

How to 'Read' Images with Texts: The Graphic Novel Case

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INTRODUCTION: READING IMAGES OR LOOKING AT THEM?

In the scholarly discussion of dealing with images, the influence of semiotic thinking is still extremely important, even if semiotics is no longer the pilot science it used to be in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet even in the newer paradigms like cultural studies or medium theory, which are now trying to achieve hegemony in the field, the semiotic heritage is still visible (for the role of semiotics in cultural studies, see Hall, 1997; for its place in medium theory, more specifically in intermediality studies, see Leverette, 2003). Although the aim of this chapter is to present some tendencies within the postsemiotic approach of the image, it may be useful to recall some basic tenets of the classic semiotic school.

Visual semiotics takes as its starting point the idea that images are visual signs, i.e. elements referring to something else, and that, according to the very definition of a sign as something that isn't natural but man-made

(a sign is either made to function as a sign, or it is interpreted to do so – independently of a previous intention), images can never be used (i.e. produced as well as interpreted correctly) without a learning process that enables the viewer to decode their symbolic meaning. The notion of 'symbol' has to be understood here in a very general sense, as defended by, among others, Nelson Goodman in *Languages of Art* (1968). As Lambert Wiesing put it:

The argument that general image theory is a sub-discipline of a general theory of symbol builds on the supposition that images necessarily are signs. Or, put differently, an object that is not a sign cannot be an image. The particularity of the image, accordingly, is exclusively intrasemiotic.... This does not mean, however, that, within this current, opinions cannot diverge. Particularly in reference to the question of what the intrasemiotic particularity of the image consists in, there is no consensus... Goodman... emphasizes the fact that images cannot be distinguished from other forms of symbolizing by means of resemblance... If we take this thought seriously, it leads us to think that

images are images of the things they are images of by reason of conventions that are learned and by reason of visible resemblance (Wiesing, 2010: 15–16).

Yet if all semiotic schools, despite their often dramatic internal differences and conflicts, accept the idea that images are to be ‘read’ by the viewer, the very meaning of the word ‘reading’ still remains unclear. Do we understand by ‘reading’ a process of code deciphering that is analogous to that of natural languages, or do we give a more metaphorical sense to this word? In the recent history of semiotic thinking, the suspicion towards linguistic models of reading, which tend to see images as units of visual texts whose meaning depends on the knowledge of the codes that link a (visual) signifier to a (mental) signified, has been growing ceaselessly. More and more, there is consensus that – although their sign status is not contested – images should be analyzed in a different way from verbal signs. This, together with the awareness of an increasing importance of the visual in contemporary societies, is the paradigm shift coined by W. J. T. Mitchell as the ‘visual turn’:

Whatever the pictorial turn is, then, it should be clear that it is not a return to naive mimesis, copy or correspondence theories of representation, or a renewed metaphysics of pictorial ‘presence’: it is rather a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality. It is the realization that spectatorship (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that visual experience or ‘visual literacy’ might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality (Mitchell, 1994: 16).

As this quotation shows, what we have to understand exactly by terms such as ‘postlinguistic’ and ‘postsemiotic’ is still open to discussion – and the situation in 2010 is not very different from the one diagnosed by Mitchell in 1994. We all ‘know’ that it is necessary to go beyond what is often called

linguistic imperialism, yet in practice it is not easy to shift to completely different models of ‘reading’, towards new forms, less determined by the linguistic model of the Greimasian School and, thanks to a stronger focus on the image, more sympathetic to the input of communication studies, cognitive studies, rhetoric or anthropology (e.g. Groupe Mu, 1993; Fabbri, 1998; Fontanille, 2006). In spite of all these attempts, and some others that will be discussed later, one might argue – to borrow a metaphor from another field – that verbal and symbolic models of reading continue to play the role of a hidden seducer in our efforts to make sense of images.

This is undoubtedly true in a very specific field, where their presence seems to be considered both inescapable and, for that very reason, utterly dangerous: the field of intermediality or mixed media objects (for a global overview, see Rajewsky, 2005), an example of which can be found in the corpus that we will study here, the graphic novel.¹ Generally, graphic novels contain a considerable number of verbal utterances (authorial or editorial paratexts, narrator’s comments or descriptions, speech balloons reproducing dialogues, written elements within the fictional universe, not to forget the too-well-known onomatopoeic expressions), and there exists a long-standing tradition of reading the medium as a combination of words and images. Of course, such an approach, which by the way is strongly criticized by more recent attempts to analyze the interaction of the verbal and the visual in terms of fusion rather than addition, does not automatically imply that the images of a graphic novel have to be read the same way as the words it contains, i.e. as ‘symbols’. Yet in this case the threat of linguistic imperialism hides in another corner: even if one does not interpret images as an equivalent of verbal signs, there is a widespread conviction that the very presence of these verbal signs determines the way we make sense of the image. Not only are the words said to ‘anchor’ the meaning of the images but also their very presence

seems to induce the idea that it must be possible to convert the meaning of the images into a set of words and sentences (for a discussion of linguistic imperialism in the graphic novel, see Morgan, 2003 and Groensteen, 2007).

The reaction against the predominance of words and language in the reading of the graphic novel (and of other bimedral practices such as the photographic novel) has been twofold. On the one hand, ambitious graphic novelists have tended to avoid words within their own work. In the graphic novel genre, one may find quite a few examples of textless or wordless graphic novels, and this tendency is certainly not new. The historian David Beron  has shown convincingly that one of the actual forerunners of the modern graphic novel, in the USA as well as in Europe, has been a particular kind of wordless woodcut novel (Beron , 2008). The very muteness of a visual narrative has always exerted a strong fascination for all those eager to defend the specificity of the graphic novel as a primarily visual medium against the harmful impact of words and texts. This attempt to ‘free’ the image from the word may be an illusion or a myth,² but that does not prevent it from playing an important role in the way contemporary graphic novelists explore their medium. On the other hand, and on a more theoretical level, scholars have tried to develop new ways of reading images that do justice to their specifically visual aspects and dimensions, without taking the utopian path of the textless image. For words and language are everywhere, even in a culture that has become massively visual, and it is more satisfying to take into account the encounter of various media and sometimes even the blurring of boundaries between these media than to pursue the impossible dream of a medium’s purity. More and more, media hybridization is becoming the rule, not only within the use of each medium but also, and even more importantly, within the growing tendency of ‘networking’ hybrid media in the global framework that Henry Jenkins called ‘convergence culture’ (2006).

Visual literacy, as argued by Mitchell, should not be a copy of verbal literacy, but to follow Jenkins, various aspects of a much broader media literacy. Yet the danger of this twofold critique of traditional, i.e. language-inspired, notions of literacy is that it becomes antiverbal *by principle*, and such an *a priori* antiverbalism may prove counterproductive. In the intermedial case of the graphic novel, more subtle solutions are needed to take into account the complex encounter of various kinds of literacy: verbal literacy, visual literacy, media literacy. Of course this internal complexity grants the graphic novel a theoretical importance that is not totally in accordance with its current position in the mediascape, where other media such as film, television, or the Internet are undoubtedly more important. However, in certain cases it may be fruitful to focus on minor media to ask anew some basic questions.

ONCE AGAIN: WHAT IS AN IMAGE?

The concept ‘image’ is undoubtedly as multilayered, complex, and blurry as many other concepts, and its definition continues to divide the scholarly community. For this reason, it is better to use a ‘tactical’ definition of image, i.e. a definition conceived so as to solve concrete and practical problems in specific contexts, rather than a general one. The bimedral structure of the graphic novel is a useful example of such a context, wherein our general ideas of both words and images are challenged by their specific interaction. Or, to be more precise, what is at stake in the graphic novel is the widespread perception of the fundamental otherness of words and images. This dominant-thinking paradigm has been articulated notoriously in Lessing’s *Laocoon* (1984), where he distinguishes between language as a key representative of the temporal arts and the image as a premier example of the spatial arts. The renegotiation of the boundary between word and image in the context of the graphic novel will

inevitably have repercussions on the definition of the image in terms of spatiality – i.e. of the image as a unified field open to instantaneous perception (it is only because the image can be perceived as one single visual item that its meaning can be grasped at once) – and on the status of language in terms of temporality – i.e. of the language as a string of discrete units subjected to sequential decoding.

Starting with the words, one should observe the utter importance of the visual dimension in the graphic novel.

First, language in its written form unavoidably displays a strong tendency towards ‘grammatextuality’ – a concept coined by the French theoretician Jean-G  rard Lapacherie (1984) and recently introduced in new media research by Terry Harpold, who writes:

I draw here on a terminology introduced by Jean-G  rard Lapacherie, who has stressed the need for a critical vocabulary for describing aspects of written and printed texts that are autonomous with regard to the reproduction of speech. In texts in which this autonomy is in evidence, he observes, the ‘graphic substance’ of the letter, line, and page, are foregrounded or are otherwise independent of the ‘phonic substance’ and discursive structures they may also represent... (2009: 88–89)

Grammatextuality (the graphic equivalent of Jakobson’s better-known ‘literariness’ or ‘poetic function’) is commonly associated with the typographic plays or excesses of certain literary genres, but its role in the graphic novel is no less crucial. The form of the lettering, the configuration of the words in the speech balloons and the insertions of these balloons in the panels, the presence of letters and other written symbols within the fictional world, the presence of onomatopoeias (‘Wham’, ‘Whoosh’, ‘Whap’), the visual dialogue between words and images on the page, etc., all these elements underscore the importance of the visual form of the words in the graphic novel. A brief consideration of the translation of graphic novels makes this palpable: besides ‘proper’ translation issues, translators have to take into

account the space of the panel and the structure of the page; letterers cannot harmlessly change the writing style of the original version, and so on.

Secondly, the intertwining of words and images in the graphic novel helps us to understand why written language itself might be considered a form of inscribed visuality. This is the fundamental idea behind the work of Anne-Marie Christin, one of the leading French scholars in the field of the history of writing (Christin 1995, 2002). Rejecting the logocentric, alphabetic and Western idea of writing as a reflection of speech, she defends the idea that – seen from a historical and anthropological perspective – there is no reason to radically distinguish between writing and the image. For the image itself, that historically precedes the development of writing systems as we know them, has always been a form of writing, i.e. of proposing meaningful relationships between elements that are linked by the presence of a frame. Privileged examples here are the ‘reading’ of the constellations in the sky or of traces left by animals. This way of communicating is not based on the alphabetic-semiotic model of autonomous signs obeying pre-existing codes, but depends on the capacity to make sense of certain relations, with the help of the notion of frame or screen and with a strong emphasis on the productive role of empty spaces or empty elements (for an application of Christin’s screen-thinking to cinema, see Baetens, 2006). For Christin, the important lesson to be drawn from the original lack of distinction of image, on the one hand, and writing, on the other hand, is not only that images can now be ‘read’ as a form of writing (yet no longer within the framework of the Western alphabetic-semiotic systems) but also that written utterances should be analyzed as well as images (i.e. as surfaces limited by screens and displaying visual relations to be interpreted by viewers in ways that are no longer linear or word-based). Christin’s theory of screen-thinking proposes a more radical form of grammatextuality that can be extremely helpful when trying to cope with

the presence of verbal and written elements in the graphic novel – and, more generally, in all types of intermedial encounter of visual and textual signs.

An analysis of the first pages of Art Spiegelman's (1986) famous graphic novel *Maus* may be of some help to understand Christin's screen theory. The story opens with the narrator – the son of a Holocaust survivor – recollecting a childhood memory. At the age of 10 or 11, he was roller-skating with some friends. When one of his skates came loose, his two friends left him behind, yelling: 'Last one to the schoolyard is a rotten egg' (5). This seemingly innocent event triggers the entire story. Complaining to his father that 'his friends skated away w-without [him]' (6), his father replies sarcastically: 'friends? Your friends?... If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week.../... then you could see what it is, friends!...' Then he starts to tell the story of his own youth. From a grammatextual point of view, the written elements in the panel (both the narrator's comments and the snippets of dialogue he reproduces) do not seem very interesting, at least at first sight. The reader has the impression that the text is 'leading' the visual storytelling; that the panels are merely illustrating what is being told by means of the text. The variations in the handwriting seem to refer solely to the content of the text: the harder the characters are shouting, the bigger the letters become; and the more important words are capitalized. However, such a reading is superficial because the visual treatment and the montage of the handwritten captions, the dialogues and the shouts, are crucial for an in-depth comprehension of graphic storytelling. As the narrator falls, his cry '**OW!**' is emphasized by the size of the bold letters, by its position on the page (the balloon containing the word '**OW!**' occupies a central position and rhymes in a visual manner with the circular panel showing a detail of the skate coming loose from the foot). A series of visual correspondences then emerge: the form of the letter O is mirrored by the more

or less round form of the caption and the perfectly circular form of the inserted image. Moreover: the form of the letter W echoes the twisting of the foot, the skate and the wheels in a V-like or W-like form. The verbal and visual correspondences, accentuated by simple montage mechanisms, remind the reader of an earlier discovery on the book's cover: the schematic representation of a Hitler-like cat, displayed on the double background of a white circle and a black swastika. The letters O and W and their figurative doubles (the form of the inserted panel and the caption and the figure composed by wheels, skate and foot) function as a transposition of the cover background on the book's first page. This example shows that even in apparently simple images and story fragments, such as the opening scene of *Maus*, the impact of grammatextuality is tangible.

The flip side of this first renegotiation of the boundaries between words and images at the level of text and language is of course a similar operation at the level of the image. Despite the current aversion of textual anchorage and growing awareness of the danger of linguistic imperialism, images seem to be more akin to language than is generally accepted. We will not be addressing here the traditional or less traditional 'visual languages' that convert linguistic units and meanings into visual sign systems – these systems include genres and practices as diverse and well-established as, for instance, the rebus, the tradition of the 'speaking gesture' in medieval painting (see Barash, 1987), or more modern examples of sign systems: the language of the deaf, all kind of pictograms, and so on. We will consider, on the contrary, a more far-reaching interpretation of visual signs as a form of writing.

In the graphic novel, ideas similar to those advocated by Anne-Marie Christin have been recently proposed and illustrated in a book on the history of the medium by Thierry Smolderen (2009). His notion of the poly-graphic diagram is a means of criticizing

two basic principles proposed by Lessing (1984): first, the idea that an image is a unified field; secondly, the idea that the meaning of an image can be found within itself. That graphic novels disturb the notion of the image as a single field, perceivable and understandable in one glance, is not new. The sequential nature of the medium, which is not, contrary to the medium of the cartoon (in the sense of caricature), restricted to one single drawing, has been brought up by several authors to argue that Lessing's theory of the image as an example of spatial art no longer holds (see, for instance, Groensteen, 2007). What makes Smolderen's argumentation so innovative and stimulating is that he not only relies on the notion of sequentiality – nor on that of the page as 'multiframe' (Van Lier, 1988) – to articulate his view of the image as an object to be read but also that he rediscovers the internal segmentation of each individual panel. Drawing on the tradition of the eighteenth-century graphic novelists such as Hogarth and Richardson, he energetically rejected the definition of the drawing as a single field, to redefine it as a set of items and signs to be deciphered in an intertextual way. In other words: what we see when we look at a drawing is not an image but a visual field that serves as a backdrop to a multitude of signs and allusions that we have to read sequentially (this is what Smolderen calls the *diagrammatic* aspect of the image, which is the key argument in his interpretation of the image as something to be *read*), taking into account the meaning of these elements in the visual and literary culture of their time (this aspect is what Smolderen calls the *polygraphic* aspect of the drawing: each 'textual' element of the image is seen as a dialogue with an existing set of meanings and values, to which it critically answers, as in Bakhtine's intertextual theory of the novel as polyphony).

Both elements – the image as *diagram*, the image as *polyphony* – cast a new light upon the graphic novel. They enable us to see the graphic novel not only as a form of

sequential storytelling but also as a lively practice within a dynamic cultural framework. This last perspective had been abandoned gradually, since the graphic novel deserted its primal habitat: that of the newspapers and magazines, where it constituted a multifaceted means of visual communication with a readership eager to intervene in ongoing public debates. For the innovative reading of the image in a word-and-image perspective that both avoids naïve linguistic imperialism (i.e. the reduction of the image to a single sign obeying one or more existing codes) and naïve anti-textualism (i.e. the refusal to acknowledge the textual and verbal dimension of images), Smolderen's framework is of the utmost importance.

If we summarize the renegotiations of the word-and-image frontier as sketched above, the most important conclusion might be that the graphic novel becomes once again the communicative arena it had been in the beginning. Rather than adding up a set of meanings proposed by linguistic means and a set of meanings inferred from a sequence of images, the reader of a graphic novel is confronted with a much bigger challenge. Reading the graphic novel requires the reader:

- to make sense of the 'grammatextual' layer(s) of the information, and of the 'stylistic' features of the drawing
- to understand the textual information (inside or outside the panels)
- to scrutinize the diagrammatic and polygraphic dimension of the panels (which transforms them into reading screens)
- to interpret the sequential arrangement of the pictures (this narrativization of the visual treatment is of course a form of reading as well)
- and, obviously, to synthesize all the previous operations.

The above analysis of the first page of *Maus* followed roughly this reading trajectory. By way of clarification, we'll present it in a more systematic way. First, the reader discovers the grammatextual organization of the opening page even before he or she is aware

of the story content. He or she notices the central word ‘OW!’ and starts to scan the page in a concentric way, noticing the differences between the dialogues in the different panels and the narrator’s voice in the upper left and bottom right corner of the page. (The captions containing the narrator’s voice function in a certain sense as brackets, enclosing the page. This, of course, is discovered by the reader in a later phase of the reading process.) Secondly, after accommodating his or her eye to the grammatextual agitation of the page, the reader establishes links between the form and the position of the letters and the words, on the one hand, and the story content, on the other hand. This operation foregrounds the relation between the violence of the grammatextual transformations and the emotional intensity of the shown event. Thirdly, the reader interprets the materiality of the grammatextual procedures: the letters O and W are thus linked with other visual elements: for example, the skate (the loose skate transforms the foot of the boy into a kind of ‘claw’, which further ‘animalizes’ the character: not only his head, but also his feet are those of an animal) and the swastika on the book cover. Fourthly, this formal and semantic knot is then experienced by the reader as an anticipated echo of what the story will bring.

It should be stressed that, unfortunately, the syntagmatic enumeration of this bulleted list does not really do justice to the simultaneous nature of the various aspects of the ‘reading’ of images, which are in practice systematically intermingled. Nevertheless, it is not totally absurd or deceiving to start the inventory with the grammatextual and stylistic dimension of the reading process. It is indeed this dimension that in a certain sense comes before the functional split between words and images. Even before the interpretation of textual and visual elements, one is invited, if not forced, to get a first global impression of what is visible on the page or in the panels. In line with this argument, authors like Marion (1993) have stressed the importance of a kind of pre-narrative or

infra-narrative layer, described as an almost instinctive reaction to what the reader detects on the page, even if he or she is not totally able to make sense of it. No less than other media, the graphic novel is a semiotic practice that we have to learn, even if the ease with which we often read graphic novels makes us forget about the efforts we had to deploy in order to get used to the singularities of its verbal and visual conventions and anti-conventions.

GRAPHIC STORYTELLING: A MATTER OF VOICES

Reading an image in the context of the bimodal structure of the graphic novel is thus a multilayered operation. The general overview hastily sketched at the end of the previous section must now be applied to the medial specificities of the graphic novel itself. More specifically, the last part of this chapter aims to specify how an image is modified into language or *speech* – and even into *narrative speech*. The question here is less ‘How do images become words?’ than ‘How do images tell stories?’ Our goal will be to rethink the notion of *narrative voice* that has been in use for many decades now in the domain of literary studies (Genette, 1983). This notion refers both to the questions ‘Who tells the story?’ and ‘How is the story told?’

Given the importance of ‘voice’ in narratology, it might be tempting to simply borrow a certain number of ideas and insights from the field of literary studies and to introduce them unaltered into the discussion of the graphic novel. Such a mechanical transfer would entail a return of linguistic imperialism at another level of the analysis. Moreover, too strong an emphasis on the serial structure of the graphic novel may reduce the internal complexity of each panel and each page, resulting in a reading stance that ignores the internal diagrammaticity of each panel and gives undue preference to the narrative stream

at the expense of all other types of 'visual reading', while giving the reader also less agency in deconstructing text and image. Yet the very intermediality of the graphic novel could offer an opportunity for inventive approaches to the concept of voice, capable of offering visual re-readings of an apparently strict linguistic category.

At first sight, the difference between voice in verbal narrative and voice in the graphic novel is a difference in complexity. Certainly, both the verbal text and the graphic novel share the same possibilities of exploring a *multilayered* narrative instance, with embedded narrators and numerous possibilities of playing with symmetries and dissymmetries between the levels of author, narrator, and character's voices. But what does distinguish the graphic novel from the verbal narrative is the *multimedial* character of its voice, which always combines a verbal narrator (who tells the story with verbal means, relying or not on embedded narrators) and a visual or iconic narrator (who shows the story by drawing it – and whose function can of course always be complexified by the use of embedded graphic narrators). André Gaudreault (1999) called this visual or iconic narrator a 'monstrator', while using the concept of 'meganarrator', which already existed in previous forms of narrative analysis, to label the more abstract instance that gathers both the verbal and the iconic dimension of the narrative act (for an in-depth presentation of this terminology, see Baetens, 2001).

Thanks to the (relative) blurring of boundaries between the verbal and the visual, as elaborated in the previous section of this chapter, it is now possible to reinterpret these voice-related structures in a more visual sense. In this respect, three aspects should be emphasized.

The first aspect concerns the communicative features of 'graphiation', i.e. the visual part of the enunciative act of storytelling. As argued by Philippe Marion (1993), the graphiation in the graphic novel oscillates between two extreme positions: between complete transparency and complete opacity.

The former is exemplified by Hergé's Clear Line style, which can be read as an attempt to propose a narrative voice that remains as neutral and invisible as possible; the latter is illustrated by all kinds of expressive or even expressionist styles in which the 'hand' of the artist matters sometimes more than the narrative content. However, both positions are still very author-related and do not leave much space for the active communication and reader negotiation of graphic styles in a framework of the image as writing, to follow Anne-Marie Christin's line of argument. By approaching the notion of graphiation from the viewpoint of screen-thinking, a graphic style or graphiation is no longer the reflection of an artist's vision, but part of a broader network of visual elements to be read and interpreted without necessary reference to the position of the artist. Graphiation is then a criterion that helps make sense of the visual relationships on a certain surface, instead of being a short cut to a single authorial meaning.

A second aspect or mechanism deals with the traditional notion of voice-over. In contemporary graphic novels, such a voice-over, which comments verbally on the story being told by visual means, whether by an external narrator or by one of the characters of the fictional world itself, has become a stereotype (after having become almost taboo in traditional graphic storytelling, which obeyed ideals of narrative transparency and non-interventionism). However, it would be wrong to confuse the voice-over mechanism as we know it from cinema and the narrative voice in many graphic novels.³ In the graphic novel the overall effect of the often-dominant presence of the verbal narrator is not quite the same as that of the cinematographic voice-over. The appropriate proposition in this context is less 'over' than 'with'. In this respect, the narrator's presence is being felt as a 'voice-with' that accompanies the sequential unfolding of the images. The opposition between voice-over and voice-with may imply that both concepts are monolithic, which is not the case: just as there are

various types of voice-over, according for instance to the diegetic status of the voice speaking (it may belong to a character that takes part in the action, to a protagonist or to a witness, or to a narrator who remains outside the fictional world, and so on), there are many degrees of accompaniment in the voice-with modus.

The shift from voice-over to voice-with is important for the visual reading of the images. First, a voice-over is much less intrusive, and 'anchors' therefore less the meaning of the images than a voice-with does, whose authoritative dimension is at the heart of much debate. Secondly, a voice-with seems also to prevent the author from making too many concessions to his or her literary superego. In the history of narrative cinema, the use of voice-over techniques has been one of the instruments, besides the use of 'authors' as scriptwriters and the recycling of existing literary material in all kinds of adaptations, of the literary turn of the movies (authors like Welles link their authorship to an intense use of narrative devices of literary storytelling). In the case of the graphic novel, the narrators seem to be much more modest, although therefore no less overwhelmingly visible throughout their stories. Since the voice does not 'cover' the image it 'accompanies', there seems to be less craving for a rebalancing of the equilibrium between word and image, to the benefit of the former and to the expense of the latter. Words do not take the floor that is given to the image.

A third and, in our opinion, even more crucial reinterpretation of the category of voice and graphiation in a visual sense, refers to the way in which one may consider the relationship between the act of enunciation (the very act of storytelling) and the underlying model of speech production that helps understand it. What is at stake here is the fundamental difference between two ways of reproducing speech in a text. As argued by Philippe and Piat (2009), one should distinguish authors whose written text is an endeavor to imitate as faithfully as possible the oral speech of a character or a narrator

(the literary tradition sometimes uses the Russian-formalist notion of *skaz* to designate this kind of fiction) from authors who undertake to transpose in their text the very energy of oral speech to make their writing more lively and vibrant (Louis-Ferdinand Céline is the best possible example of this case: nobody speaks like him, yet no style is more oral than his).

If it is likely within graphiation to interpret certain visual styles as an attempt to reproduce the visual way of expressing someone, either a character or a narrator, it is also possible to make a more radical interpretation and to see the particular treatment of graphiation as a way of introducing the very energy of sketching and drawing into the final printed work, instead of decoding them as the direct equivalent of an individual's drawing style. As a case in point, one might take Mattotti's ballpoint-drawn graphic novel *Stigmates* (Mattotti and Piersanti, 1998) as a paradigmatic example; the singularities of the graphiation are less associated with the 'self' of a person who expresses himself through the scrawls and scratches of an idiosyncratic style than of an effort to multiply the visual effect of what happens in the story (*Stigmates* tells the story of a drunk who wakes up one morning with stigmata and starts testifying of these totally unexpected and inexplicable experiences). This brings us much closer to what Philippe and Piat call 'vocality' than any attempt whatsoever to follow some personal 'style'.

Once again, a (re)reading of the opening page of *Maus* helps to clarify some of the concepts. The extreme variability of the textual elements on this page is striking: some words are outside, others inside the frames; the size and form as well as the position of letters and balloons is shifting perpetually; because of their similar shape a confusion between balloons and inserted panels is suggested, and so on. This instability is to be seen as the graphic equivalent of the uncertainty and doubts of both the character and the narrator, as the main character doesn't yet grasp the importance of the incident he is

narrating and the narrator hasn't yet found the best way to tell the story he's about to reveal. Eventually the narrator will relate the story, based on his father's words. In this sense, graphiation hasn't a merely expressive or expressionist role. The material changes in the handwriting have an important narrative function: they reflect the differences between speakers, voices and tones. It is a radical way of exploring a new (graphic) manner of storytelling.

These small proposals do not cover the field of possibilities in an exhaustive way. Certain meganarrators may foreground, for instance, narrative voices, in both the verbal and the iconic sense of the word, that do not aim at imitating a personal voice or an individual hand. Their ambition is rather to explore a radical formalism that cannot be reduced to questions of expression or style.⁴ However, this text is not the right place to explore the subtleties of this kind of narrative voice.

To conclude, what is the relevance of the graphic novel analysis for the reading of images? If one accepts the hypotheses and methodological suggestions that have been explored in this chapter, the main conclusions are threefold.

First, it is necessary to always link the image to the intermedial field in which it is functioning (different corpuses would provide us with examples of different types of intermediality).

Secondly, it is not possible to define the particular features of images in contrast to those of words; even if it would be absurd to argue that words and images are one and the same category, it cannot be denied that the reading of images activates mechanisms that are typical of the reading of verbal systems and vice versa.

Thirdly, it can prove extremely helpful to import a certain number of concepts – such as, for example, grammatextuality, diagrammaticity, or voice – that have been defined primarily in verbal contexts. If images are intermedial objects, their theory should also be open to cross-overs.

NOTES

1 We will not venture here into the debate over whether it is useful or necessary to distinguish comics from graphic novels. For this discussion has no link whatsoever with the methodological issues at stake. The differences between comics and graphic novels, if there are any, have less to do with semiotics than with aesthetics and cultural critique, and that is another story.

2 Such a myth would be comparable to the disgust inspired by old-school film scholars or aficionados who continue to believe that film as an art 'died' when the silent cinema was replaced by talking movies.

3 A simple but very telling example would be, of course, Spiegelman's (1986) *Maus*, even if one could argue that most contemporary graphic novels, whose autobiographical or semi-autobiographical tendencies are undeniable, rely on similar narrative mechanisms.

4 A good example here is the work by Francis Masse (1984), who used a very 'impersonal' drawing style and whose abundantly loquacious characters 'speak like books'.

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