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How to Ruin Your Students' Readings of Visual Texts (and Still Sleep Well at Night)

As a high school teacher, one of the highest compliments I ever received came from a small group of students in my film and literature class—a semester-long language arts elective for juniors and seniors. Toward the end of one of those semesters, as students were filing in before class was to begin, one of my students—I'll call her Megan—plopped her backpack down next to her desk and looked up at me. She stared at me rather disgustedly for a moment and then said, "You've *ruined* movies for me."

I was a bit taken aback, but I followed up. "How?" I asked.

Megan said that she could no longer just enjoy movies. She was always considering the filmmakers' choices—their uses of particular camera angles and movements, costume colors, lines of dialogue, special effects, and set design. She would turn to her friends in the middle of a Friday night out at the movie theater and say things like, "Did you see that low angle?" To her enthusiastic observations, her friends inevitably responded by asking her to shut up. Before I could respond to Megan's accusations that I'd ruined movies for her, a few other students who had arrived early to class that day agreed with her. "I know," said Shahin, "My dad won't let me talk when we're watching a movie at home anymore. He said he didn't care whether or not that last transition was a matching shot."

Of course, my reaction to all of this was to be both grateful for great students and proud of what we'd been able to accomplish together in only a couple of months. My students now approached films outside of class in the way we'd been studying them in class—by asking themselves what message the filmmakers were trying to convey and how that message was being conveyed. "Ruining" a film meant unlocking the power to analyze and make meaning from it in new and exciting ways. And even if my students' friends and family members weren't interested in having their own film experiences "ruined," I knew that my students enjoyed wielding the power that comes with a critical eye and a careful use of analytical tools.

With that introduction, this column is about ways that we might "ruin" other interactions we have with young adult texts in our classrooms. not just films. In fact, the focus of this piece is on our interactions in our classrooms with visual texts in print. Recently, an increasing number of excellent comic books, graphic novels, multimodal novels (e.g., Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, 2007; Myers's *Monster*, 1999; Selznick's *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, 2007), graphic novel adaptations of other literary works (e.g., Hamilton's *Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451*, 2009; Hinds's *The Odyssey*, 2010), and picturebooks (e.g., Tan's *The Arrival*, 2006) intended for young adult audiences have been published.

I recognize that the mere presence of these beautiful, complex, and challenging texts is not an argument for reading them in our middle school, high school, and college classrooms. But pedagogically based arguments *for* including them have been eloquently made by, to name a few, Carter (2007b), Fisher & Frey (2007), Frey & Fisher

(2004), Monnin (2010), Schwarz (2006), and Yang (2008). I recommend checking out rationales like these if you are unsure about the necessity for including visual texts in a language arts classroom.

I also understand that we are sometimes up against administrators, parents, and even longtime language arts teachers who don't understand the value of "reading" *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2003), because they never read anything visual as high school or middle school students. For those folks, we can make a simple and direct defense for including visual texts in the classroom. Below is one example written by Ashley (personal communication, January 31, 2012), currently a student teacher in the English education program where I teach. Ashley has included *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2003) and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007) in a ninth-grade classroom as part of her preservice practicum teaching experience. Here's what she had to say about teaching visual texts:

> I think it is very important to teach visual texts (at least to some extent). One reason is that it is in the standards (I know this is a boring answer, but it's true). For Tennessee standards, "Media" has its own section. Another reason is that NCTE claims that literacy is made up of "cultural and communicative practices." As an English teacher who is responsible for teaching literacy, it would be negligent of me to deny the role visual images play in my students' "cultural and communicative practices" in which they participate every day and that they will be expected to use in their future careers. Another great reason is that students become engaged with visual images. Also, they are a text and can be used to teach certain elements (such as internal conflict) that can be transferred to other texts (such as written texts).

I'll let that suffice as a rationale. If you are still not convinced, the rest of this article is probably not for you. My intended audience is those of us who know we should be including graphic novels and other visual and multimodal print texts in our classrooms but just haven't done it yet. Or haven't done it successfully. Or are still looking for better ways to help our students read, respond to, and write visual texts.

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If that's you, I would like to share some resources and ideas that you could utilize in your classroom to get started in supporting young adult readers in interpreting visual texts and making connections to them. My purpose is to suggest resources and ideas for teachers who are just getting going in the graphics game. For more comprehensive treatments of reading, teaching, producing, and learning with visual texts, please check out the following: Carter (2007a), Frey and Fisher (2008), McCloud (1993; 2006), and Monnin (2010).

Because I want this column to provide some key ideas to teachers who are trying visual texts in their classrooms for the first time, I spoke with a few of our English education program's student teachers who had recently used visual texts in their student teaching or practicum placements. Out of those conversations, two ideas that seemed to resonate were (1) the importance of students explicitly learning how to read visual texts, and (2) the value of having students produce their own visual texts. Given limited space, I have chosen to focus in more detail on the first, while giving relatively little attention to the second. Once you get the ball rolling with explicitly teaching students to interpret visual texts in your classroom, the resources above, in particular McCloud (2006), are useful in helping students produce their own visual texts.

Getting Started

As a way of introducing visual texts in my classroom and as a method for assessing my students' understanding about how visual texts work, I begin with a close reading of something visual. In using the term *close reading* in the context of analyzing a visual text, I draw on Teasley's (2011) recent application of this method of analyzing print texts to film studies in classrooms. I have found that close reading works best with something that includes a narrative but is relatively short (a page or two in length).

My favorite source for younger readers is Bang's (2000) *Picture This: How Pictures Work*, in which she considers the affective nature of illustrations and the ways that the shape, color, angle, and size of objects in a picture affect our emotions as we view them. In the first half of the book, Bang carefully manipulates a simple and abstract image of a wolf encountering Little Red Riding Hood in the forest to display these differences. How do we feel as readers when the shape of the wolf's eye is changed? What about when its teeth are turned from black to white? How do different shapes of trees affect viewers' feelings about the message of the picture? In addition to Bang's (2000) book, many children's picturebooks work well for close readings with younger readers. I am particularly fond of Wiesner's (1991) *Tuesday*.

For older readers, my favorite source of material for these initial close readings is Madden's (2005) *99 Ways to Tell a Story*. Madden begins the book with an eight-panel comic, titled "Template," that tells a simple story: A man is typing on a laptop while sitting at a desk. He gets up and shuts the laptop, then proceeds down the hall. When he is nearly to the refrigerator, someone upstairs calls down, "What time is it?" He responds, "It's 1:15." The voice upstairs says, "Thanks!" as the man opens the refrigerator. He stands staring at the open refrigerator, then hunches down in front of it and thinks, "What the hell was I looking for anyway?!" The rest of the book features 98 different ways of visually telling this story. Variations include the story as a political cartoon, map, collection of advertisements, graph, and manga; at least one version features an unreliable narrator. Because there are many adaptations of the same basic visual narrative, Madden's book rewards multiple close readings with students and allows them to see how different author choices affect our interpretations of the message and purpose of the narrative.

Conducting a Close Reading

In conducting a close reading of a visual text, I begin by displaying the text on a screen for all of us to view. Additionally, students can look at their own copies of the text—ideally copies that they can write in and highlight. Then we take a few minutes to individually inventory all of the visual elements we can identify. Students quickly list everything they see. This list might include: shape, color, words, layout, thought bubbles, speech bubbles, method author used to create the visuals (e.g., pen and ink, brush, computer software, paper cutout), number of panels, specific visual details (e.g., an old hat, a spiral staircase, a window, a long hallway, a superhero costume, a certain style of clothing), use of light, and the way each panel is framed (e.g., high angle, low angle, close up, long shot).

After each of us individually creates a list, we share our lists as a class, trying to come up with as complete an inventory of visual elements as possible. In my experience, students are adept at this exercise, noticing elements of the visual texts that I had always missed. There are also students who are familiar with the terminology associated with visual art and design and use it fluently, though I don't think fluency with the vocabulary of visual elements is necessary at this stage. This first close reading is about noticing the many visual elements that make up a page, scene, or image. In later close readings, it is vital for students to have a working set of terms for analyzing visual images; those terms can be taught over time as needed.

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Many teachers who are adept at deconstructing authors' uses of literary tropes and grammatical flourishes might feel like they don't themselves have a useful set of terms for identifying visual elements. If you're in that spot, both of McCloud's (1993, 2006) books provide useful terminology. Christel (2001) also includes a short but helpful list of terms for evaluating still frames of films that work with print visual texts.

In addition to developing a vocabulary for analyzing the visual elements of graphic novels, comic books, and other visual texts, it is also important to know the grammar and techniques for telling visual stories. Comics and graphic novels typically use panels that are ordered sequentially, but for first-time readers (teachers or young people), it can be tricky to know what order to read them in. McCloud (2006) helpfully explains that comics are typically read first from left to right and then from top to bottom (in some cultures, however, texts are read first from right to left). This same order holds true for captions and word balloons within individual panels. Also, captions, thought bubbles, and speech bubbles each look and function differently, but this might not be clear to readers who aren't familiar with their forms and functions. Again, McCloud (2006) is helpful for understanding how these elements work in the creation and interpretation of graphic novels and comics.

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After listing all of the elements in the text we're close reading, our discussion moves toward responding to two key questions:

1. What is the author and/or artist trying to say with this text?
2. How is the author and/or artist saying it?

The movement here is from an inventory of visual elements to a critical evaluation of those elements—and a consideration of the overall message of the visual text (or excerpt) as it is constructed by individual elements. For example, one of Madden's (2005) versions, titled "Thirty Panels" (pp. 62–63), includes less detailed art work framed mostly from a distance (although there are some close ups), but it adds a great deal of narrative information not included in the original eight-panel "Template." Students could discuss the use of framing: Why the close attention to some moments and not to others? What do the sound effects add to our understanding of the story? How do we view the characters differently now that we know more about them (we see, for example, who is upstairs asking for the time)? Why is the artwork less detailed? What is the overall purpose of this version? How is that purpose accomplished differently than in "Template"?

The purpose of these close reading exercises is to draw attention to the elements of visual narratives and to their rhetorical effects. As students become adept at these close analyses, they are better able to make connections to the texts and consider the author's and/or artist's intentionality and craft.

A Close Reading of Word(s) and Image(s)

Once students can expertly read images closely in this way, I think it's important to consider the particular ways images and words interact. McCloud (2006) includes a list of seven ways that words and pictures combine:

1. Word-Specific: Words providing all you need to know, while the pictures illustrate aspects of the scene being described.
2. Picture-Specific: Pictures providing all you need to know, while the words accentuate aspects of the scene being shown.
3. Duo-Specific: Words and pictures both sending roughly the same message.
4. Intersecting: Words and pictures working together in some respects while also contributing information independently.
5. Interdependent: Words and pictures combining to convey an idea that neither would convey alone.
6. Parallel: Words and pictures following seemingly different paths without intersecting. (p. 130)

McCloud (2006) provides examples and diagrams to better understand each of these categories (see pp. 130–141). While I can't fully explain each of them here, the point is that there are several possible relationships between words and pictures, and these relationships significantly affect the meaning being made within panels and across the complete text. If readers learn to tune into the interactions between text and images and not only focus on isolated visual elements, their ability to create meaning is greatly increased.

Making Comics

Media literacy educators (e.g., Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 2011) have pointed out the importance of including media production as part of any pedagogical effort to critically analyze media. Buckingham (2003) argues, "Creative production can be a means of generating new and more profound critical insights" (p. 122). In my experience, as students create their own comics, they come to better understand the methods that authors use in producing visual texts and are, therefore, more capable at interpretation and analysis.

One concern for teachers who introduce comic creation in their classrooms is the reaction of students who don't feel competent in drawing visuals. One of our English education program's student teachers, Rachel (personal communication, January 31, 2012), said she overcame this concern by sharing her stick figure drawings with students. She also said that found pictures and photos (e.g., from magazines or printed from websites) can ease the fears of students who aren't comfortable drawing. There are also several free or inexpensive software applications that can be used to create comics. Beach, Appleman, Hynds, and Wilhelm (2011) list the following: Comic Life, ToonDoo, MakeBeliefsComix, Pixton, and ReadWriteThink Comic Creator (all can easily be found online).

Some Can't-Miss Visual Texts

I have chosen to highlight specific introductory activities that students can do to help them learn how to understand, analyze, and connect with visual texts in the classroom. This has meant focusing the discussion on a narrow selection of texts that could be utilized in these activities. However, I want to make sure that teachers know where to look for the very best in visual texts for young adults. There are many high-quality options, but here are 10 that were mentioned by educators who have expertise with YA visual literature (listed in alphabetical order by author).

Bragg, G., & O'Malley, K. (2011). *How they croaked: The awful ends of the awfully famous*. New York, NY: Walker.

Brosgol, V. (2011). *Anya's ghost*. New York, NY: First Second.

Griffin, A., & Brown, L. (2010). *Picture the dead*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks.

Hamilton, T. (2009). *Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451: The authorized adaptation*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang.

Hinds, G. (2010). *The odyssey*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick.

Satrapi, M. (2003). *Persepolis: The story of a childhood*. New York, NY: Pantheon.

Smith, J. (2004–2010). Bone series. Columbus, OH: Cartoon Books.

Spiegelman, A. (2006). *The complete Maus: A survivor's tale* [includes both *Maus I: My father bleeds history* and *Maus II: And here my troubles began*]. New York, NY: Pantheon.

Tan, S. (2006). *The arrival*. New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine.

Yang, G. L. (2006). *American born Chinese*. New York, NY: First Second.

I haven't read all of these, but they were recommended by people I trust. Here's to "ruining" graphic novels and other visual texts for our students!

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Found pictures and photos . . . can ease the fears of students who aren't comfortable drawing.

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Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2007). Altering English: Re-examining the whole class novel and making room for graphic novels and more. In J. B. Carter (Ed.), *Building literacy connections with graphic novels: Page by page, panel by panel* (pp. 26–37). Urbana, IL: NCTE.

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