

Visual Narratives

GEORGE A. WALKER describes how images create meaning and spills the ink on his own artistic sources and “painful” printmaking process.

TORONTO BOOK ARTIST *George A. Walker* received an Alcuin Award for Excellence in Book Design in Canada for his limited edition graphic novel *The Wordless Leonard Cohen Songbook: A Biography in 80 Wood Engravings* (2014). During the annual awards presentation at the Arts & Letters Club in Toronto on October 5, 2015, he offered the following insights into the relationship between texts and illustrations.

~ Peter Mitham, editor

FIRST, YOU’RE ASKING yourself, “OK, why am I listening to a guy talk about wordless narratives? Books without words? It’s crazy!” But actually, I’m going to tell you about how I see the image as a form of text.

CAN A STORY BE TOLD JUST IN IMAGES? Children read pictures: it’s one of the first things that they engage with. That impression of the picture book is their first foray into the world of reading. Show a child a picture of something, have them identify it, and you have the basis of early reading. It’s innate to our nature to read pictures. I believe they are a form of writing, and I want to argue that in this talk. They have the same roots, historically and semantically, as the written word. Picture narratives are polylingual; they speak many languages, and this gives them a great advantage if you’re trying to speak to a larger audience because the images can transcend the boundaries of language.

I’m inspired by the writing of Aristotle, who spoke of “the thinking soul” and its relationship to our imagination. The idea is that the soul itself has image thoughts and this is how we get direct perceptions of who we are. Aristotle postulated that the soul never thinks without a mental image: I like that notion that thinking in images is part of our very being, who we are. And of course, there’s the science behind it too:

the rods and cones in our eyes, the occipital lobe, which translate what we see in our world to construct a picture in our mind. Mental pictures are fundamental to being human.

I’m currently reading Frank Wilczek’s book, which is fabulous, titled *A Beautiful Question: Finding Nature’s Deep Design* (2015). He’s the physicist who won the Nobel Prize, and he says we human beings are, above all, visual creatures. And I believe that’s primarily how we engage the world; that’s how we understand who we are and who others are; that’s how we identify the things that are around us and how we name them. Our stories are made in our mind as pictures constructed by our imaginations.

SO WHAT’S THIS THING WE CALL VISUAL NARRATIVE?

My definition of narrative is akin to author Mieke Bal’s concept of narrative: it’s a sign system in which a sequence of events is communicated.¹ I’m a collector of images, and I sort them into a meaning—into a narrative. And that’s the process at work in my books. I collect images, I construct images that I think have symbolic meaning in themselves and that other people can read into.

Art Spiegelman says, “Wordless novels are filled with language, it just resides in the reader’s head.” What a great place for the whole story to be—inside your head already! We read pictures every day. Like the tracks animals left in the snow. Do we need multiple pictures to tell a story or can a narrative exist in a single image? Well, of course it can and does. Georgia O’Keeffe said that she “could say things with colour and shape that [she] couldn’t say any other way.”

Carl Jung, as well as writing about the importance of dreams in constructing ourselves, wrote about the importance of the hands making things. He said the hands often know how to solve a riddle with which the intellect has struggled in vain. This notion that we can actually solve problems

through the creation of images leads to things like art therapy. It comes to us through a tradition that we can understand our problems better if we can visualize them—seeing through our problems.

Think of dictionaries. Dictionaries with pictures help us understand the meaning of something, so if I say, “Well, it looks like a tove!” And you ask, “What the hell is a tove?” And I say, “It’s a cross between a corkscrew and a badger.” Images are needed to illustrate what that might be. An illustration in a dictionary would help you understand what a tove is better than someone trying to describe what it might be.

That brings me to the great painting *Guernica*, which of course Picasso infused with symbolism. It’s in black and white. He wanted it to invoke in us the desperate feelings of war. Notice the light bulb at the top of the painting. It has a double meaning; it is more than just a light bulb shining on the horrors of war. The Spanish word for bulb is *bombilla*, a diminutive form of *bomba*, or bomb—the light bulb becomes a symbol of the bombing. A breaking light bulb sounds like a bomb.

But there’s also other symbolism in there, like the broken sword that symbolizes loss and defeat. So reading the painting this way is part of the understanding of what it’s really about, and by looking at the various signs and symbols in the work, we are richer.

It takes effort to read an image. If you just glance at a picture and all the information is given to you and you believe you understand its message, then there’s not much left to explore beyond the surface of meaning in the image. But you might be missing something that a closer reading would bear. Think about Wittgenstein’s famous illustration (rabbit/duck): like words the image can have many meanings. One thing can appear to be two things at the same time.

SO HOW DOES AN IMAGE CREATE MEANING?

We have to go back to the origins of written language. Now, it’s easy to make a picture of something and then identify it with the object you’ve made a picture of. But there is that big leap that one makes between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional, the represented pictured

object and its presence in the real world. So simplifying an object from life and breaking it down into something we can recognize on paper in an image is quite a technological advancement. And, of course, the Egyptians were the first to start to investigate this problem, and how to solve the idea of communicating more abstract and more complex ideas from a pictogram into something that we recognize as written language.

Here you can see the early pictogram symbol for “cow” in the Chinese; it turns into an ideogram, then if you look at the logo-graphic on the far right, you’ll notice that it’s completely different than the original picture of the cow, yet there’s a relationship—and it’s the same with the Egyptian hieroglyph for the letter A and how it’s transformed.

This is a quote I picked up from James Gleick’s book *The Information* (2011): “The power lies not just in the knowledge, preserved and passed forward, valuable as it is, but in the methodology: encoded visual indications, the act of transference, substituting signs for things. And then, later, signs for signs.”² Infusing what looks like just a picture with a deeper meaning and associating images with other things does actually bring a deeper meaning to them.

This leap into seeing beyond the mere marks on paper to a deeper significance requires education. You have to bring people in that teach you the signs, and then teach you what they mean. The picture then moves beyond its frame of reference and into something else entirely, something more abstractly associated. And you know this is true because of the rebus books that use pictures to substitute for words. The rebus book was another way to help early readers with the process of reading from images to the more abstracted letter forms.

But aren’t they just reading pictures here? Isn’t part of this just knowing what that picture is and being able to say, “Oh yeah, that’s a devil, that’s a snake”? Making some sort of reference to those pictures, the words then become alive because we can see more than just the picture that’s there. It’s like using an eye for the word “I” we abstract from the image a new meaning beyond what it is pictorially representing.

THE INFLUENCE OF MASEREEL

My influences for doing wordless narratives have a history. I don't deny that it's Flemish artist Frans Masereel who was the one who actually inspired me to start creating my wordless narratives. I first discovered Masereel in an exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario back in the 1980s. I saw all these woodcuts and exclaimed: "These are amazing! I can do this! I love printmaking and I love making woodcuts, and this is just an extension of that." I thought, *Wow, this is what I want to do. I just love the notion of being able to tell the whole story in images.*

One of Masereel's books, *Die Idee* (1920), was published by Kurt Wolff. The image of a lady who appears in one of his engravings in a press represents an idea; she is the symbol. She's the graphic representation of a concept. Masereel's point was that no matter what you do, you can't kill an idea. The book ends tragically, with the man being shot by a firing squad, but his idea lives on.

Another of Masereel's books, *25 Images of a Man's Passion* (1918), is his first wordless novel. This story is about a working-class man who leads a revolt against his employer. It was distributed throughout Europe as a critique of the plight of the working class. The great thing about the wordless narrative was that everyone understood it because no matter what language they spoke, the images were accessible and profound (it reminds me of German expressionism, in that respect).

STORYTELLERS WITHOUT WORDS

Another artist, Lynd Ward, went to Europe for his honeymoon with his wife, May McNeer, a famous children's book writer (Ward illustrated many of those). But he saw the work of Frans Masereel, and he was inspired to do the same thing. He brought the wordless narrative back to the United States and published his own: *Wild Pilgrimage* (1932), *God's Man* (1929), *Madman's Drum* (1930) and *Vertigo* (1937), just to name a few of the most iconic. And when I discovered Ward, again I thought, *This is what I want to do. These are so amazing!* I loved the layout of the pages, the way the engravings look, and I was completely enamoured of it. The wood engraving medium is profound and expressive, and I found it akin to my sensibilities as an artist.

In his foreword to *Storyteller without Words* (1974), Ward said: "If understanding is dependent on the words, the narrative is probably more properly described as a work of illustration, one in which the verbal element is primary and the pictorial element—no matter how impressive in draftsmanship or how much of the available space it occupies—is secondary."³ It is the image as text, the images are not just illustrations. We may think an illustration plays second place to the text, enhancing the text by illustrating the text, but remove the text and you don't have that anymore. You have the image as the narrative itself. And I thought, *That's exactly the kind of thing I can get behind.*

Canadian artist Laurence Hyde also did a wordless narrative, *Southern Cross* (1951), with an introduction by Rockwell Kent. Hyde looks at American nuclear testing in the Bikini Atoll. After 1946, the Americans towed the Japanese fleet into the Bikini Atoll and then tested nuclear weapons. More film footage was shot during those tests than Hollywood had previously shot; it was that well documented. Hyde wanted to criticize the testing. (His book, as you can imagine, was never popular in the United States, partly because Rockwell Kent wrote the introduction. Kent was a known Communist.)

Hyde produced beautiful wood engravings for *Southern Cross*. Laurence Hyde later took this book to the National Film Board, where he showed it to them and they said, "Yeah, you'd be a great documentary filmmaker, you should make documentary films here!" And they gave him a job as a documentary filmmaker based on a book of wood engravings.

It makes sense: a graphic novel is a storyboard. Just like we've made the leap from translating comic books into movies, how difficult is it to move graphic novels into the motion picture world? Certainly, you could argue that they're like silent films. Hyde said: "Novels are stories in picture form, but only close to theatre in technique, but there's something of a ballet to it."

AUTHENTICITY IN PRINTMAKING

I like the notion that we're seeing a different art form, one I didn't want to see die, that I wanted to keep alive. So I had to think of a way to do that.

I chose wood engraving, and specifically end-grain engraving, which is the medium of Masereel, Ward and Hyde. The plank is what you usually do a woodcut on, but I'm working on the part where you see all the rings. And I'm using different tools: I'm using the tools of the silversmith.

Relief printing (which is how a wood engraving is printed) is one of the oldest forms of the graphic media, and when you think of it it's very, very basic, so it's not surprising that it persists, even today. Flexography is what it's called in the commercial printing world. We keep inventing new names for processes that are old, so we can reintroduce them as a modern technology.

Why would anyone bother with making prints from wood engravings in the age of mechanical reproduction? Why wouldn't you just mass-produce them in some other process like photocopying, or offset lithography or something of that nature? Because mechanical reproductions lose the aura of the physical hand/mind process used to make the image. For me there is authenticity to making prints directly from wood I have created marks in.

I am cognizant of Hitchcock's rule for visual storytelling. He said the size of any object in your frame should be proportional to its importance to the story at that point. Like Hitchcock I've been known to include an engraving of myself in my narratives, and like Hitchcock I work in black and white primarily, but unlike Hitchcock, all the movement in my narratives exists in your head!

I'm a sucker for the pain and suffering of it all. The struggle to make an image on a wood surface. I really love the relationship with the material, especially in the electronic age when, as I said, it's so easy to reproduce anything. I like the notion that I'm taking something off a matrix made with my hands, that I've engaged with wood from a tree and have made it tell a story. I'm always looking for the evidence of the human hand in art. When you read one of my hand-printed books, you're actually holding something that I engaged with, that the book was actually made with my hands, that the blocks were all hand-impressed onto the paper. Part of me is left there.

1. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, *The Cultures of Collecting* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 97.
2. James Gleick, *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood* (Vintage, 2011), 39.
3. Lynd Ward, *Storyteller without Words: The Wood Engravings of Lynd Ward* (Harry N. Abrams, 1974), 20.

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~ George A. Walker is a book artist based in Toronto. He is associate professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design University, creative director at Firefly Books Ltd. and graphics editor at the Porcupine's Quill. His work on wordless novels was profiled in *Devil's Artisan* 68 (Spring 2011). He will speak to the Alcuin Society in Vancouver in March 2016.

