with symbols, metaphors, and other figures of style that they must decode. The textual component is important to the flow and understanding of the story, but the image provides the wealth of ambiguities and layers that make the narrative complex. It is the image that encourages readers to pause in their reading to decode all of the different details, from the choice of colours and shapes to the use of special lettering styles. As mentioned earlier, Hana and Asterios are drawn in different arrangements of colours and shapes in the fight scene that irreparably breaks their marriage (226-229). This adds meaning to the spiteful dialogue, and makes readers



Fig. 40. Asterios hiding his true face, and gradually losing Hana, from *Asterios Polyp*, p. 260.

pause to interpret what it means about the state of the characters' relationship. In the same vein, each character has a specific speech bubble and lettering style that is unique to them, which communicates information about the characters that readers need to consider. This is most striking on pages 40 and 41, where five different women with whom Asterios has had sexual encounters – or at least fantasizes about – are juxtaposed with their respective

speech bubbles (see fig. 41). The different stylizations of their bubbles and lettering are striking, and lead readers to reflect on what they entail for each of them as a person. The words are rapidly digested, but images require a pause. Even though the graphic novel benefits from the presence of text, the image's encouragement of pauses enhances readers' involvement.

It is typically passages that require a pause that also allow for multiple interpretations. The fact that such passages are either wordless or filled with striking visual elements that



Fig. 41. Four of the women, with distinctive speech bubbles and lettering, from *Asterios Polyp*, p. 41.

overpower the text is obviously not coincidental. Roland Barthes claims that “all images are polysemous” (38-39) and that text is often used as “a way... to counter the terror of uncertain signs” (39), meaning that text narrows down ambiguous meanings and, therefore, tends to leave little room for reader involvement. If we go back, once more,

to Asterios' fight scene with Hana (226-229), it is possible to see that the exact meaning of the colours used to differentiate the two characters is not clearly stated, and can thus be interpreted in different ways. We know that they are used to emphasize their differences, but why choose pink and blue specifically? The choice of pink and blue could be a simple reference to their genders by using colours that are, in the twentieth century, stereotypically associated with gender: blue for boys, and pink for girls (Frassanito and Pettorini 881).

On the other hand, if one looks into the symbolism of these two colours, it could also have more implications. Blue is often perceived as symbolizing the sky, with hints of heaven and eternity in the spiritual world (Vries, “Blue”). Blue symbolizes what is high, grand, and out of reach. This suggests a depiction of Asterios either as an arrogant man who thinks he is basically God, or as an unsuccessful man striving for a kind of success – or happiness – that appears out of reach. As for Hana, the shade of pink that Mazzucchelli uses often verges on red, which suggests mixed symbolism. Pink symbolizes human flesh (Vries, “Pink”), which portrays Hana as human, vulnerable, and genuine. Red, however, symbolizes strength, anger, violence, blood, and crime (Biedermann, “Red”). This may refer to Hana's past of abuse (Mazzucchelli 187), which has hardened her, made her stronger, but also probably more hesitant to open up, out of fear of appearing vulnerable

again. This would explain why she never tells Asterios about these traumatic events until Willy guesses it by himself (187). Whether these colours are perceived as mere markers of gender or as symbols of the characters' personality and shortcomings is up to the readers, who can adapt their interpretation according to their own sensitivities. The image, unlike text, leaves many questions unanswered, and readers must make sense of this ambiguity on their own.

Hence, while some scholars may still believe that text is the only possible factor that contributes to a work's sophistication, complexity in Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp* is ingrained in the image. All four criteria of complexity in the novel – seriousness of subject matter, multiplicity of storylines, character interiority and reader involvement – are either brought about by a tight-knit collaboration between image and text, or predominantly introduced through the image. This contradicts the idea that the image is inherently more simplistic than text, and that text is thus needed for a graphic novel to be complex, deep, or sophisticated. If even graphic novels with text rely on the image to generate complexity, it should not come as a surprise that wordless – or at least dialogue-free – graphic novels such as Tan's *The Arrival* and Kuper's *The System* contain all of the same markers of complexity as any other comics deemed sophisticated by scholars. Text is thus irrelevant in the legitimization of graphic novels.

Conclusion

In spite of the medium's centuries of existence, comics criticism and scholarship have remained surprisingly stagnant. Even in the decades following the groundbreaking 1980s, the literature on the subject often repeats itself and makes the same points over and over again. As Rocco Versaci explains, since the mid-1980s, every year would present its share of critics publishing an article "brandishing a title like 'Zap! Pow! Comics Aren't for Kids Anymore!' as if [he] or she were the first person to recognize this fact" (9). Despite the major critical strides that have been made in recent years, Robert G. Weiner claims that "true sequential art scholarship is really in its infancy" (7). This is not only because comics have been the underdog for so long (Wolk, *Reading* 64), but also because of a limited understanding of what comics are and can achieve. This is unfortunate, seeing as we live in an era that has become so heavily reliant on "visual stimuli in everyday surroundings" (Holston 9) that the ways we communicate information require regular innovation and reinvention. We find ourselves at a point where we need to open our minds to new experimentations and evolutions of the visual form of comics, so as to match the current technologies and social context within which the medium is evolving. The field needs to make room for the lively and original discussions that the expanding medium deserves.

Wordless graphic novels have particularly suffered from the dated but persistent inclusion of text in definitions of comics, which has forced these text-free works to exist on the margin of the medium and to be recognized merely as exceptions, rather than as legitimate works of comics. This thesis has argued that wordless novels should be included in definitions, either by rejecting text as an essential component of the form or, at least, by acknowledging its elective nature in the creation of comics. Through the study of the history and form, of the narrative potential and of the complexity of the image in comics, this thesis has shown that text is not as prominent or as influential as commonly believed. Close readings of three different graphic novels – Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, Peter Kuper's *The System*, and David Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp* – were used to support this argument. Ultimately, this thesis has hopefully offered a better alternative for future working definitions: the acknowledgement of image and narrative as the two main defining elements, instead of image and text.

In Chapter 1, I argued that the assumed relevance of text in definitions was baseless. I did so by comparing the points of view of different scholars on the matter of the history, creation and reading experience of comics. I made clear that definitions of comics have, over the years, consistently held on to the concept of text as a core element of the form, despite some more inclusive definitions being offered from the 1970s onwards. I then leveraged the historical analyses of Stephen Tabachnick, Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, Frédéric Duprat, and Danièle Alexandre-Bidon to prove that the initial iterations of the form were all primarily wordless. Whether we consider primitive cave art, medieval sequential art, or Hogarth's paintings as the true ancestors of comics, the image is always predominant. In fact, according to scholars Mel Gibson, David Kunzle, Rocco Versaci and Thierry Smolderen, even the influences from other media over the years have mainly come from visual media, such as cinema, painting, and photography. This only reinforced my argument that the presumed necessity of text is not, in fact, rooted in historical evidence.

I showed that text also tends to play a relatively minor role in both creative and reading processes. The studies of scholars like Benoît Peeters show that some creators draw first, using the image to shape the story. Even for those who write a script first, the latter always needs to be written with the image and visual layout in mind. The image component is thus predominant in the creation of comics. As for readers, Ciment and Groensteen theorize that the image is what grabs their attention first, and also what carries most of the information to be decoded. Some, like Wolk, may argue that image and text are received at the same time and are equally important to the understanding of the story; yet, no scholar argues that text comes first. As a result, text is optional; it can be very prominent in certain works, but completely absent in others, whereas the image must always be present for the work to be considered comics.

Nevertheless, text is often believed to be the additional ingredient needed to transform an image or pictorial sequence into comics. In response to that assumption, Chapter 2 proposed narrative as a replacement for text in definitions, using close readings of Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* and Peter Kuper's *The System* to support that claim. There is an underlying assumption in discussions of narrative that text is crucial to its formation, but as was shown using Marie-Laure Ryan's list of narrative criteria, narrative is just as present in wordless novels as it is in graphic novels with text. My analysis proved that

every criterion from each of Ryan's four dimensions – spatial, temporal, mental, and formal and pragmatic – is present in both books. Consequently, image and narrative prove to be more accurate defining elements than image and text. My conclusion was that, while comics do not always include text, they do consistently include narrative.

Another common assumption I had to address is that wordless stories cannot reach the level of complexity that renowned graphic novels have demonstrated in the past three decades, and are instead doomed to simplicity. If wordless narratives are limited in their potential, and, as such, inadequate for academic study, they may indeed not be worth the effort of re-conceptualizing comics as image and narrative, instead of image and text. To prove the invalidity of that assumption, I explored in Chapter 3 what complexity and depth mean in comics. Using the theories of Paul A. Crutcher and Barbara Postema, I summarized it in four key criteria: seriousness of subject matter, multiplicity of storylines, character interiority, and reader involvement. Not only did I demonstrate that all four criteria are present in Kuper's dialogue-free novel *The System*, but while investigating David Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp*, I also found that, even in a graphic novel with text, it is the image that introduces these elements of complexity. As a result, narrative *is* possible without text, and it *can* also reach the same levels of depth and sophistication as most critically acclaimed graphic novels.

Ultimately, the objective here was not to provide an all-encompassing definition. As argued in the introduction of this thesis, a perfect definition may not even exist. Aaron Meskin explains that “there is a very real possibility that the definitional project is misguided,” if not outright unnecessary (376). Whether they are too broad, too limiting or altogether inaccurate, current definitions almost inevitably present condemnable flaws. Therefore, my purpose was to ensure that the theoretical boundaries of the medium are inclusive and do not disregard its significant subsets. As Thierry Groensteen explains, the narrower the definition, the more experimental and creative works will go unnoticed (“Définitions” 26). Such a scenario would inevitably hinder the development of the form and of its critical field. Considering that a definition can influence public perception and recognition of the object it conceptualizes (Haendiges 211), it is important to ensure that working definitions do not exclude or reject valuable works that can contribute greatly to

the critical corpus on comics. With this thesis, it is now clear that wordless novels need to be accounted for in definitional attempts of the medium of comics.

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