The frames, foramens and fistulas of the graphic novel: an adolescent view of visual literacy in action

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Abstract: This paper discusses the visual literacy praxis of fifteen adolescents that arose from within a ‘grounded-emergent’ research design. Describing themselves as avid readers of graphic novels these high school students articulated clearly an approach to reading that was aligned to the notion of reading as ‘literary cartography’. For this cohort, the text was an entrée into the visual that allowed a straddling of visual strategies such ‘interiorisation of frames’, ‘resistant internal icons’ and ‘personal orientation’. In essence, these students allowed the visual landscape within and between the ‘gutters’, borders in graphic novels, to be viewed omnisciently, so that the visual elements such as vector foci such as horizon lines, gaze of characters and cultural icons appeared to act as literary landmarks. These visual forces provided the means by which these students could then navigate amongst and between what they perceived to be the representational code, both textual and visual, as well as manoeuvre between the underlying assumptions of the graphic map. Thus for these students the use of visual literacy provided them with a reflective ‘symbolic space’ that was engaging, existential and exegetic.

Key Words: Graphic novel, visual literacy, grounded theory

1 Site, Sight and the Seeing

Based on the premise that a great deal of the academic discussion, particularly in the field of education, that focuses on the concept of visual literacy arises out of speculation or concepts not based on actual ‘coalface’ research, this paper represents an ongoing investigation into how those engaged with visual texts actually create meaning or make meaning from them. In this instance, one cohort of fifteen adolescents who are avid readers of graphic novels formed the research base. Indeed, in the initial discussion in which the focus of the research was discussed with them, one of the female respondents made the comment that. “we aren’t avid readers of graphic novels, we’re rabid readers.” Aged between sixteen and eighteen years of age, seven male heads and seven other female heads then nodded in agreement. Not only did this comment prove to be true, through
the five focus group interviews this cohort spiraled into ever increasing negotiation of emic meaning, depth and complexity deeper, revealing an intensity of articulation that I had never before experienced. Their ‘reading rabidness’ was due to not only engagement with the genre, but a reaction to the pressure of a ‘curriculum of censorship’ that excluded both texts and critical appreciation.

Sight and Syzygy

At the turn of the new millennium, at time of millennial flux when all visual learning paradigms came under the reflective microscope, Healy lamented ‘that visual texts of all kinds were generally seen by older generations, in particular teachers, as lacking depth and any form of intellectual rigor.’2 Despite the fact that ‘children initially learn about themselves and the world around them from visual texts’3 those who grew up in a print based paradigm appear to be reluctant to grasp or acknowledge the depth of the reading tools required to engage with visual texts. In particular the notion of polyvalence and the power embedded in the ‘multilayeredness’ of visual texts and graphic novels in particular is rarely discussed. To paraphrase Spiegleman, those who believe this completely ‘miss out on the current climate of discourse, as they can not tolerate the unsayable.’4

My initial forays into this realm had revealed that the readers of graphic novels, typically aged between 15 and 25 years of age understood the tremendous innate power of these visual texts. While they read for enjoyment, this age group scanned these texts repeatedly, reflecting on the metaphoric content, as they believed that these texts had the ability to “reaches hearts and minds and help them understand themselves and the world in which they live.”5 For these readers these visual texts unpacked the very essence of humanity, with all its emotional richness, depth and diversity. It is through reading that we are able “to grasp the unimaginable.”6 However as stated previously, despite the discourse elements they saw in these texts, the intertextual, transtextual and archtextual links they made on a daily basis were not permitted to be made in their classrooms. “I’m blown away by what I’m forced to read to and to think to jump through. But can’t comment on or use everything I read, see or talk about. For me the graphic novel is about what we see and feel everyday as a group.”

In following this notion that the reading process involved in engaging with graphic novels was based in reading the visuals as reading ‘inner life’, or emotional engagement a second cohort was interviewed. This process involved
the employment of a 'hermeneutic dialectic cycle'\textsuperscript{8}, which was continued weekly with the intention of reaching a 'sophisticated level of consensus'\textsuperscript{9} through 'processual immediacy, member checking and constant comparison of data.'\textsuperscript{10} The resulting emic constructions arose out of the participant’s use of conceptual metaphors that compared the reading of graphic novels to something akin to the reading of maps. When questioned about this these students argued that any initial reading of these text types were often confusing or chaotic. While this was part of the appeal, in order to navigate their way in and through they again used cartographical conceptual metaphors stating that you had to “look for recognisable landmarks to begin with and then search how these made the text deeper or if they were connected to other sign posts.”\textsuperscript{11} One of the female students used a different mapping comparison believing that reading graphic novels was more like reading synoptic maps. “I think it’s more like seeing the isobars. Then you can see the high pressure areas and how they flow into the lows. You can see the pointy bits on the cold fronts and know there’s a clue to what is happening.”\textsuperscript{12} With no mention of the visual tools often touted as being the means of critical evaluation, the analytic metalanguage of these students was grounded viewing that was heuristic, reflective, shifting and deforming.

In a ‘grounded sense’, this investigative process revealed that within the mapping approach applied to the reading of graphic novels, this cohort utilised three overarching visual reading processes. Although discussed in three separate sections in the following pages, in actual reading practice these were a tangled mesh and have been teased out as single entities for the purpose of exploration and clarification.

A. Personal Orientation

While each participant reacted or read the visual elements of these texts in different ways at different times there was always an immediacy of expectation. Speaking in terms of cartography, for these participants the first understanding was that the accompanying minimalist text, typical of this genre, acted as a form of linguistic edging or directional markers. In other words the text shifted the narrative along and at best revealed only the surface of the meaning or the hint of what the visual mosaic represented. Between each visual element and frames there were large gaps visual and linguistic mortar that needed to be filled in by the reader in order for the whole to put together. The text allowed a fleeting contrast between the visuals and what the main characters were thinking and doing. The narrative, the character’s motivations and intentions acted in a binary
visual concert with what the author intended. This binary relationship was never immediately obvious in these texts.

In an intertextual sense they knew that the illustrations floated on a surface of hidden elements and the written component was a masked guide. However, to find what these texts were actually saying, and to unpack the ambiguity of meaning embedded in graphic novels and between each visual, required more than looking. For this cohort there was a general consensus that reading these texts required a physicality of first impressions or the ability to project oneself into the text starting from a point of interest that would lead to other elements. This point of interest could be anywhere in the text. At a first reading they would scan the text from cover to cover locating a trigger point of interest. This lead in point would then act as means of jigsawing or connecting bits of visual information. This trigger point also allowed an entrée into the commencement of a web of reflection into whether the visuals were an actual representation of meaning or some form of “breaking their personal understanding into little bits.”13 To these readers these texts in the initial read typically appeared as a jumble or bricolage of recognisable elements and visual forms far removed from their initial understanding. This spectrum of visual difference however provided a platform from which they could begin to explore subjectively the relationship between these elements.

Over all it was felt that no visual element had been placed at random and if there was not an overt intention of placement it was directly related to author-illustrators belief system. “They’re always about someone’s ideology.”14 For these visual readers this activating point not only allowed the beginning of visual the intent but also provided a stepping-stone into further geographical perception and connectivity.

B. Resistant Interior Icons

Linked to the previous facet of recognisable visual elements amidst distortion, these students believed that this was the source of their engagement with graphic novels. Rather than being repulsive or disengaging it was these elements that formed the aesthetic qualities and appeal of these texts along with the piecing together the meaning. It was in the visual tension between the recognisable and the grotesque or malformed that the reflective and ideological qualities of graphic novels also lay. While there were at times recognisable metaphors arising from within these contrasting aspects, more often than not
looking, revisiting and “wandering around the shapes, colours and lines” allowed for a deeper understanding of what the author was trying to get across. In this area of liminal attraction these young adults believed that while recognizable iconic emblems and issues could be seen, more often than not there was some form of emotional distance between these elements that they could not immediately give voice to. In some instance they knew there were crucial meanings in this interstitial visual gap and that they did not have the language to adequately describe the meaning.

However, for this text type these visual disparities often produced resonance with what these students believed were specific culturally age related issues. The main concerns they had seen in this voids of contrasts were notions of social loss, lack of emotional connectedness and assertions of rejection or displacement. Layered on top of these apparent underpinning narratives were the emotional and psychological highs and lows of characters and social groups that formed the narrative flow of the text. Each individual icon, layers of icons in the same frames, as well as the contrasting elements that occurred in each page could be endowed with these values and then shift or swirl into an extension of these ideals with each new frame or turn of a page. Gaining control over competing opposites, ambiguity and disharmony required viewing by making stable connections.

C. Interiorisation of Frames

According to this research cohort, an approach that apparently immediately followed on from, or acted in concert with the previous forms was their notion of what we came to call interiorisation. While the first approach as linked to understanding the visual voice of the narrative, the second braided in with understanding the hidden voice of the visual montage, this aspect drew on these and was the means by which the reader’s personal voice began to be pulled into the text. Similar to the previous notions of triggers, this aspect of reading visuals was somewhat broader and was linked to the finding the horizon as a point of eye-mind contact. Often these points of horizontal vision were defined by being in relief, highlighted by contrasting elements such as light and dark and their position in the illustrations.

For these respondents the horizon line, or at times possibly the lack of this reference point allowed them to start making connections to nature of the text and the visual meaning. Acting as point of orientation, not in the sense of normal stance and balance, the process of interiorisation was the means by which these
readers were drawn into the text by viewing the intended action with a different set of eyes. While the horizon line itself was an important point of reference, and often an actual plane in the text, it could also be several planes conjoined, views from different angle and lines or complete frames juxtaposed or running in parallel.

For these students these horizons revealed a great deal about the mindset of the characters in the text. These lines and points offset from the character focus were geographical locators revealing the inner personal landscape of the text’s meaning. They acted as a linguistic brake, slowing the reading process down to a point in space, time and emotion where the reader could almost touch the limn projection of the frame at hand and the overall flow of the text. This geopsychological intensification showed more clearly the inner and outer frontiers that the main character had to cross, experience or realise. In essence the horizons were places of lived depth and places of migration. As discussed by this group of focussed readers, in graphic novels the former is often a place of darkness while the latter is a line of landscape to which we should aspire, know how to avoid or come to value.

An interesting point raised by this group was the concept of the use of ‘gutters’, the frames that act as borders in comics and graphic novels. For this research grouping these lines or small strips of coloured markers were more than simply boundaries that clustered or grouped the visuals. As these respondents saw it the authors of these texts used these not only as a means of moving the narrative forward but a tool that forced the reader to focus on another aspect of horizon. The gutters not only defined space and acted as visual paragraphs but cut across the narrative in order to show disorder and to force the reader to meander through the shambolic lives of their characters and the narrative. The visuals were cut up but the blanks in between acted as a point where the reader could insert their understanding. As one student stated, filling in those blanks is where the “imagination goes ballistic.” While gutters often seemed to represent ordered division, for these students this was an interstitial reading space that only served to heighten the chaos and the need to order the disarray of meaning.

Also, these facets were more than simple divisions but represented an intertwining of trails which in themselves formed a point of location, all contained elements of time, constraints preventing the minds eye to wander and focussing the internal marative, as well as the gutters, there was implied gravity or magnets, permeability for some elements and restraints from others
3 Implications

In the field of education the term ‘literacy’ has received ever-increasing scrutiny over the past three decades. The means by which children become literate and the skills and processes needed to ‘learn to read’ and ‘learn about reading’ have become embroiled in what has been termed the literacy wars. Although now recognized as component of the broader ‘multi-literacies’ package, visual literacy would appear to have slipped under the radar of this heated debate. While visual literacy has a relatively long history in this field it has only more recently become conjoined with the traditional term and accepted by researchers at least, as a genuine educational format.

However, even the most cursory review of the literature suggests that it is viewed in a more traditional sense. That is, researchers and educators use visual terms that appear to be discussed as tools that are the ‘be all and end all’. More importantly, the tools that are suggested as a means of unpacking visual elements are linked to the concept of grammar. The implication being that they remain constant as critical tools in all situations and at all times such as written grammar. Even it a text that I co-authored visual literacy is described as following a “set of patterns and conventions that can be identified and discussed.”

While based on a relatively small samples size, this paper reveals that there are other means by which visual elements can be explored. More importantly, the concept of ‘distancing’18, which underpins the entire spectrum of literacy development and the reading-writing strategies that children employ has been cast in a new light by these respondents. Instead of being the process by which we ‘distance ourselves from the immediacy of events by converting what we’ve encountered into story form”19, these participants literally removed any distance. Thus, it would appear that visual literacy is a meaning making process that is very much different to how it is currently perceived by educational researchers.

Notes
1. ‘Maria’, interview data 11/11/06
2. A Healy, Visual Literacy: Reading and the contemporary text environment’ in. R Campbell and D Green (eds), Literacies and the Learners, Prentice Hall, French’s Forest , 2000, 32
   *Techtrends*, vol 43,4, 1999, pp. 14-20
7. ‘Pam’, interview data, aged
   Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage,1989, pp. 44 and 149
9. Ibid, 45
11. ‘Ian’, interview data 16/11/06
12. ‘Milne’ interview data 22/11/06
13. ‘Anika’, interview data 18/12/06
14. ‘Julia’, interview data 12/10/06
15. ‘Peter’, interview data 12/10/06
16. ‘Jono’ interview data 12/10/06
19. Ibid, p. 89

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