

Muted Sequential Art: A Cross-Cultural Discourse

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When speaking about discourse we tend to think about words. Here I propose that a cross cultural discourse doesn't necessarily involve words, taking as an example Sequential Art. Comics in their modern sense are born as commercial objects and developed as a full narrative language and art, erasing borders to speak worldwide. How did they do it? They stopped talking. In this article we will be analyzing the millennial history and future potential of wordless sequential art, seeing it as a powerful tool for an inclusive and global communication. Our case study will be Shaun Tan's "The Arrival", a sublime wordless comic book about migration, belonging, war and hope. In depicting the travel and the struggles of a man leaving his country for a better future, the author creates a condition of equal foreignness through shapes, creatures and language, ultimately creating through silence and unreadable words an universally understandable discourse.

Keywords: cross-cultural, wordless, sequential art, discourse, asemic writing

1. Introduction

Can muted sequential art be a cross-cultural communication tool? This paper aims to explore the potential of wordless sequential art as a cross-cultural and inclusive discourse. It does so by questioning the fundamental nature of Sequential Art and by testing its emergent limits of readability and comprehension. The study will commence with a general overview of historical and cross-cultural examples of sequential art, elucidating its inherent link with comic art.

Subsequently, the paper will introduce the case study of Shaun Tan's "The Arrival". A primary interest of this study lies in dissecting the author's refined visual language and understanding the core mechanisms underpinning its communicative efficacy. In this context, particular attention will be given to deepening the threshold of signification related to asemic writing and the absence of conventional text, in an attempt to state if written word is necessary or not to an efficient narrative transmission.

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1.1. Sequential art and History

The American cartoonist Will Eisner first coined the term *Sequential Art* in his book, "Comics and Sequential Art": "*Sequential art is the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or to dramatize an idea.*" (Eisner 1985, 5)

With this definition, Eisner posits that Sequential Art must necessarily involve pictures, a story, and words. However, this raises the question of whether this inclusion of words is indeed a requisite. Eisner crafted this description to fit the comics of his era, potentially overlooking broader expressive capabilities. Indeed, the necessity of words in Sequential Art has already been critiqued by Scott McCloud, a prominent comics theorist, in his book "Understanding Comics":

"Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer."
(McCloud 1993, 20)

Through this definition, McCloud (McCloud1993) asserts that words are not essential for the transmission of this pictorial discourse, a property that has rendered sequential art a valuable tool for mass and cross-cultural communication.

1.2. Framing Sequential art

Consistent with the analyzed perspectives, I suggest that sequential art can be conceptualized not merely as synonymous with comics, but rather as a macro-category, of which comics represent only a component. Beyond the aforementioned key texts, an excellent perspective is offered by Thierry Groensteen in "The System of Comics" (Groensteen 2007). Groensteen immediately frames comics narration as an autonomous system of signification rather than a language, thereby establishing its grammatical and semantic independence from the written word. If this establishes that comics are fundamentally a structured system of signs capable of coherently generating and interpreting messages, its characteristics can then be extended to other forms of sequential art. Groensteen himself identifies *Iconic Solidarity* as the driving force behind the comics system's operation: it is the relationship connecting each panel to the preceding and succeeding ones, a network of associative links that effectively constitutes sequentiality and confers meaning.

One might also cite "Unflattening" (Sousanis 2017), the entirely comics-based doctoral dissertation that brought Nick Sousanis widespread recognition. This work adopts a much broader perspective on the topic, investigating the impact of comics on the production and transmission of knowledge. Sousanis also highlights the importance of *spatiality* for organizing information, extending the characteristics

attributable to comics not only to sequential art but also to the organization of knowledge in general. Aware of these premises, I will therefore proceed by attempting to establish sequential art's essential properties.

The first and most evident characteristic is the presence of images in a concatenated succession – a *sequence*, precisely – that contribute to a unified meaning, thereby creating a semantically coherent text. This process is well-known in Semiotics as *isotopy* (Greimas 1966). The second characteristic is the narrative or progressive intention, where images are juxtaposed to guide the reader, serving a specific narrative function, conveying information, or even eliciting a mood. The third and final characteristic is the spatial relationship between images, which must be evident to indicate how one image connects to the preceding one; without this criterion, the other two would also collapse.

From this perspective, I can certainly consider as part of Sequential Art also art forms that predate comics and exist outside that medium. I will therefore proceed with a brief analysis of salient examples of Sequential Art throughout history, before introducing, through the analysis of a wordless graphic novel, what I consider to be key concepts for the cross-cultural transmission of meaning, applied through image-based narration.

1.2.1. The Trajan Column: Communicating the triumph

We can observe sequential art employed for mass communication in various historical monuments and artifacts, such as the Trajan Column. Inaugurated in 113 AD to commemorate Emperor Trajan's and Rome's victory in the two Dacian Wars, the Column serves as an almost figurative marble transcription of the “*Commentarii de bello Dacico*”, a prose narrative of the wars penned by Trajan himself. Of particular interest are the sculptural reliefs – presumably once richly coloured – that spiral along the entire height of the column.

Two distinct narratives intersect here: a sequential reading following the full course of the spiral and a vertical exposition organised into a chapter-like coding system. Consequently, we can identify all the fundamental elements previously mentioned, noting a sequential structure, clear narrative intent, and an explicit spatial relationship. Originally positioned between two libraries with balconies, allowing citizens to view it, the Trajan Column stands as a compelling example of sequential art's use in Ancient Rome's cross-cultural propaganda.

1.2.2. The Zouche-Nuttall's codex: Genealogy of the Power

The “Zouche-Nuttall Codex” is an accordion-folded pictorial manuscript, painted on both sides. This pre-Columbian codex presents a general Mixtec history on its front

side, while the reverse is dedicated to the genealogy, alliances, and conquests of a powerful 11th-century Mixtec noble named Ocho Venado Garra de Jaguar (8 Deer, Jaguar's Paw). Abundant in colourful figures, the images are intended to be read in a *boustrophedonic* manner (in ribbon form, with alternating direction), resembling an early form of comic strip. The primary distinction from modern comics, at the level of language, lies in the codex's employment of a pictographic/ideographic system, intermixed with logographic and, in some instances, phonetic elements; the comprehension of the narrative flow would be exceedingly challenging without specific knowledge of the Mixtec cultural code and its symbols. Nevertheless, adhering to the criteria previously outlined, it stands as a good example of Sequential Art, and a further testament to its communicative potential.

1.2.3. Wordless novels: A rebellious phenomenon

Wordless novels represent a stylistic and narrative genre that conveys stories solely through images, without the aid of text. Emerging in the early twentieth century, primarily centered in Belgium and Germany, they were significantly influenced graphically by Expressionist art and politically by its artists. While our previous focus has been on what might be termed 'institutional' Sequential Art, produced on behalf of governments to legitimize and exalt their power, wordless novels are rooted in fundamentally different principles. The two main originators of wordless novels, Frans Masereel (Belgium/Germany) and Lynd Ward (USA), largely conceived their works as instruments of denunciation against authoritarian regimes, war, industrial society, capitalism, and the consequent social injustices – concepts particularly salient in: “*Mon livre d’heures*” (Masereel 1919); “*Die Idee*” (Masereel 1920); “*Gods' Man: A Novel in Woodcuts*” (Ward 1929) –. Classically produced using woodcut, these novels had low printing costs, making them easily reproducible. Furthermore, the absence of text proved invaluable for the dissemination and comprehension of their message, even in environments with low literacy rates, confirming the medium's highly inclusive nature. Wordless novels silently gave voice to the voiceless, speaking of the lonely and oppressed individual in a society constructed against him, be he a worker, a migrant, or a dissident. Following the Second World War, however, the phenomenon of wordless novels gradually declined, until its rediscovery in the 1960s, framed as a form of proto-comic in book format. This inspired contemporary authors to create comics that, unlike existing serialized editions, were book-length and not necessarily bound to a specific narrative genre. The prime example of this new conception of comic creation is “*A Contract with God*” (Eisner 1978), after which the cartoonist would coin the term *graphic novel* for this new comic form.

2. To be foreigner

Our case study can effectively be considered a graphic novel and a contemporary successor to wordless novels. Indeed, Shaun Tan's "The Arrival" is a silent comic book that narrates the journey of a man who emigrates to escape war in search of a promised land. The narrative follows him in his confrontation with the great tragedy of war, but also accompanies him when he deals with the everyday problems of life in a completely foreign place; it reminds us of "Mon livre d'heures" in focusing on the banal dramas of every day, such as finding a job to support his family left in his home country or even just finding a place to sleep, if no one around speaks your language or knows your culture. The author wanted to create a perennial sense of searching for semantic clues of a perpetual lack of familiarity. An interesting perspective on this visual representation of the immigrant's experience is offered by the studies of Priya Singh (Singh 2020), that analyzed The Arrival's relevance in urban studies, highlighting how the author navigates the interplay between the protagonist and the alien urban setting, portraying the city as a quasi-living entity.

For an overview on the book and its graphic properties:
<https://www.shauntan.net/arrival-book>

2.1. A plausible world

To convey this pervasive sense of unfamiliarity to the reader, Tan (Tan 2006) constructs an alien world whose forms are subtly anchored to our own. He achieves this by developing coherent graphical and logical structures that, despite being entirely foreign and inaccessible, maintain internal consistency. This approach to world-building and to the design of narrative dynamics is reminiscent of Luigi Serafini's "Codex Seraphinianus" (Serafini 1981), in which the illustrator and architect created an illustrated encyclopedia of a completely imaginary world, described in a non-existent language – what can be considered an *asemic language* –. Both authors intuitively understood that a *text*, in the semiotic sense, must possess narrative coherence to function effectively, thereby establishing a plausible extralinguistic framework (Cosentino 2012).

3. The language of silence

The reading conditions and visual experience established by Tan (Tan 2006) are specifically designed for universal communication, equally unfamiliar to all, thereby generating narrative value through the absence of information – such as spoken language – or the opacity of information – as seen in the use of asemic language –.

For a narratological overview on the topic, Scanu's research is very thorough, exploring the role of time and focalization in the wordless narrative structure (Scanu 2021). In Tan's work (Tan 2006), the protagonist initially clashes with the foreign spoken and written word, which the author represents with an original asemic language, much like Serafini did (Serafini 1981). This approach reveals the arbitrary nature of the signs in the alphabets we currently employ, rendering them unreadable to those lacking the necessary decoding tools (Saussure 2006).

Consequently, one might inquire about the difference in emotional and narrative conveyance between absent information and undecipherable information – a word, in this particular case –.

3.1. The value of zero

Upon examining several well-known comic strip characters, a more common use of asemic writing than generally perceived becomes evident. For instance, Woodstock, the iconic yellow bird from Schulz's "Peanuts" (Schulz 2004), communicates solely through small, untranslated vertical segments understood only by other birds and Snoopy. For an highlight on the character see: <https://www.peanuts.com/about/woodstock>

We thus infer these segments function as words, or at least hold the value of words, yet we cannot decipher them as such, unlike, for instance, onomatopoeias. This type of semantic operation recalls the concept of the *linguistic zero*, defined as the absence of a linguistic element (be it a phoneme, morpheme, or word) in a position where its presence would be expected, or where its very absence contributes to a meaning or grammatical function (Piredda 2010). Typically, these elements are not consciously analyzed during comic consumption, as the interpretive process of asemic language and the absence of language is often supported by other extralinguistic elements – which we will analyze subsequently – and by context.

This raises the question: what is the limit of signification between asemia and the absence of written words? Because, if analysis were confined solely to the verbal plane, asemia would appear as potential communication, while the latter as a lack of communication. However, as we have just noted, in a multimodal language like that of comic book narrative, other elements contribute to information transmission. Therefore, it is exceedingly rare for silence in a comic to correspond to an absence of communication.

3.2. Analogical communication

To further explore this concept, we turn again to "The Arrival", specifically the initial part of the story: the protagonist has just disembarked in the new country and, unable to read or speak the local language, attempts to communicate through

gestures and scribbles. This broadly 'instinctual' process brings into play the semiotic concept of the *analogical sign*, a type of sign where the signifier – the perceivable mark – bears a relationship of similarity, proportionality, or correspondence to its signified meaning. For instance, to convey that he is seeking a place to sleep, the character draws a stylized bed.

This communicative approach also encompasses *mimetic gestural iconism*, as when the protagonist attempts to make himself understood through gesturing, a strong isomorphism becomes evident between the syntactic marks of the gesture – such as direction, speed, and amplitude – and the semantic marks of its meaning (Dogana 1987). Consequently, this form of communication proves simpler and more immediate, referencing a broader and widely shared linguistic and experiential code.

In the case of "The Arrival", one might venture to extend this reasoning metatextually to the author's chosen graphic representation style. This style is exceptionally rich in detail and exhibits a high degree of analogy with the world we know, meaning that the salient elements depicted are numerous in relation to the object of representation.

4. Conclusions

We have thus established that Sequential Art is a highly effective tool for producing and transmitting meaning in a cross-cultural context, framing it unequivocally as both language and discourse. We have also observed how its communicative potential is amplified when words are abstracted from the narrative, making it more universally accessible and shareable. In this regard, Satu Kaikkonen, a contemporary asemic artist and writer, offers an insightful reflection on the role of semantic language: "[...] *semantic language all too often divides and asymmetrically empowers while asemic texts can't help but put people of all literacy-levels and identities on equal footing.*" (Kaikkonen 2013)

I propose that this assertion can be extended to silent Sequential Art, confirming it as a valid and independent system of signification and information transmission. I can thus infer that written word is not necessary to effectively convey a message. This is precisely what Shaun Tan achieved with his work: a silent and universally comprehensible discourse that remains initially unfamiliar to everyone (Johnston 2012). This further confirms the profound potential of a medium born from popular culture yet evolving to embrace a global audience.

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