

‘Arts of time and space’: The perspectives of a teenage audience on reading novels and graphic novels

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Summary

This paper explores the different claims teenagers make about their experience of reading novels and graphic novels using empirical data gathered through interviews and reading group discussions. Employing theories of reader response (Iser, Fish, Eco), multimodality (Kress and van Leeuwen), as well as theories of how comics work (McCloud, Groensteen), it argues that the students perceive differences in the areas of participation, imaginative engagement, control and temporality. Reading graphic novels, it concludes, offers these teenagers ‘choices’, not just in the reading process but in terms of the physical event of reading itself. These ‘choices’ offer potentials for reading which need to be explored further in educational contexts.

Keywords: Graphic novels; education; reader response; multimodality; teenage audience.

Introduction

The comics medium in the U.K. and U.S. has enjoyed growing popularity in the last twenty or thirty years. More strategic marketing and new terminology, such as ‘graphic novel’, as well as the activities of scholars and theorists (Barker 1984, 1989; Eisner 1985; Gravett 2004, 2005, 2006; Groensteen 2007; McCloud 1993; Sabin 1996; Versaci 2007; Wolk 2007) who have valorized comics as objects of study, have contributed to the beginnings of a shift from marginal to mainstream culture. There is now much greater accessibility to manga and graphic novels in high street bookshops and local libraries, as well as the option of buying books on line. Comics are no longer objects which young people have to seek out in newsagents and specialist comic stores – they have found their way into schools: school librarians display them, and some teachers encourage the reading of them in classrooms. As well as a growing awareness of the need to teach visual literacy skills, the increasing

inclusion of comics in school contexts is part of the current educational trend to embrace children's popular culture in an attempt to appeal to students' out of school interests in delivering the curriculum. (Brenner 2010; Bitz 2009; Marsh and Millard 2000; Gibson 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010; Bucky Carter 2007) Comics-making software (for example, Comics Life) can also be seen to address the need to allow pupils greater flexibility in the forms their own work can take. Comics are used in educational pamphlets to inform young people about road safety, teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease and bullying. Given the exposure today's teenagers can have to the comics medium, their own perspectives on reading these texts is an important and under researched area.

In this paper I discuss the claims teenagers make about the experience of reading graphic novels. I use primary data collected from a case study conducted in a secondary school in Edinburgh, Scotland with a small group of voluntary members of an extra-curricular Graphic Novel Reading Group. The Group was constituted of eight boys and two girls, all approximately sixteen years old; it took place once a fortnight during the lunch hour. Members of the Group took it in turns to suggest graphic novels to read and these were overwhelmingly what might be termed 'quality' examples of the genre. (Texts read included: *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, *Manga Hamlet*, *Fungus the Bogeyman*, *The Arrival*, *The Trial*, *Palestine*, *Maus*, *The Killing Joke*). The data is composed of semi-structured individual interviews with the members of the Group, as well as recordings of group discussions about the graphic novels read. I have written elsewhere about the complexities of employing what is still a marginal, often referred to as 'geeky', medium in schools (see Sabeti, 2011), as well as the way in which graphic novels may challenge the critical reading practices we implicitly employ and teach in schools (Sabeti, 2012). More recently I have considered the emerging literacy practices I observed in this Group as providing interesting potentials for pedagogy (Sabeti, forthcoming). However, here I wish to dwell on what the *students* claim to be unique about their experiences of the reading process itself. I focus, in particular, on the contrasts they articulated between reading 'ordinary' novels and graphic novels.

The idea that the comics medium has the potential to engage young people in reading, and that the reading of 'comics' will promote the reading of 'proper' books, has been in existence since *Classics Illustrated* first started publishing adaptations in the 1950s. The famous tagline, 'Now that you have read the *Classics Illustrated* edition, don't miss the added enjoyment of reading the original, obtainable at your school or public library', with all its suggestiveness of the comic as a dispensable tool, or route, to other more valuable forms of reading, is still present in some form today. We would only need to look at the burgeoning (and global) educational market for adaptations of classic literature to confirm this. It is because of this widely held assumption that the comics medium somehow supports the reading of 'weightier' texts that I was interested in the reading histories of the students I worked with. Invariably, I discovered that all these pupils were what we might term 'readers', not just of comic books, but of conventional novels. Their trajectories, in terms of which came first in their personal reading histories – the comic or the novel –

differed. Some had begun with children's novels and then discovered the joys of manga and Tintin. For others it was the other way round; however, what was consistent across the interviews was the fact that all of the pupils read novels, as well as graphic novels, for *pleasure*. That they discussed both children's literature (Harry Potter, the *Goosebumps* series) and literature oriented towards older readers (novels such as *The Road*, *The Castle*, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* were mentioned) suggested that their reading of novels had developed as they matured. For the boys in particular, the science fiction and fantasy genres were favourites and ones which they saw as connected to their admiration of graphic novels which also displayed 'the ability to more easily depict something that is obviously unrealistic', as one of them put it. While in some cases reading comics had *led* to reading novels, the students articulated this as part of a random pattern of discovery rather than a logical trajectory. In interviews they repeatedly contrasted novels with graphic novels, helping them to express what they thought of as two different types of reading, two 'different worlds'. It is this dichotomy which has prompted both the way the following discussion is structured and the theoretical framework I use to analyse the material itself.

Theories of Reading: reader response and multimodality

In order to contextualize and elucidate the students' comments on reading I employ two theoretical frameworks in this paper – reader response theory (Iser, 1980, 1989; Fish, 1980; Eco, 1984, 1994) and the social semiotic theory of multimodality (Kress, 2005; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). The decision to use these is guided by the distinction the students make in their experience of reading novels (verbal prose narratives) as compared to *graphic* novels (a combination of verbal and visual narratives). At a rudimentary level: reader response theory considers the role the 'reader' plays in the co-construction of meaning, particularly in relation to prose fiction; multimodality is relevant because an aspect of its theory considers the ways in which we interact with given 'texts' or 'message entities' which are increasingly making use of a variety of modes, including images. As attempts to demonstrate the agency (although the *kind* of agency discussed is very different) of the reader, they are helpful frames through which to view my material because multimodality takes into account the difference which images can make to the reading process. At points where I feel it is helpful in clarifying the comments students make about how graphic novels are operating, I also turn to the work of comics theorists – Scott McCloud and Thierry Groensteen.

Theories of reader response are based on the 'implied' (Iser), 'model' (Eco) or 'informed' (Fish) readers inherent in literary texts. For the purpose of the analysis which follows I wish to extract and briefly describe four important aspects of this theory which are of particular relevance to my data. Firstly, an important notion in these theories is that of a reader who *participates* in the production of a meaningful aesthetic experience from a text. A pleasurable reading experience is thus seen as one which involves 'the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself', it must be 'active and creative' (Iser, 1980: 51). This implies that there is mental 'work' to be done on the part of the reader who should not be a passive recipient but an active contributor. Secondly, stemming from

this is the idea, central to reader response theory, of a reader who fills in the 'gaps' or 'indeterminate sections' of a text with their interpretations and imagination (Iser, 1989: 9). It is these gaps which 'function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves' (Iser, 1989: 34). Thirdly, is the notion of 'control', and the degree of control, a reader might have. While there are differences of opinion over this, in general we could argue that in this theory, the reader has some degree of agency but this is, by Iser's own admission, 'controlled in some way by the text' (1989: 33). It then follows, as Eco explains, that different types of texts, both 'open' and 'closed' (sophisticated novels, train timetables) expect different kinds of cooperation from their readers. While these theories are not based on claims made by empirical readers, they do provide interesting ways of viewing these claims, particularly in opposition to statements about how different types of texts are experienced. Lastly, and perhaps most explicitly dealt with by Fish, is the inherent temporality of reading narrative and making sense of it. Reading flows *in time* and 'the reader responds in terms of that flow'; sentences are experiences, they 'do', rather than 'mean' things and readers speculate as to possible meanings at any given point in a narrative (Fish, 1980: 77, 86). Eco uses the metaphor of walking in a wood to discuss the same idea – that reading is an *activity* that takes place within the limits of *time* (1994:49). It is these four positions on participation, imagination, control and temporality, which I will return to later in the paper in the light of students' comments on reading novels and graphic novels.

The social semiotic theory of multimodality developed by Gunther Kress and others is a broad theory of communication which places the creation and interpretation of messages/signs within social and cultural contexts. It is based on the contention that communication of any kind is a multimodal event involving a variety of 'modes' such as writing, speech, still images, moving images, gesture, music, action, colour, and so on. So, for example, what we might call a conversation and think is a communication dependent on speech is actually a complex multimodal event constituted of speech, facial gesture, tone of voice etc. Different modes of representation have different 'affordances', that is 'distinct potentials and limitations for representation' (Kress, 2005: 13). Every act of communication – whether it is by an artist, teacher, public speaker, or participant in an everyday interaction – is an act of 'design'. The suggestion, therefore, is that we are all in possession of the agency to choose the form of representation that we wish our messages to take, or as Kress puts it, we can ask ourselves this question, 'In this social and cultural environment, with these demands for communication of these materials, for that audience, with these resources, and given these interests of mine, what is the design that best meets these requirements?' (2005: 20). The implications of this theory for activities such as teaching and learning are broad; what schools, curricula and teachers often do, of course, is remove this agency from students who are asked to represent their knowledge, what they have learned, in one particular mode – usually writing.

Much of this work is based on the idea that one of the most striking changes in the contemporary communication landscape has been the gradual replacement of writing with

the image as a primary mode of communication (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; Kress, 2005). It is the points made about the differences between these modes, both in terms of their 'affordances' and implications for knowledge representation *and* issues of how they are received which are important for a discussion about novels and graphic novels. Multimodal theory is not a theory of 'reading', however, there are some surprisingly close connections to reader response theory in terms of what it has to say about participation, control and temporality in the mode of writing. Verbal messages (both in writing and speech) follow the 'logic of time', whereas images follow 'the logic of space'. In contrasting a verbal text with a web site composed of both image and text, Kress argues that when readers depend on 'the revealing of elements one after the other to be able to make sense of the whole' as they do with verbal narratives which unfold in time, it is ultimately the author who has power (2005: 13). On the other hand, because images (and text/image combinations) are spatially organized, there is no 'clearly discernible reading path' (2005: 9) and the reader (or 'visitor' in the case of the web site) is free to choose their own entry point and construct their own path through the message. This kind of participation is a more liberating one which allows the recipient greater control of the reading process and releases them from the temporality imposed by the work's 'author'.

The Graphic Novel Reading Group

The students I interviewed enjoyed reading graphic novels but they were careful to identify these as additional, alternative kinds of reading experiences to novels and, consequently, an additional or alternative *pleasure*. For them, graphic novels were not substitutes, educational supports, instances of 'light' reading, but a voluntary leisure activity. Moreover, they identified with what they saw as the 'cult' of reading the comics medium, and their attendance at the Group was partly a desire to affiliate themselves with like-minded people, and partly a desire to find out more about the medium and genre. Despite many statements about incomparability and divergence, in interviews the students repeatedly compared their experiences of graphic novel reading with that of conventional novel reading. This comparison may have arisen from the 'quality' of the graphic novels we read together, but also from the knowledge that novel reading was 'real' reading, or reading that counted in schools (Moss, 2007: 50). The fact that the interviews took place within the school and that I was a teacher (of English) there at the time may have played a part in this. In drawing this comparison they articulated what they perceived to be some important differences in the *invisible* process of reading these two types of texts. As the initiator of, and participator in, the Graphic Novel Reading Group, I was also able to see the *visible* signs of the reading of graphic novels.

The Graphic Novel Reading Group was set up as an extra-curricular lunchtime activity in an independent secondary school in Edinburgh, Scotland. The students who attended it (approximately ten members) responded to a notice placed in the school bulletin and came on a voluntary basis. Most had a history of reading the comics medium and most, though not all, knew each other well socially. All were members of the same year group in the

school – fifth year, ranging from fifteen to sixteen years of age. The majority were boys and a large proportion of these students were academically successful, belonging to ‘top’ set classes in subjects such as Maths and English. It emerged in interview that all regarded themselves as marginal to mainstream school culture or ‘different’ (either because of social and economic background, lack of sporting prowess, racial identity, an identified learning difficulty, or in terms of their interests in comics, computer games, science fiction and other cultural artefacts one might associate with ‘geekiness’ – a term they employed occasionally). They all placed value on the existence of the Group and invested in it by attending regularly and participating fully in discussions.

The following data is arranged thematically according to the contrasts students signaled in interviews and the practices I observed and which I was able to compare to their claims about reading. In analyzing these claims I employ the theories (of reader response and multimodality) introduced earlier in this paper and attempt, where relevant, to explain them in terms of the categories I identified – those of participation, imagination, control and temporality. In doing so I hope to present a clear delineation of the differences inherent, for the students, in the process of reading these different texts. My material, I argue, both animates and illustrates the arguments put forward by these theories, but the perspective of the students also complicates and extends these. In the final section I consider some of the distinctions in reading which existed for the students but *do not* fall within the framework of these theories. I end by considering what the possible advantages of these differences might be within educational contexts. In the interests of anonymity, the names of all interviewees have been change.

‘You can’t really compare them because they’re quite different’ – What the students had to say

‘Words’ and ‘Pictures’

The most obvious difference between novels and graphic novels is that one medium contains images and the other does not. Rather than stopping here, however, the students used this distinction as a springboard for making a variety of comments about what it felt like to read them. For many it sparked a discussion about both the reader’s participation *and* the connection with imagination. Fergus, for example, described it this way:

With novels you’ve got your words on the paper and you imagine it, but with graphic novels you’ve got the pictures there as well. You can either build on that in your head or you can just keep it to that and sort of, spend as much time as you like on that, just looking at that and the words that go with it. Or alternatively, the no words that you get sometimes.

Su put it this way:

When you're reading a book you form the picture in your mind whereas when you're reading a graphic novel the pictures are already there. It's a different way of reading things because it's not like 'he said' or 'she said', or 'he walked into a room and picked up a cup'. It's there in the picture.

Both students suggest that there is a kind of creative work ('you imagine it'; 'you form the picture in your mind') which novels require from their readers that graphic novels do not force. Yet, they are both careful – as all the students were – to avoid making distinctions which implied that one kind of reading was 'easier' on the mind. Su continued:

[If a graphic novel is]...laid out unconventionally, it takes quite a while to figure out what everything's doing. And also, if in an image, they have subtle things that are part of the story, then you sort of have to look out for those. In a book that doesn't really happen.

Students spoke about conventional novel reading in ways which correlate with Iser's theory of 'indeterminacy' and reader response. For Iser, 'The shifting blank' of the text,

is responsible for a sequence of colliding images, which condition each other in the time flow of reading. The discarded image imprints itself on its successor, even though the latter is meant to resolve the deficiencies of the former. In this respect the images hang together in a sequence, and it is by this sequence that the meaning of the text comes alive in the reader's imagination. (1989: 40-1)

Based on these comments, it might be possible to argue that because in graphic novels you – as Su put it later in the interview, 'know more than in a book' – there is potentially less gap filling to do. The imaginative work of image building and picturing has already been accomplished by somebody else's imagination. It would be difficult to see it differently than it is. However, as Su and Fergus both suggest there are other *kinds* of work to be done – whether this is looking for details and subtleties in the images, or 'building further' on what you have in front of you. In this sense, the *location* of the engagement, participation, imaginative work can be seen to differ. Scott McCloud famously located the equivalent gaps of comics in the process he called 'closure', that is, the 'phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole' (1993: 63). While visual representations, however abstract or lacking in detail, always demand some kind of completion from a collaborative viewer, the 'gutters' that constitute a comic are a vital component determining the reader's participation in the medium. It is here, McCloud writes, 'in the limbo of the gutter [that] human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea' (1993: 66). Thierry Groensteen's theory of the complex 'system' on which comics are based

also suggests the complexities inherent in reading them. Indeed, he draws a comparison between how comics work and how literary texts work by referencing Iser's theory of reader response, concluding that the art of comics may reside in the 'discovery of the ultimate limit that the reader is susceptible of achieving in their capacity to produce inferences' (2007: 116). While there is work to be done (and sometimes - by their own admission - quite a lot of it) the students located this, not in the verbal narrative, but in the visual one. This was sometimes work to be done on a fixed image (what Groensteen calls the 'spatio-topia'); sometimes it involved getting to grips with the interrelationship of images and panels (in Groensteen's terminology, 'arthrology'). The students would agree, in other words, with McCloud's argument that 'No other artform gives so much to its audience while asking so much *from* them as well.' (1993: 92).

Arts of time, arts of space

The idea that images work on the 'logic of space' while verbal narratives operate according to the 'logic of time' (Kress, 2005: 14) is not a new one. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's essay 'Laocoon' made this distinction in 1766 when he argued that poetry was an art of time, while painting was an art of space (1984: 91) The temporality of the reading process was referred to often in interviews and linked, as it is in Fergus's first comment above, to the fact that there are images present – you can 'spend as much time as you like on that'. Students seemed to be acutely aware of the fact that images slow down the reading process and offer the reader the possibility of lingering on particular pages. Speaking of reading Shaun Tan's wordless portrayal of the immigrant experience, *The Arrival*, Adam explained:

you can turn the pages, you can read it and then you can notice things, you can think about what it is actually meaning and you can take your time to think, 'Why is it that the town is being covered by those gigantic tentacle things?' or something like that.

This was a direct contrast to their experience of novel reading, and as Scott pointed out, cinema. Discussing the masked character of Rorschach in the graphic novel *Watchmen*, he said:

Well, generally with graphic novels and comic books you can look at an image more and they can hide things in the image more; in films, it's one blink and you've missed it, but in this one you can see it, and concentrate on it, and like with the Rorschach face you can notice it properly and sort of try and work out what it is – sort of look back over it again...But with a book you're reading it at a certain pace generally.

Again, the emphasis is on the possibilities inherent in static image contemplation, both for the artist who can 'hide things' and for the reader who can 'work out' or 'look back'. As

Kress and van Leeuwen point out, 'In the design of such texts there will be pressure to put more of the meaning in the individual elements of the composition, to use more highly coded images' (1996: 208). In other words, this is not just a 'logic' but, as Lessing points out, an 'art'. Verbal narrative, by contrast, is an 'art of time' in that it depends on the flow of time for its effects. Stanley Fish makes this point clear in his arguments about how meaning is constructed through an 'event', what sentences *do* in time, rather than what they mean out of time.

What I am suggesting is that there is no direct relationship between the meaning of sentence (paragraph, novel, poem) and what its words mean. Or, to put the matter less provocatively, the information an utterance gives, its message, is a constituent of, but certainly not to be identified with, its meaning. It is the experience of an utterance – *all* of it and not anything that could be said about it, including anything I could say – that *is* its meaning (1980: 77-8).

In order for that experience to occur, time has to pass and the 'reader responds in terms of that flow' (1980: 74). What the students are describing, on the other hand, is an 'art of space', dependent on the relations of objects in space and in this sense their claims are in line with Groensteen's argument that 'the relational play of a plurality of interdependent images...[is] the unique ontological foundation of comics' (207: 17). While the students' focus on the images and timing is part of the contrast they make with novel reading where there are no images, their preoccupation with these may also affirm Groensteen's contention that comics are ultimately stories told through the complex interplay of images, rather than words (2007: 6).

To complicate matters, students also made a contradictory claim: that the comics medium was actually quicker to read. Speaking of manga, Andrew said:

It's faster...I just read them when I can and I'm quite likely to just sit down and read them in one go.

Su agreed with this:

Graphic novels and manga don't take very long to read – well, for me, they don't take very long to read...whereas novels take a bit longer so I get more involved.

When I asked them to identify the reason for this speediness, they located it (as Andrew does here) in the fact that:

It focuses more on pictures than actual dialogue.

Groensteen argues that the speech balloons in which this dialogue is contained create a 'network' which not only 'regulate[s] the management of space' but 'contribute[s] in a determining fashion to directing the gaze of the reader' (2007: 67). He goes on,

[The] balloon is perhaps the only element of the paginal apparatus on which the gaze definitely stops (except when leafing through the comic without reading it). It is a point of anchorage, an obligatory passage. Because of this the reading can be directed to a certain degree, driven by the network that connects the occupied positions of the successive balloons across the page...To insert a written enunciation...into a panel allows the author to retain the reader's attention for an instant within a frame that, without it, would expose itself to the risk of simply being ignored or skimmed over. (2007: 80-1)

It follows then that a graphic novel with fewer words would be a 'quicker' read. Scott, speaking of why he preferred reading graphic novels, said that novels he had tried to read 'felt a bit slow'. He had turned to a graphic novel adaptation of Franz Kafka's *The Trial* – a text he chose for the Reading Group – on the grounds that, 'It was visual, it felt shorter.' He is careful to personalize these comments by using the qualifying word 'felt'. A graphic novel adaptation of a novel will be objectively shorter in terms of word length but it might not necessarily take *less time* to 'read' and the pupils are aware of this subtle difference. For Adam graphic novels had a momentum that novels did not and the way in which he phrases his comment suggests that he is swept away, that he, in fact, *loses* control of the reading process. He had recently read Ian Rankin's *Dark Entries* and he said this:

I read it all in one go because I couldn't stop myself from reading it. There are no obvious stopping places in graphic novels, whereas in books, you read a couple of chapters and then you go and do something else.

However, as we noted earlier, it is also Adam who enjoys the 'thinking' time graphic novels give. Ironically, it is *The Arrival* – a graphic novel devoid of words altogether – which he lingers on the most, a point I will return to later in the paper.

Immersion and Anchoring

The contradictions in these notions of time – the slowness and speed of the reading process – were also connected to contradictions in their claims about immersion. For some, like Andrew, novels were preferable: 'they're longer and you get more absorbed in them'; for others, like Adam, graphic novels provided 'a bigger scope for thinking'. Su was not sure which was more immersive:

It's like a different world from reading a book. In some ways you are more involved because you're looking at the pictures and in other ways it's not as involved because the story's not as full on as with a novel.

A pattern which emerged in these distinctions was that graphic novels provided a greater sense of immediacy. With books, Scott explained:

You can feel immersed but you don't feel as if you're actually there. With a graphic novel you're in the room, you can see the room around you.

In terms of the idea of 'participation' then, we might say that students felt that novels involved them in constructing worlds, whereas graphic novels involved them more immediately/quickly in a (partially – because comics have gaps too) visually constructed world. While the students are not in 'control' of what that world looks like in the case of a graphic novel, they do feel themselves more in control of the reading process. For many, the visual element was what helped to anchor them, as well as situate them imaginatively, within the graphic novel. Adam said:

I'm always a bit unclear when I'm reading a novel ... I can lose ... you have to sort of maintain a constant train of thought, imagining the situation and what's happening. Yeah. In a graphic novel you can walk away and come back and the picture will still be there.

The fact that this world does not disintegrate and disappear as soon as Adam stops reading, only to be reconstructed when he does, is a strength of graphic novels for him. Both Robert and Scott expressed a similar sense of being anchored by the images in a graphic novel, a feeling they did not have when reading verbal narratives. For Robert the visual element 'gives you more understanding'. Scott put it this way:

Visual symbolism is always much easier for me. Although some ideas can be more simple if just written down [than represented visually]. Visual things have visual contexts, look like other things.

Novels on the other hand depend for their effects on:

[w]hat the prose is about or if it clicks, how to see the images or what mind set to be in when reading it.

Some of the contradictions in the students' articulation of experiences of temporality, involvement, and control are connected to the intrinsic notion of *choice* offered by this reading experience – one they don't feel they have with novels. In the last section of

analysis I will look at this idea in more detail. In doing so, I hope to bring together some of the connections implied in preceding arguments.

Choices

As Kress and van Leeuwen's theory of visual design argues, the reading of images does not operate on a 'left to right, and from top to bottom, line by line' basis (1996: 204) but offers a variety of reading paths. Comics, given their traditional tendency to sequential narrative, would appear to demand a linear reading path, however, they *offer the choice of others*. Closely connected to the combination of 'pictures and words' the students referred often to the notion of 'choice', an idea embedded (as you can see from Fergus's first cited comments) in much of what they had to say about reading graphic novels. For many of them, not only did graphic novels offer 'multiple entry-points', they did not have to be read chronologically in order to be enjoyed. Indeed my observations of their actual reading practice in the Group is analogous to Kress and van Leeuwen's description of magazine reading where a reader 'may flick through the magazine, stopping every now and again to look at a picture or read a headline, and perhaps later returning to some of the articles which drew their attention' (1996: 204). This was particularly clear in a session where we were reading two texts - Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* and the first instalment of the manga *Mushishi* by Yuki Urushibara. On this occasion two pupils arrived without having read one of the texts: Adam had not seen *The Arrival* before the session; Jamie had not read *Mushishi*. For both, 'reading' was a possibility under the conditions of the session itself so while I carried on a discussion about the texts with those who had read them, these two students read the texts for the first time.

Adam: Oh my ... [flicking through the book]
Scott: It's like the first one.
Adam: Yeah.

During this Andrew, Fergus and I are carrying on a conversation about the translator's decision to retain Japanese honorific titles in *Mushishi* in order to make it more authentic.

Adam: What's happening now? He's switching...Oh he's telling the story.

Meanwhile, Jamie is sitting there quietly reading *Mushishi*.

SS: *I thought he was quite cool, the Mushi. He always had a cigarette hanging out of his mouth.*
Fergus: You shouldn't be encouraging that.
SS: *I was a bit shocked to find out he only had one eye.*
Robert: Yeah.
Jamie: [looking up] What?

Robert: Yeah, he only has one eye. I quite liked it.
Adam: It's the fruit now... [...]
Adam: They've arrived home. Is that, wait. Is that? Oh, no, no, no. A reflection of the first image? [He flicks back through the book]. Yes. Or is it? [He flicks forwards]. Yes!

Later,

Adam: I think my favourite bit of it is when you see a plant growing –
SS: *On the window?*
Adam: Yeah, and then it turns to winter and you see...
SS: *Is that the one where you read across the two pages? I think he's really clever, the way he plays with the order of his narrative.*
Adam: The flower growing is quite late on.[He tells me as I look for it]. That's it.
Robert: No you missed it. It's a page back.
Adam: Also, I noticed he reflects...one of the pages here reflects the very first page. You know how the very first page has nine panels about what his life was like?
SS: *Yeah.*
Adam: That's copied in his new lifestyle. I'll find the one that's the same as the one before.
Scott: As the one in the beginning?
Adam: Yeah, that's the one.
Fergus: Can we see?
[Adam passes the book over and Fergus and Robert look at it.]

Apart from one brief interjection, Jamie withdrew from the conversation, although he still occupied his usual seat at the table. Adam's reactions to his reading, on the other hand, were incorporated into the discussion. He did not read this text chronologically, instead he flicked back and forth picking out parts that interested him. Not only is it clear from his comments that he understood much of the subject, but he is also appreciating Tan's skill *and* deriving pleasure from his experience of reading it ('Oh my'; 'I think my favourite bit of it is...'). Perhaps because *The Arrival* is constituted solely of images, it offers its readers a choice of reading paths, plausible readings and the ultimate decision in terms of how to traverse the textual space (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996: 208). However, I also observed students reading *V for Vendetta* (a text with a relatively complex verbal narrative) in non-chronological order. Indeed, at one point in that discussion Andrew announced that 'Reading backwards was more fun.' Of course, in some of these cases students were *re-*reading the texts but the fact that Adam read it for the first time like this supports their

claims about the choices inherent in the reading process. For them there is a greater degree of *control* over the reading of a graphic novel and the reader is free to choose a route which follows the contours of their personal interest. While many, as we have seen, acknowledged the reader's participation in constructing meaning from a novel, some also figured the novel reader, like the cinema audience, as less active than the graphic novel reader. Comparing reading a graphic novel to watching a film, Scott said:

You feel more involved generally because you're actually physically turning the page or doing something as opposed to just sitting there staring at a screen.

The text of a novel is ordered by the author and occurs in the 'fixed order of syntax, line, page, text' whereas images tend to 'occur in an open order fixed by the reader and/or viewer's interest' (Kress, 2005:16). As Heath and Bhagat have noted, an individual viewer has the 'capacity to edit, structure, feature, ignore, classify, scan, or interpret visual information; they can either take in, reject, or reshape visual information through experiential, attitudinal and situational stimuli' (1997: 590). Again, the fact that the majority of graphic novels read also contained verbal narratives did not constrain this element of choice; indeed, the double narrative perhaps added to this by creating a multiple layer of possible routes they could take back and forth through the graphic novel.

Furthermore, as the excerpt from the discussion shows, these choices have broader implications than those which constitute the internalized reading process. In interview, Fergus told me:

I think graphic novels are easier to read sometimes than novels because with novels you sit down and it's 'Shhh, everyone be quiet while I read this.' While you can look at graphic novels a bit more casually and like, talk to friends as well. But then again, if you want to read it in bed, you can. So it's a wider thing, I think, because you can do it where you want, and whenever you want and with whomever you want. But with novels I find you just have to stop what you're doing: 'I'm reading this. Leave me alone.'

The description above suggests a reading experience that is liberating and a kind of text that is enabling. This is not liberation in the form of 'escapism' often associated with the popular reading experience of the novel (Radway, 1991) but in terms of the social and practical restrictions of time, place and space. There appear to be, for this teenager at least, more choices surrounding the *event* of reading a graphic novel. Rather than providing a springboard for you to escape your day-to-day reality, he suggests that you are able to engage in that reality at the same time as you read a graphic novel: unlike reading a conventional novel, you do not 'have to stop what you are doing'. Iser argues that prose fiction allows the reader to:

Step out of his own world and enter another, where he can experience extremes of pleasure and pain without being involved in any consequences whatsoever. It is this lack of consequence that enables him to experience things that would otherwise be inaccessible owing to the pressing demands of everyday reality (1989: 29).

What the pupils repeatedly claimed, and demonstrated in Group sessions, was that with a graphic novel you did not have to ‘step out of... [your] own world’ in order to enter another. You could continue – if you chose to, or the situation demanded it – to interact with that world at the same time as you entered the fantastical environment of Shaun Tan’s immigrant, or the bleak London of Alan Moore and David Lloyd’s *V*. When Fergus says that graphic novels are ‘easier’ to read, what he means is not that they are intrinsically less demanding or ‘easier’ to understand, he simply means that for practical reasons it is easier to get them read. You can read them in conventional ways (on your own, silently, in bed) – ways we normally associate with the novel; or, you can read them in busier, noisier, contexts as we saw in the reading group session. These issues of context are important, not just to teenager’s lives, but also to any consideration of using graphic novels within educational institutions. What the theories discussed in this paper do not do, is take into account the *physical event* of reading itself.

In his history of reading Manguel traces the shift from reading aloud when reading was a form of thinking and speaking (1997: 47) to the modern phenomena of silent reading where the reader ‘had time to consider and reconsider the precious words whose sounds could echo just as well within as without’. The text itself, he goes on, ‘protected from outsiders by its covers, became the reader’s own possession, the reader’s intimate knowledge’ (1997: 51). What the pupils describe here, and what I observed, offers both kinds of reading event. The value many of the students placed on reading graphic novels was partly hinged on the fact that it could involve talk.

Fergus: I think graphic novels are more ‘social’ – that’s a good way of putting it.

SS: *What makes them more social?*

Fergus: I don’t know...it’ll have something to do with the fact that there are pictures but I don’t know.

What Fergus is trying to articulate is that this reading process is one which has the potential to be *shared* with others and part of this sharing process is the production of talk around the text. This talk is easier to stimulate because of the presence of images which are objects simultaneously perceived by more than one person. Scott McCloud makes a distinction between words as ‘received’ information and images as ‘perceived’ information. With images, in a sense, we are further down the processing road; there is no necessity to

construct pictures in your head - pictures which will inevitably be deeply personal ones. In the reading and discussion of a novel, words go in, pictures are formed, words come out but the individuals who utter these words do not have access to the pictures created in the minds of the other participants in the dialogue. The fact that images can be perceived simultaneously by a number of individuals (their size and position will, of course, play a part) also means that interpretative acts can occur collaboratively (see Sabeti, 2012). The gap filling Iser speaks about, in other words, does not have to be an internal process restricted to one reader; it can be exteriorized, 'social' and completed in conjunction with others. Instead of the 'intimate' and 'precious' experience Manguel describes as constitutive of silent reading, this kind of reading can be seen as unrarified, more in tune with students' everyday practices. Alongside this I also noticed a de-sanctifying of the artefact of reading – the graphic novel. The idea of personally possessing a copy was not one which mattered to the students; indeed, the copies of graphic novels were borrowed, shared, creased, dog-eared and transferred from one set of hands to others constantly even within sessions themselves.

The sections I've outlined above attempt, for the sake of argument, to separate and clarify points which are actually interdependent. How immersed the students feel will depend on the imaginative work they feel they are doing, or the time they take to read. The time they spend lingering on an image will depend on the image, their personal interests, and the conditions under which they are reading. The issue of temporality is linked to the idea of control, control to participation, participation to imagination, and so on. In finally resting on the notion of 'choice' I have tried to bring these things together as a way of theorizing the differences inherent for the students in the reading process of novels and graphic novels. What quality graphic novels allow students to do is to choose how, when, where and with whom, they engage with them. From an educational perspective, the reading of graphic novels appears to challenge traditional ideas about concentration, the focus on a single task, and the notion of individual critical thinking. The opportunities offered to linger on images, to share thoughts about simultaneously perceived objects, and to engage with graphic novels in states of seeming distraction all pose distinct possibilities for pedagogy. The fact that the practice of reading graphic novels, as these students articulated it, seems somehow more in tune with their busy teenage lives than novel reading, should surely be of significance to educators. Such 'educational' potentials need to be explored further.

Conclusion – the case of adaptation

I began this paper by noting the prevalence of comic book adaptations of classic literary texts specifically marketed for educational uses. While the number of schools teaching graphic novels to younger children is on the rise, we are still a long way from acknowledging their educational value by placing them on lists of set texts for examinations. They are, however, seen to be of educational use in *supporting* the teaching of these texts. Consequently, comic book adaptations of plays (in particular, those of Shakespeare) and

novels widely taught in secondary schools in the U.K. and U.S. are widely available. During the course of the Graphic Novel Reading Group we discussed two adaptations – one of these was *Manga Hamlet*, the other was an adaptation of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. I want to conclude my discussion of the contrasts students articulated between novel and graphic novel reading by considering their reactions to the latter text. The adaptation can be viewed as a way of integrating and exploiting some of the advantages of the comics medium (discussed in this paper) in teaching more conventional curricular content. However, in the context of this project it was the two adaptations that evoked the most strongly worded comments on any of the texts we read. In the session when we were discussing the manga *Mushishi*, this exchange took place:

- Robert: Is this the first manga you've read other than *Gon* and *Hamlet*?
Andrew: *Hamlet* was not manga.
Fergus: *Hamlet* was crap.

The discussion on *The Trial* opened in this way:

- Robert: I hated it.
SS: *Why did you hate it?*
Robert: Well, it's nonsensical. I like things that actually make sense when I'm reading them. This was just random pages. I mean, that stupid little skeleton that appears...what's the point of it?

I am not necessarily suggesting that this hostility was a result of the fact that these were 'bad' adaptations of classic texts. Indeed, any judgments on the quality of the adaptation itself would be irrelevant as the majority of these students were unfamiliar with the source text of both of these. It was Scott who recommended that we read *The Trial* and he was the only one of the students who had tried to read the novel itself. It was because he had struggled to do so that he had turned to the graphic novel adaptation. He was then, to borrow a phrase from adaptation studies, the only student to 'experience the adaptation as adaptation' (Hutcheon, 2006: 126). There is, however, another layer of experience at work here. The judgments the students are making are based on their respective knowledges of manga and graphic novels rather than the original texts. They are, I am arguing, experiencing them as adaptations, but as adaptations of manga and graphic novel, not of Shakespeare and Kafka. It is in this respect, that for some of them, the texts fail. The recurring image of a skeleton illustrates this point nicely. It was not only Robert who did not understand its significance:

- Andrew: I didn't understand the skeleton or any of the visual things that they used. I think it was well drawn.
Robert: Yes, I'll admit it was well drawn. I just couldn't stand it.

Neither Robert nor Andrew could decode the symbolism of the skeleton, regarding it as an irritating affectation on the part of the artist. However, they were both willing to concede that there was some artistic value in this graphic novel – ‘it was well drawn’. In order to appreciate the visual symbolism they needed a little prompting from Scott who pointed to the recurrence of other images such as clocks, knives and birthday candles. This exchange then followed:

- Andrew: Unless the whole bureaucratic thing is a metaphor for life which we are all trapped in until death? The constant skeletons make sense if it’s all about the fear of death.
- Robert: Yeah.
- Scott: Knowing Kafka, it’s probably some metaphor about the bourgeoisie and the working class. The judge and jury are the bourgeoisie telling people to work. Why? Just work. We told you to. It’s like the trial. Just stay in it because we told you to.

In this case it took somebody who ‘knew’ Kafka to nudge the others into an understanding of the themes of the graphic novel. In some ways I found this surprising because of the iconic universality of a skeleton as representative of death. However, these students found it difficult to comprehend the abstract ideas of bureaucracy, entrapment, helplessness and hopelessness through the images alone. When discussing *The Trial* with me in interview, Scott pointed out several things that helped him to understand and appreciate the novel through the resources deployed in the graphic novel adaptation. He noted that ‘the main character...looked like Kafka quite a lot’; he appreciated the inclusion of images of laughing spectators of Josef K’s fate – ‘when they’re looking at the character, they seem to be looking at you’. These conscious decisions on the part of the artist helped Scott to understand and empathize with the character and to see his fate as a universal one – he (the reader), Kafka (the author), Josef K (the character) all occupied the same position. This was something achieved through clever play with visual images. When I asked him if he thought the ideas he had grasped through the graphic novel could then be transferred to the texts he might encounter in the English classroom, he said:

Only the macro-analysis, I think, the idea of the bigger picture which is the same for everything really. You get the idea of the bigger picture with graphic novels more easily. It’s literally pointed out to you and shown to you.

For example, it is possible to *show* that there is a difference between what a character says and thinks (by using divergent speech and thought bubbles). This might not be so clearly grasped from reading a novel and the students appreciated this laying out of knowledge in visual terms. While graphic novels can re-present the thematic content of a novel, Scott

seems to be suggesting that because novels and graphic novels rely on different operating systems, it is more difficult to do this with the details - these are more dependent on the medium.

Given the arguments I have put forward here about the relative freedoms and choices – participation, control, temporality – students experience in reading graphic novels, I was perplexed by some of their reactions to these adaptations. It is clear from Robert's comments on *The Trial* that he felt alienated by it and was unable to participate in constructing meaning from it. It was not working *as a graphic novel* for him, despite the intricate network of recurring images, complex interplays of resemblance and gaze, admirable art work, and so on. He did not feel he had the choices which so many of them claimed were what made reading graphic novels so pleasurable. I want to end by suggesting a reason for this. While Robert was unfamiliar with the source text, he was aware of its existence behind this adaptation. He came to the adaptation knowing it was 'Kafka', though he did not 'know' Kafka or *The Trial*. It is because of this that his own agency as a reader appeared to be lost. The control of meaning-making and temporality resided with the source text, and not with him. It had to 'mean' something, something profound – it was Kafka – but exactly what this was, eluded him. The fact that he was able to separate the artwork (and artist) to concede that it was 'well drawn' further supports the idea that the agency of the original source was an invisible entity operating behind his experience of the text. He did not regard this as an original work, newly made and readable in the same way as the other graphic novels he had encountered. Instead, this was an artist's representation of Kafka's novel and still under the author's control in the way novels might be. He did not, of course, *choose* to read this graphic novel himself (it was Scott's choice) but despite the fact that he was not being *made to read it* (this was a voluntary club, not an English lesson) his reactions suggest that he was being forced to make sense of it and failing to do so. What the data from the group session shows is that, in this case, he was able to regain a sense of agency through collaborative reading and discussion with his fellow students. However, the reactions of the pupils suggest that adaptations will need to be handled carefully in classrooms. Given the potentials of graphic novels, the choices they offer students as readers, and their intrinsic *adaptability* to different reading contexts, it is ironic that it is the *adaptation* – the type of graphic novel most used in educational contexts – that can inadvertently reverse this potential.

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