Picture Book Guy Looks at Comics: Structural Differences in Two Kinds of Visual Narrative

Perry Nodelman

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> But Aquaman, you cannot marry a woman without gills, you're from two different worlds.
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> —*The Simpsons*' Comic Book Guy

I am a picture book guy—the author of *Words about Pictures*, a theoretical text about how picture books for children communicate. It is with some embarrassment, then, that I admit to having trouble making sense of a related form of storytelling with pictures: comics. Approaching comics with the meaning-making strategies I have derived from my experience of picture books is something like lacking gills; I find myself confused about how to fit together the various kinds of verbal and visual information comics typically provide in order to grasp the stories they are trying to tell. With persistence, I can make sense of how comics construct stories; but the kinds of confusions I experience before I get there might be a useful source of information about how the formal qualities conventional in these two kinds of visual narrative, picture books and comics, differ.

When I speak of conventional formal qualities, I mean the most basic structural characteristics of these two different kinds of storytelling by means of words and pictures—the fact that comics tend to report what characters say in speech balloons, for instance, or that picture books tend to provide just one large picture for each page or spread as opposed to the many different panels usually in view on each spread of a comics story. I know that, as in Maurice Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen*, some picture books make use of speech balloons and other structural conventions more commonly found in comics. I know that comics do occasionally resort to pages consisting of just one large panel, and that they sometimes rely on other picture/text relationships more common in picture books. But that I can so easily identify the speech balloons as being comics-

Perry Nodelman is Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Winnipeg. The year 2013 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary, and twenty-fifth year in print, of his book *Words about Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books* (U of Georgia P).

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like visitors in picture books, and the single-panel pages as picture book-like visitors in comics, reveals their status as conventions of their specific form of graphic storytelling—and it is the basic conventions typically identifying a text as either a comic or picture book that I propose to focus on here.

While exploring those differences, I will offer examples of my generalizations about structural conventions from two texts with illustrations by the Canadian artist Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas: his own graphic novel, *Red* (2009), which he identifies as a "Haida manga," and Amanda Reid-Stevens's picture book, *The Canoe He Called Loo Taas* (2010). In *Red*, Yahgulanaas tells a story of the life of a Haida hero before European contact. *Loo Taas* is about a fifteen-meter war canoe carved by Bill Reid for Expo 86 in Vancouver, and now housed at the Haida Heritage Centre on Haida Gwaii (formerly the Queen Charlotte Islands), British Columbia. While the illustrations in the two books are similar in style, both being representational but simplified cartoons and both making reference to traditional Haida art, the books offer substantially different reading experiences. And while both exhibit significant divergence from the mainstream conventions of the kinds of books they represent—*Red* in its use of curvaceous frame borders that evoke Haida form-lines, *Loo Taas* in being a nonfictional but poetic celebration of a specific actual artifact—I believe that each nevertheless manifests the distinguishing structural characteristics of its type. Indeed, the distinctiveness of these books might be understood in terms of how each takes the inherent structural characteristics of its type, either comic or picture book, toward a logical extreme.

The most obvious way the two books differ from each other is what leads to my confusion as a picture book guy looking at comics. Put baldly: in terms of structure, comics are more complicated than picture books. This is not to say that some picture books are not structurally complicated or some comics structurally simple, or that some picture books do not have a more complex structure than some comics. But conventionally, as in *Loo Taas*, each spread of a picture book contains one or two images and one or two sections of text. Meanwhile, as in *Red*, the pages in comics characteristically contain both more separate images and more separate sections of text, and present them together in a series of separate but connected panels. Furthermore, those panels are inherently more difficult to interpret. The convention of picture books is that the pictures are separate from the words, as in *Loo Taas*, occupying a related but different space; when the words in some picture books do appear superimposed on pictures, they appear over areas that are freer of details or more muted in color, thus creating an emptier background for them that sets them off from the rest of the picture and makes them easier to read. In comics, however, words appear not only outside of and near pictures, but also within pictures, superimposed over images (often already busy ones), or in the speech balloons that interrupt the pictorial space depicted while implying that it continues on behind them. Yahgulanaas exaggerates this quality in *Red* by sometimes even placing words in the borders of the frames.

On most pages of comics, then, as in *Red*, there are more separate fragments of story in both words and pictures—more panels, more segments of text in balloons or boxes. That means there are more bits of information to put together. Comics, then, is a mosaic art, in which lots of separate little pieces that come together through their relationships to each other form a whole, but nevertheless remain apparent as still-separate pieces. While picture books also work by relating sections of text to specific images, they create a different dynamic by stripping that relationship down to the conventional one-image-plus-one-text accompanying it per page or two-page spread. In picture books, indeed, each set of image and text implies a relationship something like that between a painting on a gallery wall and the printed information posted near it about its name and its artist, or like that between an illustration in a magazine or newspaper and its accompanying caption or headline. As a series of such relationships, the sequence of pictures and texts that makes up a whole picture book seems more like a themed exhibition in a gallery than like the mosaic intricacy of comics.

In other words, picture books seem to represent most centrally and more clearly the conventions of illustration: pictures as ways of offering further insight into what texts are saying (and, of course, the opposite). Comics, which offer more complicated combinations of back-and-forth between text and picture, picture and picture, and text and text, on each page and spread as well as throughout a whole story, seem less centrally or purely illustrative. They offer a more complex relationship, one that seems to compromise or even thwart the basic principle of illustration by offering so many ways of thinking about what might be illustrating what. As on the busy pages of *Red*, there is more than one possible path to follow in attempting to connect the fragments of text with the pictures, and the panels with each other.

Let me try to find other words to describe this effect. A comics structure is excessively illustrative in such a variety of ways that it seems to transcend illustration and become something else: hyperillustration, perhaps, but a form of hyperillustration that seems to undermine the basic function of the illustrative relationship. This undermining has something to do with the ways comics not only imply sequential movement through their panels by readers/viewers who wish to understand a narrative but also other, nonsequential possibilities. As Douglas Wolk suggests in *Reading Comics*, "You look at one image, then you look at another, and you note what's changed between them.... That movement is strongly in one direction—the direction of the panel-to-panel flow—but it's not exclusively in one direction" (130). This quality makes comics unlike films, which, at least for those without access to the "pause" and scene selection features on VCR and DVD players, have been constructed to move only forward and at the mechanically controlled speed their producers intended. But in experiencing comics, a reader's use of time to organize the reading process is always discretionary: "You can linger over each panel; you can observe a tier or a page or a two-page spread as a composition and get a sense of the whole thing at once; you can look back at panels you've already read (you can scarcely

not do that, when you're observing what change has happened between panels) or turn the pages backwards at will" (Wolk 130–31).

Red is a particularly telling example of the range of possibilities open to comics, for it has been made available publicly not only in the form of a book but also as an artwork made up of its individual pages hanging together on the wall in a 2010 exhibit at the Vancouver Art Gallery (and visible in that form in an image printed at the end of the book, and again on the reverse side of the book's jacket). In that conformation, *Red* reveals a vast network of connections by showing all the individual panels at once, thus implying an openness to a variety of spatial relationships among them in addition to the one that most obviously (but still, to me, confusingly) implies a temporal connection between them. Thierry Groensteen identifies this openness to contextualizations apart from the most obvious sequential ones as a "general arthrology" (*System* 22) or overall system of connections: "[W]ithin the paged multiframe that constitutes a complete comic, every panel exists, potentially if not actually, in relation with all the others. This totality . . . responds to a model of organization that is not that of the strip nor that of the chain, but that of the *network*" (146). As a result, "The strip, the page, the double page, and the album are nested multiframes, systems of increasingly inclusive proliferation" (148).

It is possible, of course, to see picture books in that way, too: we can and do reread some or all of the pages, even while in the process of first reading the story they form part of. We can and do make nonchronological connections between the individual segments, remembering an earlier appearance of a visual object: as, for instance, when the inclusion of an old man wearing spectacles as one of the passengers on the completed canoe in *Loo Taas* reminds readers of his earlier appearance wielding a tool as one of its builders. But we make such connections in terms of the relative isolation of the pictures, each separated from the others by at least one turn of a page. The binary segments of visual and verbal information on each spread and the chronology of left-to-right movement, then, seem more characteristic of picture books than of the possibilities of a wider network of connections found in comics. In reading comics, though, the potential and actual relationships of the separate fragments to each other and to all the others—the general arthrology—seems more immediately important than the ways in which fragments of picture and text might happen to illustrate each other. There is something more actively energetic happening—the something that seems to transcend or even undercut illustration: for the proliferation of possible connections makes it unclear which fragments illustrate which others, or else the differing ways in which they do all illustrate one another can easily undercut each of the individual illustrative connections. The effect for me is less significantly a series of purely illustrative moments than an invitation to join in a pulsing and ever-shifting movement into and out of numerous possibilities of illustrative connections which both organize and complicate time.

As in *Red*, a typical comics page offers multiple images that depict a series of separate moments chosen out of the flow of time in order to represent its passing. As a result, as Scott McCloud suggests in *Understanding Comics*, as we view a page, "Both past and future are visible and all around us" (104). Art Spiegelman, author of *Maus*, echoes this description: "[Y]ou've got all these different chunks of time—each box being a different moment of time—and you see them all at once. As a result you're always, in comics, being made aware of different times inhabiting the same space" (qtd. in Silverblatt 135). Yahgulanaas describes the exaggerated complications of time caused by the oddly shaped panels in his own work in this way: "In Haida manga time/space is a twisting expanding and compressing flow that has no unnamed spaces" ("Once Upon a Time" n. pag.).

Red's "twisting" makes it a particularly intense example of proliferating energy—and thus an extreme version of comics' characteristic structure. Robert Haines, associate director of the Joe Shuster awards for Canadian comics, calls it "a challenging work, filled with non-uniform panel borders that slip and slide as characters interact with the borders, grabbing hold, laying down, leaning against; the pages dripping with little details that gave even this veteran comic reader some pause, occasionally missing the correct order" (n. pag.).

What Groensteen calls "proliferation" seems to account for my confusion as a newbie comics reader—and even Haines's confusion with *Red* as an experienced comics reader. Charles Hatfield, who says that "From a reader's point of view, comics would seem to be radically fragmented and unstable," goes on to argue "that this is their great strength: comic art is composed of several kinds of *tension*, in which various ways of reading—various interpretive options and potentialities—must be played against each other" (*Alternative* 36). In *Red*, Yahgulanaas takes full advantage of this instability, often switching between scenes involving different characters from page to page, sometimes doing so on the same page or two-page spread, and frequently offering different panels in different sizes that depict the same action from multiple points of view. In a sequence in which the hero Red thwarts a raider's attempt to capture him, for instance, only close inspection reveals that repeated figures of the raider's weapon connect the various separate images of him and eventually account for how he dies. Close-ups of Red's feet and hands are so extreme in these images that his entire position remains unclear until he falls; meanwhile, Yahgulanaas devotes increasing attention to the raider's hair clasp, which gradually grows from a few blurred impressionistic lines into what appears to be another fully realized character involved in the scene, thus making the actual physical relationship between the two real characters harder to decode. This sequence, then, offers what Hatfield identifies as an invitation to different sorts of reading. *Red* is a story of the Haida past—might the figure on the hair clasp represent some spiritual entity emerging?

One way or another, the extreme fragmentation and instability of the sequence seems revelatory of a deliberately unsettled world view inherently

full of new possibilities—and therefore, it seems, well suited for depiction in comic form, an exaggerated manifestation of that form's inherent uncertainty. Speaking of his interest in reimagining Haida tradition, Yahgulanaas describes his work in this way: "The comics form encourages me to extract meaning and form where I find it, in the indigenous and the settler cultures, and to flip them upside down, reverse them, recombine them, to allow new meaning to emerge in a renewed form" ("Notes on Haida Manga" n. pag.). A key aspect of his expression of this enlivening encounter between two cultures in *Red* is the use of Haida form-line as panel borders, their irregular shapes creating yet more proliferation of interpretive possibilities. As Yahgulanaas says,

> The eye and the mind pulls (sic) us from that page there, down this line here, swooping up over here, flipping back, bouncing up and down, and going wherever we will go. And when we read it like that, we can't read the book, we can't read the story as a book. So it's all about the context, and it's—when Europeans came to North America and saw indigenous societies, how could they possibly understand what the narrative was or how the structure worked, because they didn't have the map? (McCue n. pag.).

Red, then, uses the proliferating potentiality of the comics form for thematic purposes.

When all the pages of *Red* are seen at once (as they were displayed in the Vancouver Art Gallery), the form-lines create a row of three large shapes that look like traditional and safely symmetrical Haida totem figures superimposed over its lively sea of color. Yet when seen in isolation, viewed on separated pages as the asymmetrical frames for an assortment of oddly shaped panels, they appear chaotic. What creates a regular pattern as part of the whole image seems entirely irregular when seen only partially on each page of the book, thus reinforcing the impression of instability, uncertainty—the destabilizing of the traditional figures.

Loo Taas presents a much more stable, documentary-like view of Haida culture. The form-line shapes remain and still form the borders of the pictures much as they do in *Red*. But the pictures in *Loo Taas* are isolated from each other: just one per each spread, each one centered against a monochromatic field on one page or the other of its spread, so that the form-line-like shapes look more like conventional albeit somewhat oddly-shaped borders. Nor do they form part of any overall figure.

While the pictures within the borders in *Loo Taas* are similar in style to those in *Red*, the smaller number of them and the wider borders of monochromatic space that surround them make the pictures seem much less active than the ones in *Red*—more significantly illustrative than energetic. There are only nine pictures altogether, and someone who looked at them without reading the accompanying texts would have a hard time figuring out what series of events might connect them. In this different structural context, then, each of them seems less a partaker in an ongoing depiction of unsettled but connected

action—as are the many images of *Red*—than like a caricatured but nevertheless conventionally framed representational image of what the text describes, a depiction of time stopped just at the point which might best convey useful visual information in support of the meanings of the text it accompanies. Thus an image of two men working on the canoe with tools, in relation to a text that assures us that "[u]sing chisels, knives, and adzes / they built Loo Taas just right," seems most significantly to offer information about what the tools and their use might look like. Only the few pictures containing a clearly excited wide-eyed boy convey anything like the exuberance of *Red*—and even in those pictures, the exuberance is identified with and restricted to this one character and constrained by the overall effect of the heavily framed pages on which the pictures appear. The effect is, again, more illustrative than energetic—more like a museum display of the Haida past than an attempt to enter into and enliven it as Yahgulanaas says he hopes to do in *Red*.

Loo Taas is, admittedly, documentary in intention: an informational book. But the kind of viewing it invites seems to me characteristic of picture books more generally. Beginning with the kinds of books that introduce most children to the picture-book experience—word books and such—the most basic implied viewing of the pictures is an inspection of them in terms of seeking information that will help explain the accompanying text; they offer an opportunity for readers to find the objects in them that the texts name. In other words, once more, they illustrate—and no matter how complex their style or contents might become, they continue to serve that basic function. Indeed, as I argue in *Words about Pictures*, whatever else they do, complexities of style and content are always part of the semiotics of picture books, and have the central purpose of contributing further, more complex meanings to the narratives the pictures help convey.

As a result of their differing numbers of individual illustrations and sections of text, picture books and comics tend to have a different rhythm. The rhythm implied by the structure of picture books tends to be contrapuntal. As in musical counterpoint, built around two distinct streams of notes, there are two separate but interdependent streams of information. The pictures offer a different sort of information than the texts do, and pictures and words are distinct enough that each moves independently of the other; but as lines of musical counterpoint sound harmonious when played simultaneously, the words and pictures of a picture book intermesh to create a larger whole. As a result, when readers look at a picture in a picture book, they tend to expect a variation of it in the text, and vice versa—something that is different enough from it but related enough to it to help account for its significance. Having tried to puzzle out how, readers can then turn the page in expectation of a development that draws from, but also continues to build bilaterally upon, the information found previously in earlier words and pictures. As readers work to make sense of the information found on a picture book page, the words and pictures combine in ways that are supportive but also, inevitably, as I argue in

Words about Pictures, allow them to effectively undercut each other and create often rich but still contrapuntal meanings. Then, on each new page, the new words and new pictures separate out again, like two lines of a fugue. Readers can then once more work to perceive the relationships between the two lines, as well as the relationships between them and what came previously. There is an ongoing duality, an ongoing sense of two things in play in relationship to each other.

Comics seem much less insistently dual, and most usually suggest a much less contrapuntal rhythm. According to McCloud, "Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments" (67). And while "closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality," we can do so because each panel contains enough information to allow us to connect the figures in it to the figures in others—and specifically, therefore, contains elements repeated from earlier panels which can act as templates or schemata for what comes next. For that reason, Pierre Masson calls comics "the stuttering art" (qtd. in Groensteen, *System* 115): the repeated information and the new information establish a stuttering-like forward movement by means of partially repeating what is past in a process of recontextualizing the repeated visual details. As a result, comics offer more, and more specific, information about what is happening than pictures books do. But then, the more separate bits of information there are, the more complex is the act of putting them together, and the pleasure offered derives as much from the resulting ongoing and open-ended process of exploring ways of fitting the proliferating relationships between the puzzle pieces together, as it does from believing one has thought in an appropriately contrapuntal manner and solved the puzzle—as one might more easily do in response to a picture book like *Loo Taas*.

As I suggested at the outset, I could easily list large numbers of both picture books and comics that represent exceptions to the generic conventions I have explored here. But while it is tempting to focus on those interesting and often ingenious divergences, I find myself more interested in what they diverge *from*—that is, what is conventional enough to be unexceptional, and therefore to be taken for granted as obvious. Ideological theory tells us that what seems most obvious to us is what most influences us beyond our awareness of the influence—as Louis Althusser suggests, "It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are 'obviousnesses') obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot fail to recognize and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out (aloud or in the 'still, small voice of conscience'): 'That's obvious! That's right! That's true!'" (245). Surely, then, the structural conventions of these two forms of storytelling—so easy to take for granted as simply the ways things usually are—imply specific values, specific ideologies, and cultural assumptions that need further consideration.

For me, my own experience of doing this comparison revealed that need for further consideration in a dramatic way. It showed me aspects I had not understood, not only of comics, the form less familiar to me, but also of picture books, the form I thought I understood very well. As I began my work, I was pleased to learn that there was a sizeable discourse extant about how comics tell stories that could help me past my original feeling of disorientation; what the comics theorists I have quoted here had to say was new, intriguing, and very helpful to a picture book guy. Yet it will hardly surprise anyone who works in comics studies. What might be surprising is that performing the comparison and thinking abut how *Red* is different from *Loo Taas* in terms of how comics vary from pictures books actually did teach me new things about picture books.

Or, rather, the process caused me to understand old things in new and surprising ways. I knew that the connections between pictures and text in picture books is illustrative; understanding how less illustrative comics are pointed me toward a deeper awareness of the inherently didactic nature of the conventions of picture books—of how the insistence on illustration confirms an urge to explain things, to have the words account for and reveal the important meanings of the pictures and the pictures account for and reveal the basic significant thrust of the words. Indeed, it occurs to me that this illustrational dynamic, so central to the books young readers of children's literature start with, might well be even more central and conventional a feature than I had imagined of literature for young people generally. The characteristic didacticism of that literature not only reveals a central educational purpose for most such texts; it might also help account for some of its key structural features—its conventional structures as inherently and already didactic even before authors make specific didactic use of them, or, for that matter, even when authors choose not to use them for didactic purposes.

Among those basic structural features is the binarism that underlies the conventions of this sort of writing that I explore in my book *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*: the relationship of an implied adult narrator to an implied nonadult narratee; an accompanying and paradoxical sense of a double addressee, both an implied child reader and an implied adult reader who chooses or shares the texts with the implied child; a focus on binary opposites like child and adult, home and away, good and evil, in theme and structure. In confirmation of this characteristic "twoness," a surprisingly large number of recent novels for young people offer two alternating streams of narrative focused on two different characters involved in the same set of events in a way that causes their stories to act as illustrations of the relative truthfulness and limitations of their differing points of view—a version in exclusively verbal fiction of the illustrative dynamic of picture books. As a picture book guy, my new understanding of how picture books are not like comics has pointed me toward new ways of thinking about how children's literature generally is a lot like picture books.