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The Language of Speechlessness: Wordless Graphic and Woodcut Novels

My paper examines wordless comic books and woodcut novels by focusing mainly on the following works: Milt Gross' *He Done Her Wrong*, Peter Kuper's *Mind's Eye*, Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, and Lynd Ward's *Gods' Man*. Beneath the visual surface of these works lies dormant, as I would like to argue, a linguistic aspect that only a thorough analysis can unravel. By exploring the narrative techniques employed in these pictorial narratives, the interdependency of visual and linguistic signs becomes evident. The study aims to identify and name methods at play in the aforementioned works that borrow and appropriate narrative techniques from other media by utilizing their own media-specific means. The (failed) attempt to fully dispense with language, as I suggest in my essay, has called forth an innovative visual vocabulary and distinct narrative techniques that can only be encountered in wordless graphic and woodcut novels.

> May a pantomime make use of one speaking role? or of one line? or of one word? No! a thousand times, No! Not a role, not a line, not a word, not even if this single word should be needed to produce a profound sensation. A single word would shatter brusquely the fragile charm built up with so much care. (Aubert 1976: 192)

In his study on pantomime, Charles Aubert argues vehemently against any usage of verbal communication in pantomimes. Spoken words are to be avoided at all costs. Even the simulation of speech by means of facial expressions that is the movement of the actor's lips and jaws should be forbidden since the mere evocation of speech, as he puts it, goes against the very essence of the medium. "So these actions are absolutely forbidden: To speak. To simulate speech. To simulate speaking in a low voice. To simulate listening to a conversation." (ibid.: 193) The aforementioned notion defies the etymology of the word "pantomime", which in Greek means: imitator of all. Pantomimes imitate everything – everything but speech. Notwithstanding the difference between spoken and written words, pantomime, woodcut novels, and silent film share a common aversion to any verbal and linguistic component. Silence is of the essence. This disposition to speechless and wordless storytelling is, however, very relative since all three art forms employ in one way or another written signs and/or sounds in their narratives.

Both pantomime and silent film are often accompanied by music, and the sound of music – aside from establishing and setting the mood of the work – is capable of transmitting the actor's emotions, thus conveying information about the story. Music can also manipulate, or rather, tamper with audiences' emotions, and as such it acts as a non-silent narrative component of the work. Music "speaks" in pantomimes just as it speaks in silent films. Furthermore, silent films employ intertitles

whose function it is to either convey the thoughts of the characters or add information between two sequences that cannot be expressed solely through visual or musical means. Milt Gross was one of the first comic book artists who drew on this contradiction when he composed his most significant work and what might just be the first wordless graphic novel: *He Done Her Wrong: The Great American Novel and not a Word in It - No Music, Too* (1930). The comic book was a parody of Lynd Ward's first and commercially very successful woodcut novel *Gods' Man* (1929) and an early attempt to tell a book-length story without resorting to the use of written words. Yet his attempt to refrain from linguistic signs proved to be futile. As David A. Beronä asserts:

> wordless comics are not as disassociated from text as generally regarded. The foremost wordless comics search for a link with language to some degree. Even Masereel's visual woodcut novels had titles to anchor his pictorial images. (Beronä 2001: 29)

Spoken and written words and phrases – language itself – are an integral part of the world we inhabit. To eschew and renounce language is to seek entrance to an alien and impossible domain not available to us since we were introduced to the *Symbolic Order*, in the sense that Lacan gives to the term. The space not infected by language is a place that Lacan termed the *Imaginary* and the realm of the Imaginary is as inaccessible to us as is the *Law* to the man from the country in Kafka's most famous short story *Before the Law* (1915). Language, as it seems, is the Law and the space that it shields is the domain of the Imaginary: long lost to us since we stepped into the territory of the Symbolic. Taking this fact into account, the following study argues that wordless graphic and woodcut novels, despite their occasional utilization of linguistic signs, set in motion innovative narrative modes the full range of which has not yet been explored sufficiently. In addition, both media borrow and appropriate narrative modes taken from other art forms such as painting, pantomime, and silent film. In order to test the validity of this argument, the following study examines pictorial stories made by Peter Kuper, Shaun Tan, Milt Gross, and Lynd Ward. By refraining from the use of written text and by replacing linguistic with pictorial signs, these authors have created stories that differ significantly from conventional comic books.

1. Innovative, Graphic Storytelling Techniques in Wordless Comic Books

> Since I'm aware that pages 2 and 3 are on left-hand and right-hand pages respectively, it would seem advantageous to save any big visual surprise until page 4, so that the reader doesn't see it until he turns over. Thus, page 3 ends with a teaser. (Moore 2008: 36)

In contrast to literature, in which the turning of the page is not usually considered a structural element of the overall narrative, the author/illustrator of a comic book often employs the movement from one page to the next to initiate a surprising moment or a shocking effect. As Alan Moore in the above quote stresses, the final panel at the bottom of the right-hand page can induce a cliffhanger that will capture readers' attention and incite them to turn to the next page. The moment under consideration here is of course minimal and cannot be compared to conventional cliffhangers in comic books or television series, but it is sufficient for the writer of the pictorial story to surprise or shock their audience by introducing an unexpected twist in the story. The shocking development can be enhanced by employing, for instance, a full-page panel. The moment before the reader turns the page is also an ideal moment to introduce a change of scenery or a passage from one sequence into another. The turning of the page, as Will Eisner duly notes, enables a smooth transition: "when the reader turns the page a pause occurs. This permits a change of time, a shift of scene, an opportunity to control the reader's focus." (Eisner 1985: 63) This often overseen narrative tool exposes the impact that the book as a material object has had on the medium of comic books.[1]

In the wordless graphic collection *Eye of the Beholder* (2000), Peter Kuper elevates the turning of the page as a genuine graphic, narrative tool to new heights. The collection consists of multiple wordless comic strips, and each strip utilizes two pages to bring forth its punch line. The first page of each story, carefully positioned on the right-hand page, contains four panels followed by a *splash page* that sets in the moment the reader turns the page. The four panels preceding the *splash page* are often misleading and designed to function as puzzles, or rather "visual puzzles", as the cover of the book suggests (*A Collection of Visual Puzzles*). The reader is thus unable to bring *closure*[2] between them, to fill in the gaps between the

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1 In web comics the turning of the page has been supplanted by the act of scrolling down the webpage on which the pictorial story is told.

2 *Closure* can be defined as an activity on the part of the reader to fill in the gaps between images by means of association. Because comics are a static, visual medium, the depicted action has to be broken down into segments. Omissions are thus necessary and it is the reader's task to connect the dots and construct a link between two images. The virtual space in which this act takes place

images and extract meaning from them. The puzzle can only be resolved through the transition to the next page, to the next image, which contains the key to the puzzle (Fig. 1).
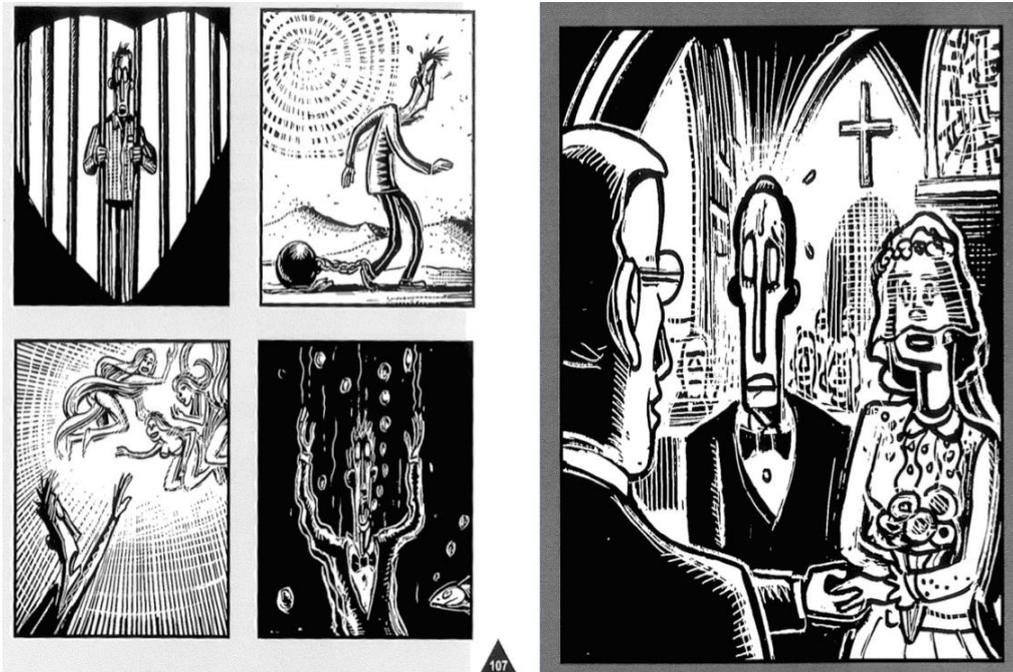

Fig. 1: *Mind's Eye. An Eye of the Beholder* (Kuper 2000: 107–108)

The gag of the story unfolds before the reader's eyes the moment they turn the page to view the concluding fifth panel, and the resulting effect would lose its strength without this pause because of the eyes' predisposition to wander and skim through the two pages that lie in front of them. While the punch line of most cartoons and comic strips results from the use of words and images, Peter Kuper employs a graphic narration void of words to bring his message across, and he does so by tampering with two of the medium's most distinctive traits: closure and the turning of the page. The difficulty to infer meaning from the first set of panels, the temporary but deliberate obstruction of closure on the first page and its reactivation on the following concluding page is the formal element that makes the solution of the visual puzzle so appealing.

Shaun Tan resorts to a similar technique in his wordless graphic novel *The Arrival*, but contrary to Kuper's strips the goal here is not to produce a punch line. The book portrays the fate of a refugee forced to leave his family and his impoverished country in order to seek better prospects in a distant, imaginary land. Shadows in

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is the blank space between two images, the so-called *gutter*. As Scott McCloud puts it: "Here in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea" (McCloud 1994: 66).

the form of dragon tails can be seen sliding through the streets of the city at the time of his departure, which can be interpreted as the presence of an oppressive regime.[3] In the following chapters, the lead character finds himself in a foreign country, the language of which he does not speak. And what better way to express this occurrence than in a wordless pictorial story? When language fails, when we are unable to communicate with others via a linguistic system common to us and our interlocutors, we find ourselves forced to fall back on nonverbal forms of communication such as gestures, facial expressions and, when pen and paper are available, drawings.

The lack of words in a narrative medium of any kind presents, understandably, many challenges. The absence of language has to be compensated by other means of communication, and those artificial modes can dramatically change the flow of the narrative and the way the story is registered by an audience. As Charles Musser remarks with regard to silent film: "Lacking words, actors often resorted to extensive pantomime to convey their thoughts or actions, pushing the use of conventionalized gestures to an extreme." (Musser 1990: 3) The same can be said about wordless comic books as many critics have pointed out:

> In a wordless comic, the use of gestures and facial expressions is an essential mechanism to indicate mood and personal emotions, and so additional importance needs to be placed on body posture and gesture… (Beronä 2012: 19)

Will Eisner and Scott McCloud have both offered short micro-dictionaries of gestures (Eisner 1985: 102) and facial expressions (McCloud 2006: 83–85) that act, as they suggest, as a form of pictorial vocabulary, but their use and frequency in wordless comics has to be pushed to the extreme if they are to be effective. Not unlike most wordless pictorial narratives, the use of distinct gestures, postures, and facial expressions in both Kuper's and Tan's work carries an essential part of the overall narrative. Yet it is the invention of another technique, very rare in comic books, that is worth examining in greater detail in Tan's work: one that bears many similarities to Kuper's comic strips on the one hand, already outlined at the beginning of this section, and to the medium of film on the other.

Tan's *The Arrival* opens with a page that features nine panels within which an object is presented (Fig. 2). Taken together, the images seem to be unrelated to each

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3   The function and meaning of symbols in pictorial narratives will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

other because no closure is involved between them and, hence, no story or sequence is narrated.
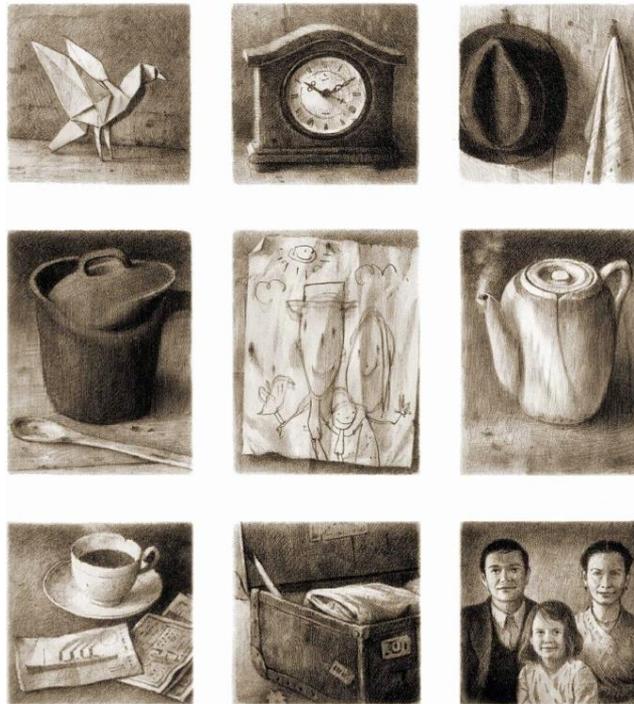

Fig. 2: *The Arrival* (Tan 2006: 1)

The page as a whole is reminiscent of Kuper's strips, and one could expect to understand the purpose of the sequence by turning over to the next page. Yet by doing so, the reader is still unable to draw safe conclusions and unlock the meaning of the first page. While the following page in itself clearly presents a sequence (two hands carefully packing and placing a framed picture within a suitcase) and is thus far more conventional in terms of sequential storytelling than the first, the relationship between the two pages remains elusive. The only element that connects them is the image of a family, with which the first page concludes and the second begins. Said panel functions as a link that enables a smooth transition between the first two pages. The key to the first set of panels of the first page lies on the third page of the comic book, a full-page panel that pulls together the previous panels into one *shot*. The term "shot" is intentional here given the film-like sequence that the first three pages exhibit. Tan's work is of course grounded in the tradition of children's picture books and as such cannot be considered a typical comic book, but the aforementioned sequence resembles more a scene from a film and less a conventional sequence of images.

The *splash page* on the third page (Fig. 3) compels the reader to go back to the previous pages in order to reexamine the information that the panels transmit, and

by doing so, s/he gradually begins to grasp their meaning. The objects presented on the first page turn out to be *close ups* of a more comprehensive image, and one could speak of a rapid "*pictorial zoom out*" when the content of both pages is viewed together.[4] This is due to the duplication of the same objects on the first and third pages. The same images that the reader saw when s/he opened the book can be seen, scaled-down, as components of a more coherent picture two pages later. The perspective stays fixed on the first page, slightly zooms out on the second, until it abruptly pulls away on the third, disclosing what might be called a *pictorial establishing shot* that sets the tone and the mood for the rest of the story. One can hardly speak of a punch line here, but the effect is essentially the same. The final images of both Kuper's and Tan's pages completely restructure the meaning of the previous set of images, and both works invite the reader to flip pages back and forth in order to unpack more details from them.
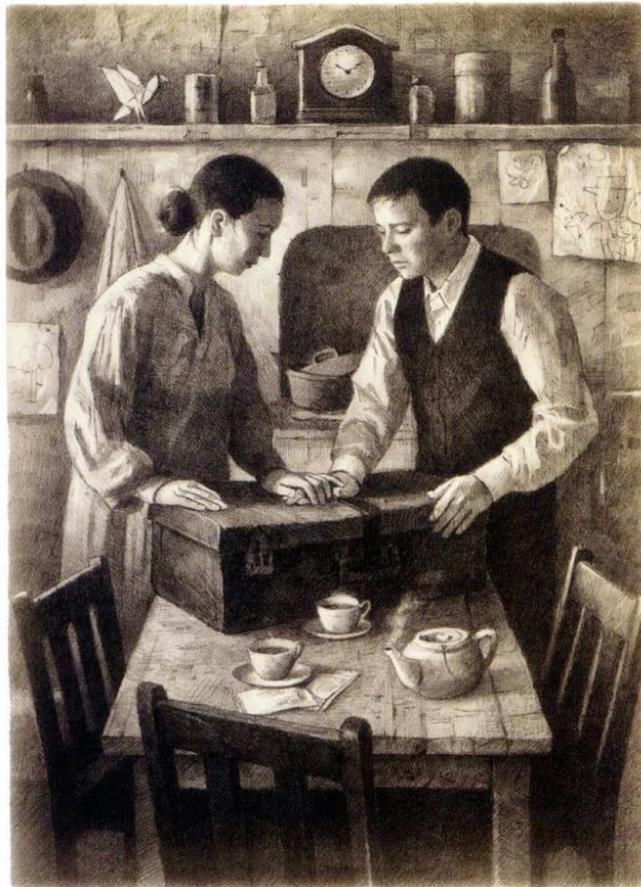
Fig. 3: *The Arrival* (Tan 2006: 3)

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4   A famous zoom out akin to the process delineated above can be found in the film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) by George Roy Hill. The scene under consideration is available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KyR7XB0VBPM, accessed: 05.07.2017.

It bears mentioning that the sequence discussed here is an instance of what Irina Rajewsky has termed *intermedial reference*, one of her categories of *intermediality*:

> Intermediality in the narrow sense of intermedial references, for example references in a literary text to a film through, for instance, the evocation or imitation of certain filmic techniques such as zoom shots, fades, dissolves, and montage editing. (Rajewsky 2005: 52)

Tan utilizes pictorial-specific means to simulate a filmic narrative method, the zoom out, by gradually changing the perspective of his panels. As opposed to a zoom out in a film though, the steady and gradual movement of the camera backwards can only be imitated by a gradual, and eventually abrupt, change of perspective from page to page and, later in the story, from panel to panel.[5] Apart from conveying necessary information about the story, the sequence of panels aims to build a unique atmosphere and create a mood that is profoundly different to any narrative comprised of textual and visual components. As Aubert states in his thoughts on art forms that do not make use of any textual or verbal components:

> Really, the principal motive for producing a pantomime is that its rapid and noiseless action causes a very different emotion than the drama does, a mysterious emotion, akin to that experienced in dreams. A painting does not speak; statues are silent; yet no one denies the intense charm which pictures and sculpture exert. (Aubert 1976: 152)

While not all wordless graphic novels fall seamlessly into that category, Tan and Kuper's works certainly do. The groundbreaking work of Milt Gross on the other hand and his wordless graphic novel *He Done Her Wrong* (1930) in particular demand a different kind of treatment. One of the first graphic novels in the history of the medium, the book has its roots in the silent film slapstick comedies and is replete with cartoonish characters and humorous situations. The subtitle of the graphic novel (*The Great American Novel and Not a Word in it – No Music, Too*[6]) points to the reality that silent films were in fact not silent at all and the author sets out to construct one of the first *silent comics*. Yet, as Beronä has convincingly demonstrated, Gross' work is in actuality not wordless at all. Despite the absence of any textual traces within speech balloons, as Beronä writes,

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5   The first page of the second chapter employs a more conventional and gradual zoom out, this time from panel to panel, very similar to a jump-cut: the page begins with a close up of the same framed picture that we saw at the beginning of the book, continues with panels that show the protagonist sitting in front of said picture and later on in the inside of a ship cabin, and ending with an establishing shot of an enormous ship (the trip involves, apparently, the crossing of an ocean).

6   The 2005 edition of the book published by Gary Groth and Kim Thompson left the last part of the subtitle out adding the phrase "with no words" on the cover.

> Gross uses recognized cultural icons and background settings with street signs and billboards to display textual information, and this makes his novel less than a purely visual work. (Beronä 2001: 22)

Notwithstanding the abundance of words and phrases in a work that claims to be wordless, *He Done Her Wrong* stands out against most wordless graphic novels in terms of inventiveness due to the, among other things, successful employment of images that substitute for words: "Gross uses images that can be decoded either as qualities, changed relationships, or actual words." (ibid.: 26) Instead of chapter headings, for instance, Gross utilizes images that express in visual terms the leitmotif of the chapter. The third chapter for example opens with a small narrow panel that presents a sad dog wearing a hat. On its own, the image is not particularly helpful, but when viewed in conjunction with the preceding events of the story it discloses useful information about the coming chapter. Given that the hat of the dog is identical with the hat of the protagonist, and taking into consideration the unfavorable fate that has struck the latter in the previous sections, the image translates into "poor dog", which is also the main theme of the chapter. The image of the dog as a signifier in this example refers to the protagonist, who is in turn the signified, the meaning that the image denotes. As Art Spiegelman notes: "Wordless novels are *filled* with language, it just resides in the reader's head rather than on the page." (Spiegelman 2010: xvi) It is thus safe to assume that the absence of text in a work made primarily of images does not automatically exclude linguistic properties.

2. Woodcut Novels: The Power of the Symbol in
Lynd Ward's *Gods' Man* (1929)

> Now that alone is significant and fruitful which gives free play to the imagination. The more we see, the more must we be able to add by thinking. The more we add thereto by thinking, so much the more can we believe ourselves to see. (Lessing 1970: 14)

In *Laokoon oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing examines, as the subtitle of his work proclaims, the relationship between fine arts and poetry (literature). Given that the work was written in 1766, many of Lessing's observations and inferences are dated, but the work struck a cord at the time of its publication the waves of which still reverberate in the present. In his attempt to underscore the limitations of painting as a narrative art form, Lessing "paints" a rather bleak picture that becomes all the more accentuated the moment he compares painting to poetry. As opposed to the poet, the painter and the sculptor

have to endow their work with symbols if it is to be recognizable by an audience. The depiction of the goddess Urania for instance, the Muse of astronomy, has to be accompanied by visual attributes that symbolize astronomy. Those properties are, as Lessing remarks, a necessity in visual arts.

> The artist in order to make it distinguishable must exhibit her [Urania] with a pointer and a celestial globe; this wand, this celestial globe, this attitude of hers are his alphabet from which he helps us to put together the name Urania. (ibid.: 42)

In wordless sequential narration, symbols are not as indispensable as in fine arts where the artist is very often (but not always) required to choose one moment, one *frozen frame* to tell their story. With the aid of a pictorial vocabulary already in place for comic books, the illustrator/writer can employ a variety of tools to develop a storyline without having to resort to the use of text. Yet, as Beronä has shown, when a visual language is asked to replace words, symbols and stereotypes can contribute significantly to the construction of more coherent story strands. "Since these comics are wordless, artists rely increasingly on icons and stereotypes to collaborate with pictures in telling their stories." (Beronä 2001: 19) In woodcut novels, the use of stereotypes, icons, and symbols are all the more prevalent and this is indicative, as I would like to argue, of their close kinship to fine arts. Non-sequential woodcuts and wood engravings are, after all, a branch of fine arts. While some artists (cf. Seth 2007) and critics (cf. Beronä 2001) concerned with woodcut novels have highlighted the immense impact that silent film has had on the medium, said influence encompasses aesthetic categories and, to a much lesser degree, modes of narration. The woodcut novels of Lynd Ward for instance, whose novel *Gods' Man* will be discussed at length in this section, are infused with references to German Expressionist films: shadows, threatening urban spaces, enormous buildings with sharp angles, all poised against a black and white backdrop build the visual space upon which Ward and other prominent woodcut-artists place their narratives. Despite this point and the undisputable manner in which silent film has shaped the imagery of woodcut novels, the fleeting and short-lived medium of woodcut novels has developed a unique method to thread a narrative that differs from both comics (wordless or not) and silent film.

What is striking in those works is the fact that the print was intended to occupy the full space of two pages, although not as a double splash page. The actual print was on the right while the left page was left blank. While recent publications have left this pattern out – the republication of Masereel's *Passionate Journey* (1919) that

came out in 2007 is a case in point – the latest edition of Ward's novels, edited by Art Spiegelman and published in 2010, retains it. In other words, the prints were meant to be viewed in a comparable manner to that of paintings, one image at a time. As Spiegelman argues:

> To make a wood engraving is to insist on the *gravitas* of an image. Every line is fought for, patiently, sometimes bloodily. It slows the viewer down. Knowing that the work is deeply inscribed gives an image weight and depth. (Spiegelman 2010: xxiv)

From this perspective it becomes apparent that woodcut novels intentionally refrain from the use of the page as a narrative tool. Eisner has famously stated: "Pages are the constant in comic book narration." (Eisner 1958: 63) This does not seem to be the case in woodcut novels. Closure is undoubtedly involved between the prints, but not within the confines of the page itself. To put this simply, woodcut novels have not developed a pictorial vocabulary that can be compared to the rich visual language of graphic novels. This might be due to the very short lifetime of the medium, which spanned, not unlike the silent film medium, just a couple of decades. For this reason, the prints that comprise the story take no advantage of the book as an object and disregard its more potent unit: the page. The constant in woodcut novels is not the page but the image itself.

Coming back to Lessing's observations and the function of symbols in images, we can now examine Ward's use of them in his first pictorial novel *Gods' Man*. Published in 1929, it tells the Faustian tale of an artist and his encounter with a demonic figure who endows him with a magic brush. After signing a contract with the stranger, the protagonist gains fame and riches, but quickly becomes disillusioned and has to escape the city after having assaulted a police officer. Seeking refuge in the country, he is found exhausted at the riverbank by a woman who takes care of him and later bears him a child. But his fate was sealed the moment he signed the contract with the stranger who eventually finds and asks the artist to draw him a portrait. While painting his portrait, the stranger takes off his mask and in a moment of fear and panic the protagonist falls off a cliff and dies. The last image displays the face of the stranger: a skull that appears to be smiling.

In one of the prints (Fig. 4), the symbol of a currency, the dollar, can be seen on the shoulder of a woman with whom the lead character is in love. As the following images suggest, the protagonist has been deceived by his agent and the woman marked by the dollar-icon who "framed" him in order to exploit his talent and appropriate his riches. Demoralized by this insight, the artist wanders through the

streets of the city in despair. At this point in the story, a series of encounters with representatives of leading institutions occur that either lead to or are the outcome of the protagonist's mental breakdown. Those encounters comprise exchanges with a police officer (police), a sailor (navy/army), a priest (church), and, after assaulting an officer, a judge (judicial system). A woman that resembles the woman branded by the dollar-icon accompanies all of those figures in slightly inappropriate postures. An interpretation that takes symbols into consideration, a "symbolic" reading, could infer that the protagonist, after realizing that the woman he fell in love with was only interested in his wealth, experiences an epiphany that leads to a new awareness: the leading institutions, so goes this line of reasoning, are corrupt and governed by greed. This is a technique that Ward applied in his subsequent novels as well. The author himself describes one of his characters in his following woodcut novel *Madman's Drum* (1930) as follows: "I sought to explore the cause-and-effect factors in the life of a man who was generalized enough to represent more than an individual, and his actions, more than those of a single person." (Ward 2010: 790) The presence of an individual branded by a dollar mark next to representatives of the law and the army is evidence that the driving force behind those institutions, at least in the realm of the story, is greed and the urge for more power.

Fig. 4: *Gods' Man* (Ward / Spiegelmann 2010: s.p.)

The misogynistic and to some extent sexist implications in Ward's novel cannot be ignored, and the twofold presentation of the female gender as either a *femme fatale* or an innocent and naive human being is fairly superficial. Yet for a symbol to be effective it has to operate on the principle of overgeneralization and synecdoche. Just as the image of a police officer can be viewed as a generic symbol of the police force as a whole, so can a human being branded by the icon of a currency be viewed as a symbol of power and greed. As Ward puts it:

> a single image must convey not only what it literally is but must also give some understanding of what, by virtue of the associations and meanings the cultural matrix has given it, it symbolizes. It is to this duality of meaning that the best of pictorial narrative aspires. It must communicate on both levels. (ibid.)

If there is a key in Ward's dark and complex narratives, a "magic brush" that enables readers to interpret his art appropriately, it must be hidden within the realm of his symbols. While the icon of a currency poses relatively minor problems to the critic who attempts to extract meaning from it, the interpretation of more complex symbols like the sun and the forest, recurrent themes in Ward's oeuvre, represent a far greater challenge. At the beginning of *Gods' Man*, we find the protagonist in the midst of a storm as he attempts to cross a sea. Enormous waves nearly swallow his tiny boat, but the sudden appearance of the sun that shines upon him unexpectedly saves him (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5: *Gods' Man* (Ward / Spiegelmann 2010: s.p.)

Grateful for his redemption by the most unexpected force, he raises his right hand in the direction of the sun in a posture that signals gratitude and rapture. Interpreting

symbols as ambiguous and polysemous as the image of the sun poses, as one might expect, many risks. According to Matilde Battistini: "Like all archetypal symbols, the sun has a dual, ambivalent nature. It is the source of light, warmth, and life on earth but may also become a source of destruction and drought." (Battistini 2005: 192) The sun also stands for knowledge and wisdom given its ability to lighten spaces and "illuminate" them, and there is a reason why the philosophical and intellectual movement characterized by rational and scientific thought was given the name the *Age of "Enlightenment".* Taking into account the context of the tale and its direct reference to the Faustian myth, it is relatively safe to view the sun as a metaphor of knowledge[7] and the protagonist not only as a Faustian figure but also as a modern Icarus drawn and burned by his urge to reach treacherous heights. The manner in which symbols successfully replace written words and their capacity to endow a narrative with depth becomes evident here.

A further work that displays the inventiveness and ingenuity of a narrative that favors a symbolic and visual narration over a textual one is Ward's *Wild Pilgrimage* (1932). The most essential visual theme in the story is unquestionably the forest, which can be seen as the space of the unconscious through which the protagonist wanders after fleeing the city. Similar to the central figure in *Gods' Man* who runs away from the corrupt city in order to find refuge in the country, the leading character in *Wild Pilgrimage* departs from the cruel, industrialized city and enters the domain of the forest where he seeks redemption. As Battistini writes with regard to the ambiguity of the forest as a symbol:

> The forest may be interpreted as either a sacred place or a symbol of the deepest reaches of the unconscious. The sacred dimension derives from the fact that a forest comprises multitudes of trees, symbols of the vital lymph of the universe and nature's regenerative capacity. Because of the dense tangle of vegetation and shadow within it, however, the forest is also considered the abode of hybrid and demonic creatures [...] and associated with the unknown. (Battistini 2005: 244)

A series of hallucinations that reflect the disturbed inner world of the protagonist occurs in the forest, which seems to intensify the suppressed wishes of its new inhabitant and exacerbate his unstable mental state. In order to "draw" a line between the character's inner thoughts and his outer experience, Ward renders the former in

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7   If we take into account the fact that the color of the sun is actually dark, our reading might have to take a different direction. "In alchemy, the image of the sun is split into the daytime orb, golden and life-giving, and the 'black sun', the raw material not yet transformed by the Master and the symbol of his nocturnal journey through the Underworld" (Battistini 2005: 192).

red color so as to mark them off from the latter.[8] The red color in this sequence acts as a mark that helps readers distinguish prints that refer to the character's hallucinations from the black and white prints that signal his outer world, and Ward must have been one of the first artists who used this technique to make a narration more intelligible without having to employ textual or symbolic means. The same technique has found widespread application in the film medium where it serves as a distinguishing mark for a flashback the color of which usually differs from the rest of the film set in the present.[9]

A last example from Ward's work will "illustrate" that even the greatest pictorial storyteller of the twentieth century could not cross the line that separates the imaginary from the symbolic order. A print that presents the artist in *Gods' Man* at the peak of his fame is reminiscent of the example I highlighted in the previous section when discussing Milt Gross' wordless graphic novel. The print depicts the main character surrounded by seven men who raise a glass of champagne in his direction (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6: *Gods' Man* (Ward / Spiegelmann 2010: s.p.)

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8 "Thus, the establishment of character and setting and the beginning of action appear in the customary black-and-white in which most woodblocks are printed. But at the first point in the story where the reader is to move inside the protagonist's head and see what images have been formed there and thereby understand what desires and intentions those images reflect, the color of the printed block changes to an off-red" (Ward 2010: 795).

9 Color is just one of many means to indicate a shift in time in films. A *dissolve* or the use of *voice over* narration are also very common.

Only the hands holding the glasses are visible and their arrangement expresses an almost threatening quality. The posture of the artist on the other hand evokes feelings of modesty but also superiority. The image translates, as I would like to propose, into: "he has become the toast of the town". Just like the image of the dog in Gross' graphic novel, so does the print under consideration here act as a phrase, conveying meaningful information about the story. In other words, Ward has transformed an idiomatic phrase into an image that bears the same signification as its source. The traces of language, as one might infer, are as "visible" on visual surfaces as they are anywhere else.

For all their similarities, the reading track of woodcut novels differs significantly from the one readers experience in comics. The vast majority of conventional comics, wordless or not, take advantage of the page's surface and the book's materiality when they narrate a story via images, whether with or without words. The turning of the page can be used, as we have already seen, as a means to exert some control over the reading track and to introduce a major shift in the narrative. The arrangement of panels on the page, their number, size, and the shape of their outlines are also of great importance as Will Eisner has demonstrated:

> For example, when there is a need to compress time, a greater number of panels are used. The action then becomes more segmented, unlike the action that occurs in the larger, more conventional panels. By placing the panels closer together, we deal with the *'rate'* of elapsed time in its narrowest sense. (Eisner 1985: 30)

Most importantly, comic books take advantage of the conventions of reading that are identical, for the most part, in both literature and graphic novels. Readers in the Western world proceed from the left-hand to the right-hand page when they open a book and from top to bottom and left to right when they read the page itself. The manner in which the conventions of reading define the reading flow in comic books becomes all the more evident the moment we turn our attention to Japanese comics, better know as Manga. Manga-comics follow the norms of Japanese writing direction and as such the back of the book is its beginning because the reading flow in Japan proceeds from the right-hand to the left-hand page and from top to bottom and right to left on the page itself. From this vantage point, it becomes apparent that the norms of the written text dictate the norms of the sequential image, and the relationship between the two turns out to be more intimate than their appearance suggests. While the reading track from page to page in woodcut novels follows the same reading conventions, the fertile potential of the page as a powerful, narrative

tool remains undeveloped. Apart from being a necessity, the page in the woodcut novel is nothing more than a distraction. Similar to a painting, each sequential woodcut image demands the full and unconditional attention of the reader. Yet even the most visual of all sequential media cannot evade the all-encompassing effects of language. The woodcut novel might have touched upon the threshold that separates the symbolic from the imaginary, but it wasn't able to transgress it.

Bearing in mind the omnipresence of icons and images in our daily life, we can add that our culture, at least in terms of how we communicate with each other, is gradually morphing into a "co-mix" of word and picture. Images in general and moving images in particular have never been as instrumental as they are today, which prompts David Trend to conclude:

> The word and the image are inextricably intertwined in the information order of the 21st century. [...] Living in the digital era demands a new kind of literacy that is both language and vision based. (Trend 2010: 34)

This new kind of literacy, if it ever comes to that, will bear a striking resemblance to a hybrid medium that many considered "low art" when it first appeared in the mid 19th century and has since come to be termed *comics*.

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