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# Intermediality as Cultural Literacy and Teaching the Graphic Novel

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**Abstract:** In their article "Intermediality as Cultural Literacy and Teaching the Graphic Novel" Geert Vandermeersche and Ronald Soetaert argue for the inclusion of the graphic novel for the teaching of cultural literacy and literature. As the printed book is no longer the sole carrier of cultural literacy, Vandermeersche and Soetaert postulate that literary culture must be repositioned in intermedial cul- ture and practices. In order to do so, Vandermeersche and Soetaert apply Werner Wolf's typology of intermediality, aspects of narratology, and scholarship about comics. Following a theoretical discussion they analyze the graphic novel series *The Unwritten*, a text that thematizes the intermedial nature of (Western) culture today and mediates the function of literature and cultural literacy. Consequently, as Vandermeersche's and Soetaert's analysis suggests, narration incorporates references to and the thematization of other media and literary texts, which, in turn, creates embedded stories that try to link the entire fabric of literary culture together. As such, it changes the way we look at the transfer of cultural literacy to readers and students of literature and culture.

Geert Vandermeersche and Ronald Soetaert,
"Intermediality as Cultural Literacy and Teaching the Graphic Novel"                                    page 2 of 10
*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/20>
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## Geert VANDERMEERSCHE and Ronald SOETAERT

## Intermediality as Cultural Literacy and Teaching the Graphic Novel

Western culture has undergone "the broad move from the now centuries-long dominance of writing to the new dominance of the image" and this occurs hand in hand with the decline of the book as the dominant medium for the dissemination and acquisition of knowledge (Kress 1; on the relationship between verbal literacy and image, see, e.g., McCloud; Kibédi Varga). We postulate that in pedagogy the transmission of cultural literacy must be repositioned to follow inter- and multimedial culture (on this, see, e.g., Soetaert, Top, Van Belle).

There is a large corpus of scholarship about the current situation of the humanities with specific reference to the culture of reading (see, e.g., Birkerts; Darnton; Dreyfus and Kelly; Edmunson; Garber; Hirsch; Stephens; Ulin). For example, E.D. Hirsch argues that the disappearance of (literary) books would entail a loss for humanism and cultural literacy and, in consequence, for democracy. At the same time, most agree that narrative as the "culturally most potent formal expression of [speech or writing]" (Kress 2) has reached the status of a central notion in the humanities and qualitative research in the social sciences (see, e.g., Kreiswirth). Hence, the discourse on the "crisis" of literature, the book, and the study of literature ought to be countered by an understanding that literature is but one of the genres in which the human need to tell stories is actualized. In and through narratives much of our shared cultural knowledge is stored and communicated (see., e.g., MacIntyre). Rather than seeing the narrative as linked specifically and exclusively to print culture (Kress; Goody), we need to see it as a transmedial phenomenon (Herman; Ryan, "On the Theoretical"; Sommer; Wolf, "Intermediality Revisited," "Intermediality"). Research into and the implementation of intermediality in pedagogy — followed by social practices — thus acquires immanent relevance (see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek and López-Varela).

In pedagogy discussions about curricula for the teaching of literature are focused mainly on the inclusion versus exclusion of certain books in the literary canon including argumentation about thematic and/or ideological perspectives (see Guillory; Bloom). In contrast, Mikko Lehtonen argues that "language and culture have been multimodal since the beginning of history … different media have been inter-related in terms of both structure and content, has been a blind spot to the human sciences" (Lehtonen 72; see also Soetaert, Verdoodt, Van Kranenburg). Further, it appears that the debate about the changing landscape of media in curricula for the teaching of literature is confined to the field of cultural studies where media genres such as cinema and the other arts are studied. Developments in digital culture confront pedagogy with the question of how narratives are transformed in the diversity of media.

The currency of the concept of "intermediality" and the development of interlinking (new) media lead us to question an important aspect of teaching literature and culture as to whether certain practices, cultural literacy, or knowledge altogether are medium specific (see Semali and Pailliotet). Some argue that cultural literacy as entwined exclusively with a particular medium (books) and a practice (paper-based reading) (see, e.g., Birkerts; Hirsch). Therefore, the survival of that knowledge in a different medium (e.g., internet) is assumed to be impacting cultural literacy negatively (Birkerts; Stephens; Ulin). Among others, Marie-Laure Ryan objected to this thinking because "it regards media as a self-contained system of signs, and their resources as incommensurable with the researches of other media" (Ryan, *Narrative across Media* 3). For example, graphic novels often thematize and incorporate literary themes, techniques, or even complete storylines through adaptations or references. They are proof that "a core of meaning may travel cross media, but its narrative potential … [is] actualized differently when it reaches a new medium" (Ryan, *Narrative across Media* 1; see also Hatfield).

Intermediality is a concept to describe a system of relations between different media objects, "regardless of their status as recognized art" (Wolf, "Intermediality Revisited" 16). Werner Wolf differentiates media by "their underlying semiotic systems" ("Intermediality" 253) and postulates that the analysis of intermediality should be with focus on the "transgression of boundaries between conventionally distinct media of communication" ("Intermediality Revisited" 17). A related concept to intermediality is "intertextuality"; however, scholars of literature use the concept to denote the inter-

Geert Vandermeersche and Ronald Soetaert,
"Intermediality as Cultural Literacy and Teaching the Graphic Novel"                          page 3 of 10
*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/20>
Thematic issue *New Perspectives on Material Culture and Intermedial Practice*.
Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Asunción López-Varela, Haun Saussy, and Jan Mieszkowski

pretation of texts in the presence of other texts (see, e.g., Moraru 256). In contrast, Wolf reserves "intertextuality" for the relations between identical media such as literary references in novels and specifies it as a subtype of intermediality ("Intermediality" 252). Likewise, Lehtonen defined intermediality as "intertextuality that transgresses media borders" (76). The extension of the term "intermediality" confronts us with a problem: we can either analyze how it functions between different artifacts, i.e., extracompositional intermediality (ECI) or how it functions within the work itself, i.e., intracompositional intermediality (ICI). ECI is divided into two forms whereby there is first transmediality (see Rajewsky), which denotes phenomena which appear in diverse media but "are non-specific to individual media" (Wolf, "Intermediality" 253). The development of these phenomena no longer occurs in one specific medium or they cannot be said to "belong" to one specific medium. Such similarities can "form points of contact or bridges between different media" (Wolf, "Intermediality Revisited" 18). A second form of ECI is intermedial transposition, in which "one medium acted as an origin in a process of medial transfer" (Wolf, "Intermediality" 253) for either an element (e.g., the "literary" voice-over in cinema) or the whole content (e.g., book-to-film adaptations). A concept relevant here is Jay David Bolter's and Richard A. Grusin's concept of "remediation" which seeks to describe "what is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media" (200): new media borrow from old media, e.g., leafing through an e-book — that is based on a printed book — on a digital reading device, but also "older media can remediate newer ones within the same media economy" (Grusin 497). While media forms can try to erase signs of such influence (called "transparent immediacy"), particularly relevant is what Grusin calls "hypermediacy, in which a medium multiplies and makes explicit signs of mediation" (497).

A first form of ICI is "multimediality," which happens "whenever two or more media are overtly present in a given semiotic entity at least in one instance" (Wolf, "Intermediality" 254) and "in this form intermediality itself and the original components of the intermedial mixture are directly discernible on the surface of the work, that is, on the level of the signifiers, since they appear to belong to heterogeneous semiotic systems, although these components need not always be 'quotable' separately" (Wolf, "Intermediality Revisited" 22). The second form of ICI are intermedial references in a work to another medium, genre ("system reference"), or to an individual work ("individual reference"). Wolf defines ICI to denote "the involvement of another medium [which] takes places only covertly or indirectly: through signifiers and sometimes also signifieds pointing to it" whereby intermedial references enter "the other medium … as a conceptual rather than a physical presence" ("Intermediality" 254) and "this means that a monomedial work remains monomedial and displays only one semiotic system, regardless of the existence of an intermedial reference. For this reference is carried out by the signifiers of the 'dominant' medium which is used by the work in question, so that the other, 'nondominant' medium (the medium referred to) is actually only 'present' as an idea, as a signified and hence as a reference" (Wolf, "Intermediality Revisited" 23). References to other media are represented with the semiotic means of the dominant medium, for example the reference to a text in an oil painting. These references can be explicit, which then are called "intermedial thematizations" or implicit, which are then called "intermedial imitations" (Wolf, "Intermediality Revisited" 25). In explicit references, the reference "resides in the signifieds of the referring semiotic complex, while its signifiers are employed in their usual way and do not contribute to heteromedial imitation" (Wolf, "Intermediality" 254). In other words, it is "present whenever another medium (or a work) produced in another medium is mentioned or discussed in a text" ("Intermediality Revisited" 24). On the other hand, in implicit references there is "the effect of some kind of imitation of another medium or a heteromedial artifact and leads to an imaginative representation of in the recipient's mind" ("Intermediality" 255).

We now turn to narratology with regard to intermediality, a concept we employ for the study of the graphic novel. In narratology, the idea that narrative is a transmedial phenomenon has engendered the concept of "transmedial narratology" (see, e.g., Kukkonen; Ryan, *Narrative*). It had always been a claim that narrative transcend cultures, distinct media, and genres. However, while such claims in the past served to legitimate the pursuits of narratology, these objectives were not translated in scholarship for attention to more than one medium and thus research into narrative remained largely language based. The reason for this approach was narratologists's specialization in Saussurian struc-

Geert Vandermeersche and Ronald Soetaert,
"Intermediality as Cultural Literacy and Teaching the Graphic Novel"                                                        page 4 of 10
*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/20>
Thematic issue *New Perspectives on Material Culture and Intermedial Practice*.
Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Asunción López-Varela, Haun Saussy, and Jan Mieszkowski

turalism (see Ryan, "Narration in Various Media"), which led them to reject "the possibility of visual or musical forms of narrative" (Ryan, "Transmedial Narratology" 2). However, in the last few decades, we have seen a change in "the increasingly interdisciplinary profile of the research being conducted in this domain" (Wolf, "Intermediality" 252, "'Cross the Border'"), which is the reason for "the emerging preference for 'intermediality' over rival terms such as 'interart relations' and 'intertextuality' (252). Karin Kukkonen, for example, examines how medium specific features of comic books influence how stories are told: "the project of investigating how particular media constrain as well as enable story-telling practices" (34). Her perspective is retrospective as she focuses on how the graphic novel *Fables 7: Arabian Nights (and Days)* retells "earlier versions of *Arabian Nights*, particularly the nineteenth-century fairy book and its illustrations, remediating and recontextualizing their storyworld and charac-ters … how the different modes in comics — especially images, words, and sequence — have an im-pact on narration, and also how those modes allow comics to draw on storytelling traditions and thus become part of a larger cultural conversation" (35).

The relationship between literature and comic books has been pointed out repeatedly (see., e.g., Versaci). As suggested, in graphic novels it occurs with some frequency that literary content is bor-rowed from high culture (see Figure 1). The graphic novel thus not only adapts literary content, it uses all strategies of intermedial transposition as described by Wolf. In recent decades, creators of graphic novels have placed their work in a new relationship with literature. There is not yet a clear term for what could be called a new genre. Graphic novel creator Bill Willingham has identified this strand of graphic novels as literature-based fantasy: it can be characterized by its meditation on both the older genres of popular comic books (resulting in the deconstruction of the superhero myth, for instance in Alan Moore's *Watchmen*), and on narrative practices in general (for instance in reflection on the ma-kings of autobiography in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*). This genre often retains the structure of the action or quest story of their comic book predecessors: graphic novels "foreground these retellings and revisionings, as new writers constantly reinvent characters, the characters' motivations, their sto-ries, and even their worlds" (Taylor 172). As examples, the graphic novels we list below share these characteristics, but even go further in thematizing the act of storytelling and adapting and of transfer-ring literary knowledge (cultural literacy) with a postmodern twist (see Figure 1).

With the multi- and intermediality of the graphic novel, the question arises whether the graphic novel is a graphic with words, a text with graphics, or whether it should been seen as a fully hybrid artifact? The search for a definition of the medium of comics has been a project riddled with objections and counter arguments. Scott McCloud defines the comic as a medium "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic re-sponse in the viewer" (9). What we propose is that the graphic novel is characterized by a specific combination of words and images. The symbiosis of two semiotic modes has made it difficult to de-termine the affordances and constraints they separately offer storytelling, because "comics are a key instance of the cooperation between different modes in narrative … [comics] cut across the categorical distinctions between words and images and their functions" (Kukkonen 36-37) and "there is a tenden-cy for readers who come from literary backgrounds to read over design, as though the artwork existed only to render the plot visible and move protagonists from place to place, while readers with design backgrounds often see the art as existing in a narrative void, an end in itself. Yet in the best instanc-es, the design of a comic is inseparable from the narrative" (Rosen 58). Rather than differentiating between the possibilities of, on the one hand, words, and, on the other hand, of images, in comics "these different modes work together in their storytelling, and this suggests that they are perceived in a dynamic process of narrative cognition, rather than in a piecemeal combination of non-commensurable semiotic resources" (Kukkonen 39). Others have shy away from definitions, because "if you try to draw a boundary that includes everything that counts as comics and excludes everything that doesn't, two things happen: first, the medium always wriggles across that boundary, and second, whatever politics are implicit in the definition always boomerang on the definer" (Wolk 17). The defini-tion of the specific genre of graphic novels is no less problematic. Stephen E. Tabachnick defines the graphic novel as "an extended comic book that treats nonfictional as well as fictional plots and themes with the depth and subtlety that we have come to expect of traditional novels and extended nonfic-tional texts" (2). Importantly, with regard to reading, too, comics are different in that "comics chal-

Geert Vandermeersche and Ronald Soetaert,
"Intermediality as Cultural Literacy and Teaching the Graphic Novel"                    page 5 of 10
*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/20>
Thematic issue *New Perspectives on Material Culture and Intermedial Practice*.
Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Asunción López-Varela, Haun Saussy, and Jan Mieszkowski

lenge most of the ways we learned to read: left to right, top to bottom, linearly, and progressively" (Rosen 58). In sum, a definition of the graphic novel depends on qualitative discriminations and readers' expectations, both — essentially — subjective categories and thus they become "not merely analytic but also tactical" (Hatfield 19). As examples, we present in Figure 1 selected comic books with literary thematics:

Figure 1: Examples of comics with literary themes.

| Title | Creator(s) | Year | Adaptation from | Content |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *The Sandman* | Neil Gaiman, et al. | 1989-1996 | Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night Dream* and *The Tempest* | Morpheus is the King of Dreams, as well as the King of Stories. |
| *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* | Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill | 1999 | It features characters from Wells's *The Invisible Man*, Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* Series | Creates new fictional universe with characters as a meditation on English literature. |
| *Gemma Bovery* | Posy Simmonds | 1999 | Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in a modern setting | One protagonist fears a terrible fate for Gemma after reading Flaubert's book; he tries to give her the book as a warning. |
| *Fables* | Bill Willingham, et al. | 2002 | Features characters from diverse fairy tales such as Snow White, Prince Charming, Red Riding Hood, etc. | A new fictional universe, where the fables go in search of their "author." |
| *Alice in Sunderland* | Bryan Talbot | 2007 | Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* | Embeds story in the history, geography, and myths of the Sunderland area in England; the author is struggling with telling the story. |
| *House of Mystery* | Matthew Sturges and Bill Willingham | 2008- | Cain and Abel, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, etc. | Five people trapped in a supernatural bar, where the only currency are the stories they tell. |
| *The Unwritten* | Mike Carey and Peter Gross | 2009- | Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, *Jud Süss* | Stories used and created by an underground "cabal" with power to control the world. |
| *Kill Shakespeare* | Anthony Del Col and Conor McCreery | 2010 | Features characters from Shakespeare's plays | Characters are planning to find and kill Shakespeare. |

The premise we build our argumentation on and based on the above presented theoretical parameters is that the teaching of cultural literacy would profit from an approach where comics and the graphic novel are used: "literature pedagogy now finds itself confronted with highly sophisticated visual as well as textual material that has sprung out of the most unexpected of sources — the comics … we are in the midst of a cognitive shift and reading today has become a hybrid textual-visual experience, as witnessed by the inescapable presence of the Internet, Powerpoint, cell phone screens, and the numerous full-color illustrations and photographs now found in newspapers" (Tabachnick 1-4; see also Ryan, "Virtuality").

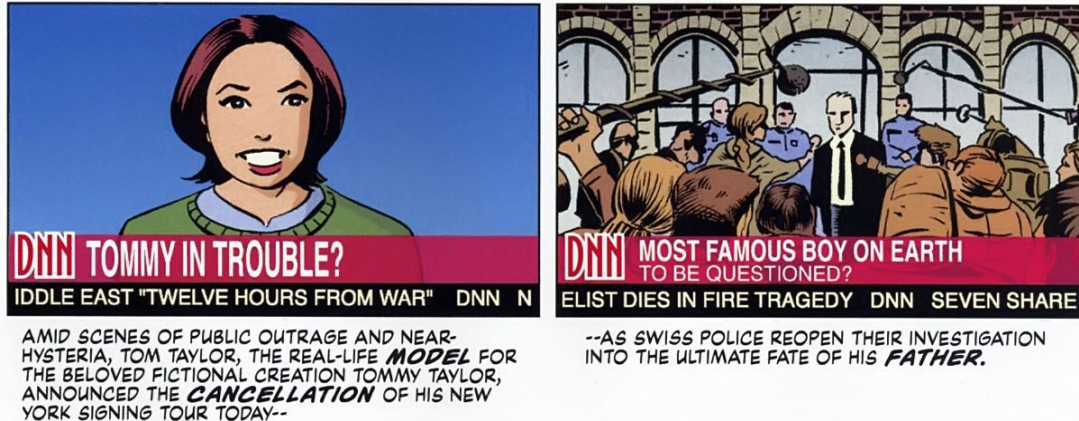In an application of the above discussed parameters including Wolf's typology of intermediality, we analyze Mike Carey's and Peter Gross's graphic novel *The Unwritten* as a test case for the exemplification of the relevance of intermediality and narration in the teaching of cultural literacy and literature. *The Unwritten*, a series that started in 2009 and that by 2011 includes four volumes with 23 issues:

Geert Vandermeersche and Ronald Soetaert,
"Intermediality as Cultural Literacy and Teaching the Graphic Novel"                                    page 6 of 10
*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/20>
Thematic issue *New Perspectives on Material Culture and Intermedial Practice*.
Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Asunción López-Varela, Haun Saussy, and Jan Mieszkowski

*Tommy Taylor and the Bogus Identity*, *Inside Man*, *Dead Man's Knock*, and *Leviathan*. *The Unwritten* tells the story of Tom Taylor's search for his identity, his father who has gone missing, and the strange power storytelling seems to have in his world. In the story, Tom's father, Wilson Taylor, is the creator of a series of popular novels about a wizard boy, similar to J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books. The text deals with a young man's quest to understand his identity and place in a world where the canonical literary narratives of the Western world still have a particular power. As the son of a famous author, he has been educated in the Western literary canon and his search is simultaneously a meditation on the origin and function of many of these texts. The story continues and includes, for example, the situation where Tom Taylor becomes the target of an underground movement which seems to control stories so as to control world events. His quest is thus the same as in many literary narratives which suggest that "one must educate oneself about the mythologies in one's community" (Horn 96) and in keeping with the current digital (Western) world, Tom is caught up in various media stories on television, the internet, and in newspaper articles.

With regard to intermediality and narration, the first example in *The Unwritten* appears on the first pages of the first issue. The story begins with what will later be revealed to the reader to be a passage from one of the Tommy Taylor books. The text boxes at the top of the comic frames imitate novelistic descriptions: typographically they have more stylized lettering than the text balloons and they imitate the third-person omniscient narrator. One of the subsequent pages shows the last page of an open book autographed by the real-life Tom Taylor for a fan: this signals the frame narrative. The reader can deduce that the story has stepped outside the embedded story of the books. The overall frame of the story takes place at a fantasy literature convention, where the real-life Tom Taylor is signing books for a long line of fans. When later on Tom's identity is called into question during a literary panel, the story leads to media scrutiny on the evening news and the internet. The page shows a webpage with the usual layout, header, and advertisements as in an online article. This is a clear thematization of another medium, as Wolf terms it. On the level of the signifiers, the image is part of the comic medium (color drawings and printed words) while on the level of the signifieds, this is "the referring semiotic complex" of the webpage (Wolf, "Intermediality" 254).

The following pages contain a two-page television report in the comic book panels and about the Tom Taylor controversy (see Figure 2). Again, the semiotic complex of the news medium is thematized explicitly. The last frame of the news report is then shown on the television set in the office of the editor who accompanies the real-life Tom Taylor. This is an interesting shift from embedded (the television news show) to frame narrative (Tom Taylor watching television). Whereas in language-based narrative the text signals, through for instance a cue from the narrator, that the embedded narrative has ended to return to the frame narrative, here the embedded narrative is being watched by characters in the frame narrative. We note here that although the terms "frame narrative" and "embedded narrative" originate in classical, language based narratology, their uses differ between language based and hybrid media: there is no human narrator who tells us a story within the story: it is the medium itself that is "telling" the story.

Figure 2: Mike Carey and Peter Gross, *The Unwritten: Tommy Taylor and the Bogus Identity* 13.
Copyright release by DC Comics to the authors.

Geert Vandermeersche and Ronald Soetaert,
"Intermediality as Cultural Literacy and Teaching the Graphic Novel"                                    page 7 of 10
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 13.3 (2011): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/20>
Thematic issue New Perspectives on Material Culture and Intermedial Practice.
Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Asunción López-Varela, Haun Saussy, and Jan Mieszkowski

The constant switching of levels and thematization of other media within the medium of the comic book have a special storytelling function: they further the story and give essential background information on, for instance, what is in the Tommy Taylor books and how popular the books are. This is one of the functions of embedded narratives: exposition (as suggested by Manfred Jahn with regard to narration). However, they also serve "as an important element in the plot" (Jahn <http://www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppn.htm>), that is, by showing the media's pursuit of Tom Taylor and his identity. When Tom Taylor is kidnapped, the attempted murder is captured on video and put online. At home, the fans are shown watching the website and chatting about the event. Again, the webchat is thematized explicitly, but here functions as a comment on the events and also as a plot element.

Perhaps the best example of the confluence of intermedial thematization and the meditation on the function and effects of storytelling can be found in issue The Unwritten: Inside Man). The page again shows a webpage from a fictional website, called The POSTnation, subtitled "when all else fails, read everything." It reviews a television debate that featured the fictional psychotherapist Dr. Pauline Swann who "has already published three books discussing the links between modern culture and mental health. Now, in The Poisoned Well, she turns her theory of cultural bootstrapping on the biggest media target of all: the lovable boy wizard whose exploits have been read by more than a third of humanity." On the webpage television clips are included of the debate. Dr. Swann asserts "that Tommy Taylor now constitutes a nationwide — perhaps a global — mental health problem." The intermedial thematization shows the medium of the internet, which incorporates text and video and shows the popular conversation about storytelling, the back-and-forth about the moral consequences of fiction and reading. The conversation even refers to the metaphor of disease and cure and common ways of speaking about how people can be affected by books (see Figure 3):

Figure 3: Mike Carey and Peter Gross, The Unwritten: Inside Man 55. Copyright release by DC Comics to the

Geert Vandermeersche and Ronald Soetaert,
"Intermediality as Cultural Literacy and Teaching the Graphic Novel"                    page 8 of 10
*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/20>
Thematic issue *New Perspectives on Material Culture and Intermedial Practice*.
Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Asunción López-Varela, Haun Saussy, and Jan Mieszkowski

authors.



The references to different media resulting in embedded narratives and the switching of levels are a constant feature of this graphic novel. Every imaginably feature of the internet is shown: from Google searches to posts on an internet forum. Structurally, they can fulfill different functions: summarizing events for the readers, giving background information on the events, helping the plot further along, or commenting on the events. Thematically, they show the multimedial context of how literature functions in today's digital world.

As we suggest above, a feature of *The Unwritten* series is the constant reference to canonical works of literature. However, the text provides more than intertextual links: it gives us visual information about the content of the books much as movies would have to show a character's appearance. In Wolf's typology, intertextuality is reserved for references between two identical media, while intermediality means transgressions across media boundaries (see, e.g., Wolf, "(Inter)mediality"). In the case at hand, a passage from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is inserted in the plot and readers encounter later Frankenstein's monster as a character in the fictional world of Tom Taylor. The adapted passage consists of a fragment from the original novel and characters in *Frankenstein* are drawn while the descriptive passages of the novel are retained as ripped-out papers and overlaid on the drawing to imitate the medium of the novel (i.e., as per Wolf's category of "formal intermedial imitation"). There are further literary thematizations in *The Unwritten* and they appear in different forms: Rudyard Kipling's life story and his *Just So-stories*, Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* and *Childe Roland*, Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*, Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleur du Mal*, Voltaire's *Candide*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, etc. Some form separate inserted stories in the narration, while others become part of the overarching plot line of Tom's quest. For example, Tom is trapped in the story of Melville's *Moby Dick*. Accidently, he has made the story stop in "mid-stream" and in order to leave the broken story, he is told by *Frankenstein*'s monster that "stories touch each other … there are places where they meet … Stories are porous; Interpenetrating. That the seals between them are imperfect." And thus he must

Geert Vandermeersche and Ronald Soetaert,
"Intermediality as Cultural Literacy and Teaching the Graphic Novel"
page 9 of 10
*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/20>
Thematic issue *New Perspectives on Material Culture and Intermedial Practice*.
Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Asunción López-Varela, Haun Saussy, and Jan Mieszkowski

travel to another story that share the theme of the ocean. He eventually ends up in the story world of *Sinbad*.

With regard to genre, *The Unwritten* can be related to the *Bildungsroman* and characteristics of the genre underlie Tom Taylor's search for his identity. Here, his father fulfills the role of mentor who has tried to educate his son in texts of world literature and it is through these cultural texts and symbols that Tom begins his quest. As such, the book can be read as an education in narrative because he must acquire cultural literacy to enable him to understand the function of canonical narratives in the world and through them his own identity. Further, the notion of literary geography functions in the plot of *The Unwritten* as a device: Tom travels from place to place, a function that is significant in the literary tradition of the quest.

In conclusion, the graphic novel and comics in general question how literary culture creates meaning and thus the claim that the printed book would remain the only source of literary knowledge and cultural literacy is called into question. In intermedial culture, literary culture repositions itself in other media where narratives are told. The graphic novel *The Unwritten* thematizes the intermedial nature of (Western) culture today and mediates the function of literature and cultural literacy. Consequently, as the example of *The Unwritten* suggests, narration incorporates references to and the thematization of other media and literary texts, which, in turn, creates embedded stories which link the entire fabric of literary culture together. As such, it changes the way we look at the transfer of cultural literacy to readers and students of literature and culture.

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Geert Vandermeersche and Ronald Soetaert,
"Intermediality as Cultural Literacy and Teaching the Graphic Novel"                                    page 10 of 10
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