Blurring The Boundaries: Creating New Genres?

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What is the use of a book,’ thought Alice, ‘without pictures or conversation?’

Abstract

What indeed! Alice’s words appear to be just as relevant today where the use of image is developed in a multitude of ways to extend the written narrative in texts including picturebooks, illustrated novels, comics and graphic novels. However, definitions of each format become less certain as the way in which images are used is constantly challenged. Comic strips have become more literary, expanded in length to graphic novels and novels have incorporated many non-writing elements such as illustrations and paratextual devices.

This paper explores examples of the emerging hybrid texts that result from the blurring of boundaries in the way word and image can operate. It considers not only the significance of textual but paratextual features that contribute to meaning and aesthetic coherence. To do this, two recent texts aimed at young adult readers, will be explored. The first is a graphic novel, a format that is at last achieving mainstream recognition. Shaun Tan’s The Arrival draws on the format’s characteristic of visual vibrancy but takes it to a new height by presenting it as a wordless text, creating the effect of rendering the literate reader helpless with no other way of gaining information but to rely on close observation. The second text is Brian Selznick’s The Invention of Hugo Cabret. While it won the prestigious 2008 US Caldecott Medal which is given for picturebook illustration, on Selznick’s own admission, it has elements of a novel, a picturebook, a graphic novel, a flip book and a movie but is none of these.

Key Words: multimodal, graphic novel, a novel in words and pictures, picturebook, temporality, spatiality, paratext, chronotope.

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1. Introduction

Multimedia, as we know, has changed the way in which meaning is created. As screen and image have influenced how messages are conveyed in our multimodal world, the diversity of visual/verbal texts has proliferated. The nature of visual/verbal narrative aimed at children and adolescents offers
enormous scope for innovation which allows author/illustrators to select complex themes and match purpose to form. To do this, they are drawing elements of compositional structures from other genres together with playing with narrative in imaginative ways to create new texts. ‘This combination,’ Lemke suggests, ‘is really a multiplication in the sense that the result is not an addition of these contributions, as if they were independent of each other, but also includes the effects of their mutual interaction: the contribution of each modality contextualises and specifies or alters the meaning we make with the contribution from each of the others.’

It must be remembered that each of these texts is not just a structured visual design but a story, narrated. Narrative dates from the beginning of civilization and yet it is still imperfectly understood. Narrative discourse can provide a useful theory of narrative. Genette suggests that narrative discourse ‘implies a study of relationships: on the one hand the relationship between a discourse and the events that it recounts, on the other hand the relationship between the same discourse and the act that produces it’. Genette’s *Narrative Discourse* provides a useful foundation for an exploration of these relationships of story, style and discourse and how such visual texts experiment with narrative in ways that would be impossible in conventional print narratives.

2. Creating Ecosystems

It is difficult to believe that many readers still see the purpose of images only as supporting the text. They ignore the entire body of postmodern picturebooks that has emerged in the past twenty years and seem unaware of what David Lewis calls an ‘ecology’ of picturebooks which highlights the fact that the internal relationship of word and image in picturebooks is flexible and complex. It is a useful metaphor which can be applied to all visual/verbal texts to demonstrate that like the interdependence of creatures in an ecosystem is essential, so too the internal environment of each visual/verbal text is delicately balanced. It is the constantly developing nature of such texts that makes them so appealing to their creators. The invitation to make new meaning through the myriad of combinations of word and image and the ability to draw on genres of verbal/visual texts such as cartoon, film, picturebooks and video games allows for the matching of purpose and an appropriate interaction of text and image in a hybridity of styles. Just as ecosystems are made up of complex networks of relationships, so too can the multiple strands interconnect to create a complex visual/verbal text.

Examples of recent innovative visual/verbal texts that create new sustainable ecosystems include Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* which draws on the format of the graphic novel; Brian Selznick’s *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* which incorporates elements of a novel with visual images; Tan’s *Tales from*...
Outer Suburbia which uses fifteen illustrated vignettes, where a bricolage of illustrative styles reflects the emotional content of each concise narrative; and Matt Ottley’s Requiem for A Beast: A Work for Image, Word and Music which embraces three modes and weaves them into a narrative tapestry.

This paper focuses on two of these emerging hybrid texts, Tan’s The Arrival and Selznick’s The Invention of Higo Cabret, that result from the blurring of boundaries. It considers not only the significance of textual but paratextual features that contribute to meaning and aesthetic coherence. Such an examination it is hoped will enable us to ‘make meaning’ Lemke (1998).

3. Compositional Structures: The Graphic Novel and The Arrival

Graphic novels are increasingly occupying a significant space on the shelves in bookshops and school and community libraries. They are emerging as a popular format with young adults and adults who have already developed a sense of narrative through large and small screen. While graphic novels have been published widely in the United States, Japan and Europe for some time, Australian publishers have only recently turned their attention to this genre.

To attempt a definition of the contemporary genre of the graphic novel would be foolhardy as writers, publishers and academics identify diverse elements. While some graphic novels maintain comic form using a series of panels and gutters with embedded texts, many experiment with a variety of image/text relationships and the way images are used to convey meaning. Traditional graphic novels have been distinguished from comics by their length and described as a larger comic book, ‘a stand-alone story in comic form, published as a book’. Drawing styles chosen tended to lack fluidity and, characterized by dark lines and shadows, were noted for their sameness, regardless of the theme. Raymond Briggs’ The Snowman (1978) and When the Wind Blows (1982) might be considered forerunners of the modern graphic novel where the genres of comics and children’s picturebooks merged. Originally published as picturebooks, to meet the present market forces, these texts have been rebadged as graphic novels. Yet, some writers maintain that the term is merely a publisher’s term to counter the stigma of the comic book. Currently, many writers prefer the more generic term ‘illustrated novel’ or ‘a picture novella’.

As writers explore the advantages of the genre of the graphic novel, they find that it offers opportunities to explore key issues through the interplay of word and image in an extended text through diverse narrative structures and encourages different points of view. It is a useful genre in which to develop political and social commentaries as is witnessed in Art Spiezman’s Maus, J. Sacco’s Palestine and Marjare Satrape Perseopolis. The controversy surrounding the definition and use of the term ‘graphic
novel’ highlights its lack of definitive characteristics and allows writer/illustrators to explore elements to create a new hybrid form.

International award winning *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan has been labelled a graphic novel\(^{19}\) a format that is at last achieving mainstream recognition. Yet, the text appears closer to a picturebook that has been extended to a novel length but is structured like a novel with discrete chapters. However, Tan experiments with the genre by presenting it as a wordless text, creating the effect of rendering the literate reader helpless with no other way of gaining information but to rely on close observation. The continuity between each image, the format of ‘sequential art’ common in the comic book\(^{20}\) suits Tan’s narrative purpose of examining the migrant experience of displacement by following the journey of an unnamed protagonist who must leave his family in search of a better life for them all. It appears that the subject here dictates the style and format.

The graphic novel format normally involves the combination of text, panels and images\(^{21}\). Tan presents an interesting twist to the use of text. Rather than using speech bubbles or embedded first person narrative, meaning seems to rely entirely on images. However, while it might be assumed that as a wordless book, *The Arrival* is devoid of text in the traditional sense, it is the language of an indecipherable alphabet printed on official papers, maps and signs that frustrates both the viewer and the migrant protagonist who struggle to comprehend the language of an alien country. In the absence of text, intertext becomes significant as the viewer recognises images that are familiar to our world, for example, the processing of immigrants on Ellis Island in the early twentieth century, a large statue rising out of a harbour, reminiscent of The Statue of Liberty, a European cobbled-stone village.

A feature of graphic novels is the use of a number of panels to sequence the action. In *The Arrival*, multiple panels show both the passage of time and a single moment in time which detail realistic everyday life events of the protagonist. Selecting diverse shapes and sizes and wide white gutters to allow each panel its own impact, Tan uses these panels for a variety of purposes: to show intense emotional moments and memories, to record mini-narratives and to record mundane, tedious events. However, unlike most graphic novels, *The Arrival* balances the small sequenced panels with large full page and double page panoramic images where landscape dwarfs the characters and slows the pace. Such an approach controls the book’s rhythm and reflects the busy dynamic world of great action of a bustling city and contrasts it with the private still moments of an individual.

The third element of the format of graphic novels is the images. Tan dismisses cartooning in favour of detailed pencil images that are realistic and highly emotive. Drawing on his experience as an illustrator of picturebooks, Tan has used not only traditional illustrative techniques with graphite pencils
on cartridge paper, but also he has used multimedia processes in production including scanned drawings, still photographs, video and digitally added textures. *The Arrival* breaks with the convention of most graphic novels which tend to maintain a specific genre throughout. The world created in *The Arrival* is one of both fantasy and historic realism where the realistic historical imagery conveys a Europe of the early twentieth century, oppressed by tyranny and violence which is juxtaposed with fantasy images of alien-like animals, science fiction modes of transport and surreal cities. Small intimate images such as the fuzzy photograph-like images of the migrant carefully packing a photograph of his family contrast with low modality expansive images of strange industrialized cityscapes where people are but small dots overwhelmed by the dominance of buildings, reminiscent of movie sets. Here, photorealism merges with pop surrealism.

Barthes believes that viewers rely on myths to make sense of images drawing on their knowledge of their own culture. Tan works to break the mythologies of culture by showing conventional images that are at once
familiar but also strange as surreal elements intrude as in the terrifying image of a recognizable Florence that is dwarfed by giant figures, vacuuming people and buildings into furnaces (see Illustration 1).

4. **Compositional Structure: Not Exactly A Novel, Not Quite a Picturebook…:** *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*

Selznik’s *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* is also difficult to classify in terms of its genre. Like *The Arrival*, it is often called a graphic novel as indeed it does have sequenced images and a narrative text divided into chapters. It is also seen as historical-fiction which considers the early history of movies and the wind up automata popular in the early twentieth century. While it won the prestigious 2008 US Caldecott Medal which is given for picturebook illustration, on Selznick’s own admission, this does not accurately classify the book. Selznick describes what his book is not: ‘not exactly a novel, not quite a picturebook, not really a graphic novel, or a flip book or a movie, but a combination of all these things’.

Selznick simply subtles the book ‘A Novel in Words and Pictures’. It is indeed made up of 26,159 words and 58 pictures divided into chapters. However, unlike many picturebooks where there is an extensive use of interanimation of image and text where each is inextricably linked with the other, here image and text ‘take turns’ to advance the plot rather like a silent movie where images are interspersed by title cards. This device is particularly appropriate given that the narrative is inspired by the story of pioneer filmmaker and father of special effects, Georges Méliès and the early silent movie industry. While it might be suggested that the writing lacks the depth and quality of the images, the overall impact creates a sense of being part of the silent movie era.

Chapter One begins with images firstly of a close up of the moon, gradually ‘pulling back’ like a camera taking the reader to scenes of the moon over Paris. Immediately the reader/viewer is aware that cinematic techniques are being employed as the ‘camera’ uses distance shots and close ups conveyed in meticulous black-and-white pencil drawings across double page openings, framed by black borders, reminiscent of a film frame. For the first twenty-two page openings the story unfolds silently. The viewer at once senses that s/he is watching a movie and must turn the pages quickly to maintain the continuity of the action. Just as a movie might advance the story without text, so too Selznick uses a series of double page openings of images to present events silently. Thirty-six frames, for example, sequence the event of the Station Inspector chasing Hugo, the main protagonist. From time to time, this rhythm is interrupted by the shift to narrative text which takes up the story. Frequently, the viewer senses that attention is required as s/he watches the ‘camera’ zoom in to a close-up of an object such as a face, an eye, or a foot disappearing from view (see Illustration 2)
In keeping with this sense of cinema are intertextual references to early French cinema including the stills from Méliès famous *A Trip to the Moon* of 1902, sketches by Méliès for film sets and the still from the historic early film of 1895 entitled *A Train Arrives in the Station*.

5. **Narrative Discourse: A Study of Relationships**

Elements of narrative, too, are borrowed and moulded to the purposes of emerging visual genres.

In both *The Arrival* and *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, an exploration of how story is conveyed through a chosen narrative discourse and how styles affect that discourse illustrate how ideologically and narratively complex these books are. Both involve a physical and metaphorical journey, adopting sequential yet circulatory movement of time, exploring past, present and future. Temporality, spatiality and paratextual elements are all significant influences on narrative in these texts.

Externally focalized, *The Arrival* is a story that deals with escape from an old world order of poverty, tyranny and warfare to a world of industrialization, mass population and loneliness. However, the book is much more than an exploration of the theme of alienation and anonymity. It is a celebration of the best of the human condition where people support each other in a new land and show genuine concern for one another. If the book is about an arrival, it is the reaching of a solution to the problem of man’s inhumanity to man. *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, like many books for young adults, addresses themes associated with coming of age including loss and redemption. Hugo’s father, once an horologist had died in a fire while
repairing an automaton, a machine that looks like a human designed with working parts that allow it to write. Hugo’s discovery of the automaton and his desire to make it work again, begins his journey of transformation. The book begins with Hugo’s secret and gradually reveals how the secrets of others are intertwined with his in this challenging mystery. All the central characters are suffering from loss: Hugo and Isabelle the loss of parents; Papa Georges of a career. It is the sense of a search for life purpose that becomes central: it is the finding of magic that restores balance. The ambiguity of the title suggests that Hugo’s invention may not be his rebuilding of the automaton but his own growth through exploring life’s purpose that brings about his ‘invention’.

If *The Arrival* and *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* are about change, they are also about time. Time, according to Heise, is a significant parameter through which narrative is organized. In visual/verbal texts, complex patterns of parallel and simultaneous explorations of time can convey a sense of movement and duration. Metz suggests that ‘Narrative is a…doubly temporal sequence…There is the time of the thing told and the time of the narrative’. In visuals, this duality allows for temporal distortions that are commonplace in visual narrative where sequential images will create specific phrasing with pauses and discontinuities that affect the rhythm of the narrative. Yet time is more difficult to depict in visual narratives. In the past, the mimetic nature of visual images had limited representations of temporal themes using chronological sequences, clocks or representations of seasons. While *The Arrival* draws on historical events that have led to migration and the people and the landscape reflect an early twentieth century era, the surreal imagery of the imaginary world makes it impossible for the reader to identify a specific history or a context of place. Yet, a new pattern of temporality and spatiality becomes important not only through sequential art but through experiments with other devices, too. Firstly, Tan uses paralepsis (where a secondary narrative is independent of time of the primary narrative) to show an image of the migrant looking into his empty suitcase which reveals a scene of his wife and child sitting at dinner somewhere far away (see Illustration 3).

Secondly, although the images in both texts are all sepia or grey in tone, changes in light and mood (see Illustration 4 from *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*) give a sense of time and place.
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Kress\(^{28}\) tells us that ‘whatever is represented in image has to bow to the logic of space, and to the simultaneity of elements in spatial arrangements’. The world that Tan creates is ‘strange, confronting or confusing—not to mention beyond the grasp of language’ \(^{29}\), full of the movement of a bustling metropolis and the silence of a person alone. Setting, then, is integral to this narrative, a physical representation of the alienation the migrant feels. Unlike a verbal text, images require the viewer to slow down and to give more attention to facilitating the interpretation of each element in the ‘ecology’ of the text. As Nikolajeva and Scott remind us, ‘While words can only describe spatial dimensions, pictures can explore and play with them in limitless ways’ \(^{30}\).

Bakhtin’s formulation of the term chronotope, which he defines as ‘the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature’ \(^{31}\), helps define genre and makes generic distinctions in narrative. The primary category in the chronotope is time. Complicated chronotopes emerge where there are two different conjunctions of time and space that reflect upon each other ‘to create metaphoric significance’ \(^{32}\). In *The Arrival* the primary chronotope blends fantasy and realism in the migrant’s narrative of leaving home. Yet the secondary chronotopes show realistically drawn mini-narratives of the lives of three secondary characters whose reasons for migration include civil war, political oppression and genocide. It is the interaction of multiple chronotopes that give the text its complexity. The effect is to create both a physical (linear time) and metaphoric (semipiternal or ‘moments out of time’) journey and reveal the simultaneous existence of the past, present and future. *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* uses quasi-realistic time of the picaresque novel
where adventures interrupt linear time. While the main chronotope involves the story of Hugo Cabret, there are other chronotopes which use analepses (flashback) of the lives of Georges Méliès and Hugo’s father, all of which interact. Further complexity occurs with the use of a great deal of intertextuality of stills from early films and Méliès sketches. To emulate the continuity and flow of movement reminiscent of films, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* uses not only blurs and simultaneous succession but draws on verbal text to enhance meaning. Although time is thought of as succession, we experience it as duration. Narrative can devote space to a momentary experience and then leaps over years. Temporal ellipses between page openings intentionally makes it difficult to determine duration in both *The Arrival* and *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*.

In recent times, the paratext has become significant particularly in picturebooks the paratext as it has the potential to provide aesthetic coherence to the book. Paratextual features such as endpapers, title page, layout and cover, provide expectations of the text which are significant in mediation between the text and the reader. Genette states, ‘More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold.’ It is a ‘zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction’. Paratexts may simply support the text but they may also confound interpretations, create or resolve ambiguity. An understanding of Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* is
inextricably linked to its paratext. The size and presentation of the book suggests an old family book, a scrapbook or a photograph album full of personal memories. The sense of age begins with the book’s cover which imitates an old bookbinding style of worn boards and cracked leather binding, a perception that is echoed throughout the book where metavisual devices make the pages appear ‘antiqued’, creased and suffering the effects of mould. The illustration on the front cover follows convention and includes the title and authors name and the illustration reveals a traveller dressed in a formal suit and hat and carrying a small, battered suitcase. The reality of this situation is immediately confounded by the other figure in this image, a small white creature that is both familiar as a friendly pet animal but strange in appearance. Before the reader can turn to the title page s/he is forced to linger on the endpapers. Endpapers, Sipe and McGuire suggest ‘mark a movement from the public space of the cover to the private world of the book’.

Tan’s use of identical front and back endpapers of sixty passport-like photographs of people from many countries, reminds the reader that the story of all migrants.

The next page, a half-title page, includes invented writing that is incomprehensible. The reader’s confidence is already challenged by needing to deal with the unfamiliar, only to be slightly restored by the recognition of minute fragments of immigration documents. The reader glimpses something of the nature of this story and is invited to empathise with the protagonist’s bewildering situation of being a newcomer in a strange world.

The paratext in The Invention of Hugo Cabret is also significant. The entire book is printed in black and white where all pages are black framed for both image and text, images and only the written pages use a white background. The only colour is to be found in vivid red endpapers. However, the most notable element of paratext is the spine and back of the dustcover which shows Hugo’s face. The spine reveals one eye and cheek suggesting mystery and secrets.

6. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show the possible multiplicity of elements and the complexity of an ‘ecosystem’ of visual/verbal texts that is challenging the definitions of existing genres.

The final word should rest with Matt Ottley, an award winning Australian author/illustrator, that it is important that there not be a lag between what creators of verbal/visual texts are doing and the reviewers and critics. The approach to the works needs to be evolving just as the works themselves are. He comments, ‘I’m reminded of the gypsy flamenco people I used to play music with who said that flamenco wasn’t truly flamenco if it wasn’t always evolving. There was no such thing as a rigidly defined tradition with them.”


Ibid


Lemke states, ‘Each different register, genre, or discourse formation is the product of some particular subcommunity going about its special business....What matters is knowing how to make meaning like the natives do’, p.6.

While the antecedents of the modern graphic novel date back to 1837 to the *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck*, the contemporary genre has emerged over the last forty years where its range of subjects has include superheroes, science fiction and fantasy and humour while Japanese manga has included romance and historical fiction.

The narrative of Paul Mutard’s adult graphic novel *The Sacrifice*, while using traditional sequenced comic format, is reminiscent of filmmaking while Nicki Greenberg’s *The Great Gatsby* uses fantastic animal figures to highlight the moral views conveyed through F.Scott Fitgerald’s novel. Here the emphasis is less on the action and more on highlighting the language of Fitzgerald’s novel.


16 A Spiegelman *Maus*, Penguin, London, 1987. This graphic novel uses anthropomorphized animals to explore notions of survival of the holocaust, thus pioneering the use of a ‘low’ genre to explore a serious theme and give the genre ‘respectability’.
18 M Satrapi *Persepolis*, Pantheon Books, 2003. Like *Maus* and *Palestine*, *Persepolis* offers a complex, global story, an allegory of the commonality of human beings as it narrates the events of Satrapi’s life during the war between Iran and Iraq.
19 While Tan’s text won the Children’s Book Council of Australia’s Picturebook of the Year Award in 2007, it has received international awards for a graphic novel, an art book, an illustrated narrative, a fantasy.
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25 Nikolajeva & Scott, op.cit. p.139
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http://www.shauntan.net/books/the-arrival.html.
33 Nikolajeva & Scott op.cit. p.140.
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38 Perhaps the endpapers act as stage curtains as Sipes suggests. While the two endpapers are identical, they serve different purposes: the front one pre-empts what the book is about, the migration of people from around the world, while the back endpapers remind us of what we have gained from the experience between the covers.
39 Lewis, op.cit.,p52
40 Email from Matt Ottley, 28 April, 2010.

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**Biography**

**Dr Bev Croker** is a lecturer at the University of New England, Australia where her main teaching interest is in children’s literature. Her current research explores the role of multimodal texts in education, with a particular focus on the changing nature of literary texts.