Unwritten Narratives:
Framing Literature in Graphic Novels

Geert Vandermeersche
Ghent University
How do graphic novels represent literary culture / literacy?

How do graphic novels reflect on the status and function of literature?
How do graphic novels represent literary culture / literacy?
- Media, literacy & embedding

How do graphic novels reflect on the status and function of literature?
- Stories as tools
“The public also understands that these shared meanings are essential for communication inside our nation — or, to put the matter simply, they are essential for reading”

TRADITIONAL THINKING HAS LONG HELD THAT TRULY GREAT WORKS OF ART AND LITERATURE ARE ONLY POSSIBLE WHEN THE TWO ARE KEPT AT ARM’S LENGTH.
“the fact that language and culture have been multimodal since the beginning of history … the fact the throughout history the different media have been inter-related in terms of both structure and content, has been a blind spot to the human sciences.”

-Mikko Lehtonen, “On No Man’s Land. Theses on Intermediality”, p. 73, p. 75
“print narratives migrate far beyond the original place and time in which they were produced”

Nick Montfort, *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*
"what does the transformation of certain forms of literary reading ... suggest about popular literacy, specifically in terms of **what readers are now led to believe they need to know in order to be culturally literate**, not by E. D. Hirsch and company, but by television book clubs ... and literary bestsellers?"

Jim Collins, *Bring on the Books for Everybody*, p. 18
“we are in the midst of a cognitive shift and reading today has become a **hybrid textual-visual experience**, as witnessed by the inescapable presence of the Internet, Powerpoint, cell phone screens, and the numerous full-color illustrations and photographs now found in newspapers”

Stephen Tabachnick, *Teaching the Graphic Novel*, p. 4
“Highly recommended.”
—Brian K. Vaughan, Y THE LAST MAN

MIKE CAREY
PETER GROSS

the unwritten

Book One:
TOMMY TAYLOR AND
THE BOGUS IDENTITY
HOW DO GRAPHIC NOVELS REPRESENT LITERARY CULTURE

- Media & embedding

HOW DO GRAPHIC NOVELS REFLECT ON THE STATUS AND FUNCTION OF LITERATURE?

- Stories as tools / equipment
Werner Wolf’s Typology

A concept to describe, in the broadest terms, a system of relations between different media objects.

Homomediality: e.g. intertextuality

Intermediality (Heteromediality)

Intracompositional

Multi- or plurimediality

Intermedial Reference to...

(1) Medium, or
(2) Genre ('system reference'), or
(3) Individual Work ('individual reference')

Explicit Reference / 'Intermedial thematisation'

Implicit Reference (Intermedial Imitation)

Evocation

Partial Reproduction

Formal intermedial imitation

Transmediality

Intermedial Transposition

Extracompositional

http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/20/
Adaptation from ...

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night Dream* and *The Tempest*

Wells's *The Invisible Man*, Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* Series

Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*

diverse fairy tales such as *Snow White*, Prince Charming, *Red Riding Hood*, etc.

characters from all 'ages' of superhero comics, characters from popular culture

J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Jud Süss

characters from Shakespeare
“this reference is carried out by the signifiers of the ‘dominant’ medium which is used by the work in question, so that the other, ‘non-dominant’ medium (the medium referred to) is actually only ‘present’ as an idea, as a signified and hence as a reference”

Werner Wolf, 2002, p. 23
IMBO-GATE MADAM LIED UNDER OATH. DNN FEDERAL
THERE'S ONLY ONE THING THIS CAN POSSIBLY MEAN.
BELIEVE IT, MY FRIENDS. TOM TAYLOR IS
TOMMY TAYLOR.

HE'S THE MESSIAH! THE WORD MADE FLESH!
HE'S TOMMY! TOMMY IS AMONG US!

GOD, IT JUST GOES ON GETTING WORSE.

HAVE THE POLICE CONTACTED YOU YET?

ABOUT MY WALKING OUT WITHOUT EVEN SAYING GOODBYE?
GIVE HIM YOUR--

CLICK

God, it just goes on getting worse.

Have the police contacted you yet?

About me walking out without even saying goodbye.
Embedded Narratives

“any narrative context within which a character reads or writes, hears or tells a narrative can produce these same relations between embedding and embedded narratives”

William Nelles, “Stories within Stories: Narrative Levels and Embedded Narrative”
Wilson calls it a \textit{canker}. It happens when a story gets \textit{corrupted} or complicated too much. When the energy inside it gets \textit{poisoned}.

So this is because of \textit{Goebbels}? Because of the movie?

It's because of the contradictions. In the novel, Süss Sins, but finds \textit{salvation} through his religion. In the movie, he's just a \textit{monster}.

When enough people had seen the movie -- there was a crisis, an \textit{imbalance}. 
Contemporary screen culture “converts many viewers to **amateur narratologists**, noting usage and violations of convention, chronicling chronologies, and highlighting both inconsistencies and continuities across episodes and even series.”

Jason Mittell, “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television”, p. 38
He believed that stories **touch** the world in specific places, but also that stories touch each other—that there are places where they **meet**.
“Criticism is the art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to poem.”

Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 96
“the general’s and the librarian’s concern with flexible, dynamic cross-links and systems (rather than with static content and substance)”

“If Musil sets the scene for the suggestion that connectivity, interoperability are not simply technical terms, but also aspects of a new type of literacy, …”

Gunther Martens, “Literature, Digital Humanities and the Age of the Encyclopedia”. CLCWeb (Forthcoming, September 2013)
“Planetary is this investigation of fiction through fiction, on the plane of fiction … to investigate the inside of each narrative, and discover the connections among them … And as one could get an education in the humanities by following every reference in James Joyce’s Ulysses, the popular culture scholar could do worse than track Planetary’s source material.”

Geoff Klock, How to Read Superhero Comics
HOW DO GRAPHIC NOVELS REPRESENT LITERARY CULTURE
- Media & embedding

HOW DO GRAPHIC NOVELS REFLECT ON THE STATUS AND FUNCTION OF LITERATURE?
- Stories as tools
"shouldn't we have a better idea of what books do to and for us?"

“The border of the text constitutes and defines its specific fictional status and the kinds of use to which it can be put.”

John Frow, “The Literary Frame”
When a Book Becomes a Disease: Dr. Pauline Swann and Tommy Taylor

On CBC’s Moral Massacre debate show, broadcast last night at 9.00pm EST, Dr. Pauline Swann astonished the studio audience and her fellow guests by asserting that Tommy Taylor now constitutes a nationwide – perhaps a global – mental health problem.

Dr. Swann, a noted psychotherapist, has already published three books discussing the links between modern culture and mental health. Now, in The Poisoned Well, she turns her theory of cultural bootstrapping on the biggest media target of all: the lovable boy wizard whose exploits have been read by more than a third of humanity.

“Karl Jung suggested that there’s a collective human unconscious,” Swann said. “An under-mind that feeds all our myths, all our deepest instincts. That’s always been true. But in an age of mass culture, we can actually write to the under-mind. Our virally spreading fictions embed themselves in the collective unconscious of humanity and change it.”
“In this sense, narrative functions as a powerful and basic tool for thinking, enabling users of stories to produce and interpret literary texts, carry out spontaneous conversations, make sense of news reports in a variety of media, create and assess medical case histories, and provide testimony in court.”

David Herman, "Stories as Tools for Thinking", p. 163
I learn about how stories work for the same reason that soldiers learn how to strip a rifle.

You should, too.
IT'S--IT'S A STORY, IT'S JUST A STORY, MAN.
IT'S NOT WORTH DYING FOR!

JUST A STORY?

TELL THAT TO THE GREEKS WHO Fought AT TROY, TOMMY WITH WHAT?

TELL THE WOMEN BURNED AS WITCHES, THE ROSENBERGS, Sacco AND VANZETTI.

TELL THE MARTYRS OF ALL THE RELIGIONS AND THE MILLIONS WHO FELL IN ALL THE WARS SINCE TIME BEGAN.

STORIES ARE THE ONLY THING WORTH DYING FOR!

SRAUNNNK
AND I KNOW YOU CAN'T ANSWER ME. SPEAK WITH ONE VOICE, OR ANYTHING.

BECAUSE YOU'RE NOT ONE VOICE. YOU'RE ALL OF THEM. HOBBES'S WHALE, NOT SINBAD'S OR JONAH'S, OR MÜNCHHAUSEN'S.

AND HOBBES'S WHALE WAS JUST A SYMBOL. IT STOOD FOR THE POWER OF THE MASSES, A BILLION LIVING THINGS MAKING UP ONE HUGE ENTITY.

I THINK YOU'RE THAT, KIND OF--THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS, OR SOMETHING.

THE FICTIONAL UNCONSCIOUS. THE MINDS OF ALL THE MILLIONS OF PEOPLE WHO READ MY FATHER'S BOOKS, OR ANY BOOKS, MAYBE.

ALL THOSE MINDS, FOCUSED ON HIM--ON TOMMY, AND THROUGH TOMMY, ON ME.
“Narrative, arguably, is at once a vehicle for and target of such distributed cognition, which is enabled by the shared construction and revision of stories, but which also eventuates in the fashioning and refashioning of accounts of how the world is, might be, or should be.”

David Herman, ”Stories as Tools for Thinking“, p. 163
REPRESENT LITERARY CULTURE

- Intermediality
- Connecting stories ➔ ‘critical’ literacy

REFLECT ON THE STATUS AND FUNCTION OF LITERATURE?

- Effects of reading / stories
- Caution about stories as tools
I'M SORRY. I JUST GOT CARRIED AWAY, THAT'S ALL.

BIEN SÛR. A GOOD STORY CAN DO THAT TO YOU.
Geert.Vandermeersche@UGent.be

www.cultureeducation.ugent.be

Ghent University
Department of Educational Studies