The Power of Hybrids
Complex and effective visual narratives that resist categorization

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The following text is a refined version of the paper presented at the *The 16th Annual British IBBY/NCRCL MA Children’s Literature Conference*. The presentation was delivered by both Frixos Michaelides and Petros Panaou, who interacted with each other, maintaining at the same instance their distinct voices; the former approached the issue as an author and illustrator, while the latter approached it as a scholar and critic of children’s literature. We would like to keep this distinction between the two voices in the published text as well, since we believe that it adds interest to the analysis and affords the opportunity to present similar ideas from different stand points.

Petros:

Comic books, graphic novels, picture books, wordless picture books, illustrated books, and novels, as distinct genres abide to specific conventions. Word-image interaction in each genre is also guided by conventions and can only vary within a preset range. These identifiable conventions assist the interpretation of stories; the reader knows what to expect and how to receive it. We assert, however, that the postmodern era has brought the publication of works that break conventions, resist categorization, subvert reading expectations, and yet are highly successful in communicating powerful and engaging stories.

*Tales from Outer Suburbia* (2008), *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (2007), or *The Savage* (2008), for example, are such works. Frixos Michaelides, an experienced author and illustrator, and Petros Panaou, a scholar of children’s literature, analyze these books – each from his own perspective – pondering on the manners in which their narratives are constructed through a powerful fusion of generic conventions, a combination that prompts the reader to stay constantly alert, assessing the nature of word-image interaction on each page, and switching from one mode of interpretation to another. While these “hybrids” certainly do imply an experienced reader – one who is familiar with the conventions of each of the aforementioned genres – they also imply a reader who, being a child of the postmodern era, accepts and celebrates flexibility, fluidity, and transmutation.

Of particular interest are the avant-garde techniques, which are employed to achieve this effect. Stephen Weiner defines the graphic novel as ‘a story told in comic book format with a beginning, middle, and end’. Weiner dates the use of the term graphic novel to the publication of *A Contract with God: And Other Tenement Stories*, by Will Eisner in 1978. Eisner, himself in his seminal work, *Comics & Sequential Art*, implies that the graphic novel is inherently avant-garde, since it breaks from a tradition of comics being ‘confined to short narrations or depictions of episodes of brief but intense duration’ (p.141). This is
why the first attempts of publishing and promoting graphic novels ran ‘headlong into an unprepared audience, not to mention an ill-equipped distribution system’ that followed ‘the patterns of yesterday’ (p.141). In an effort to provide the genre with higher status, Eisner intentionally marketed his graphic novel *A Contract with God* to adult audiences and had it sold in bookstores rather than in drugstores and comic book specialty shops.

The graphic novel’s status has of course changed dramatically since 1978. The fact that this conference has been devoted to comics and graphic novels attests to this change. But status is not the only thing that has been changing during the past few years. Eisner had also pointed to certain limitations of the graphic novel:

1. In being specific, images obviate interpretation.
2. Converting a textual passage into a visual image in the mind, rather than viewing a printed version of the image, permits a more participatory involvement.
3. Within the comic book art, there is little time and space to deal with abstract ideas or emotions, such as ‘the surge of pain or the glow of love or the turmoil of inner conflicts’ (p.140).

Writing in 1985, Eisner concludes his discussion of the medium’s limitations and challenges as follows:

> Yet it is precisely in these areas where the opportunity for expansion of the application of comic book art lies. This is the prime and continuous confrontation which the comic book cartoonist must address. There are only two ways to deal with it: to try, and risk failure, or not to do it at all—that is, to avoid any subject not easily expressed by the present state of the art or its existing clichés. (p.140)

It seems that ever since, several artists have taken the first option, risking failure but producing extraordinary visual stories. And of course, they achieved this by breaking away from the present state of the art and its existing clichés.

**Frixos:**

The first work to be discussed is *Spring-Heeled Jack: A Story of Bravery and Evil* (1989), by Philip Pullman and David Mostyn. Words in this book compose a fast running text, giving the outlines of the plot, describing only what is necessary: Names... facts... since the illustrations take care of the rest: the physical characteristics of the heroes, their sentiments, their feelings towards each other and more. This particular form makes the book interesting, rather than time consuming. The pictures give power and brilliance to the plot, leaving no space for doubts or gaps in the description.

There are pictures in this book that cannot be classified easily... They function as pictures in comic-books, or as ordinary illustrations in classic novels, or they sometimes simply accompany the text
as plain sketches; but as Figure 1 shows they rarely are just that. In certain cases, some pictures function also as autonomous caricatures, or touch upon the limits of animation and cartooning (Figure 2).

In page 29 we have a picture (Figure 3) that has the title ‘HOW TO HOLYSTONE A FUTTOCK SHROUD,’ which supposedly explains the text that precedes it. The text reads: ‘[…] the sailors went on reefing the foremast, furling the capstan, and holystoning the futtock shrouds. It was a busy ship’ (p.25). The picture could have been taken from an educational handbook or from a manual with guiding directions of use. The only difference is that these directions do not make any sense; at least not to a person who does not know what a bight, a luff, a gaff, a Turk’s head, a starboard cringle, or a fisherman’s friend is. In this manner, the image is used to reinforce the text’s humour. The weight and complexity of the sailor’s assumedly laborious work is communicated in a comical way through the question mark in the bubble above the cat. At the same time, it is amazing how we can have complete knowledge of what is taking place on the ship at the time, even though it is never clearly explained neither in the text nor in the picture.

Dialogues are sometimes presented in babbles within the picture, just like in comic books (Figure 4), and sometimes in the form of classic narrative, with the picture undertaking a descriptive role. The setting of a scene may be communicated by a simple sketch. This allows the reader to add her/his own details as s/he wishes or imagines. That is to say, the picture is not restrictive but informative; as it may function in an illustrated novel. At other instances, the pictures take on the role of showing the reactions of heroes to some incident, functioning as journalistic photographs or theatrical extracts. A very effective element of the pictures has to do with the thoughts of creatures that observe the story as it unfolds. Thought bubbles above the heads of cats, dogs, or mice present a detached view of what is taking place, as in comic-books. There are instances where the picture precedes the text, predisposing the reader for the text that what will follow. At other times the text precedes the picture, and in some cases the picture replaces the text.

This book is a classic example of the multifaceted powers and capacities of illustration and the multiple roles it can play. Cross and parallel connections of picture and text are employed here, rendering the book anything but boring. Spring-Heeled Jack reveals how the creators can handle a story in many different ways: With words, with static pictures, with a script, with visual sequences, with movement, with external or internal observation... subjectively or from a holistic point of view. Both the reader’s emotion and intellect are stimulated.

Petros:

At a point where Ned, one of the protagonists of Spring-Heeled Jack, makes rude sounds and gestures, a bubble above the head of a little creature – one of the neutral observers Frixos has discussed – reads: ‘WHAT KIND OF A BOOK IS THIS?’ (p.29). I would like to rephrase the little creature’s question into: ‘WHAT KIND OF BOOK IS THIS?’ Is it really a graphic novel, as it is vividly advertised on the front cover? As defined at the beginning of the presentation, a graphic novel is a story told entirely in comic
book format. This is not the case here. Is it an illustrated novel then? Obviously not. It can best be described as a patchwork of chunks of pure text and comic book strips. As the blurb on the back cover explains, it is “a fantastic adventure told in words and cartoons.”

This approach aims at surpassing the limitations described by Eisner, since the text enhances interpretation, participatory involvement, and the expression of abstract ideas and emotions, while the comic book art enhances the story’s pace, the depiction of action, and the insertion of humour in serious circumstances. However, we describe the result as a patchwork, since the two narrative modes are not blended. In most instances, they are kept distinctively separate, both in terms of space and function. It is quite illustrative that one can read the story, at least to a surface level, by just reading the comic book strips and ignoring the patches of text.

We now turn to a more recent book that separates word from image all together, in terms of space, but is much more effective in blending the two in terms of time and meaning; this is achieved mainly through “the invention” of ingenious transition techniques.

Frixos:

In *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (2007), Brian Selznick places us in a cinematic mode right from the start by using a black background, an introduction of darkness, and silence, and by stating the date the story takes place. You are not about to read a book, but watch a film or better yet watch a book-film. The scenario is based on a novel that is being processed and adopted into a mystery film. You feel as if you are reading the story, witnessing the scene preparation, film sketches, film stills, a transition from words to an almost animated film... and the actual film at the same time.

The first pages focus gradually from a bright moon to Paris under the moon, to the inside of a Paris train station, and to young Hugo inside the station, in the style of a cinematic introduction. This fact reminds you of those movies which are included by a narrator with a smooth voice. In *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, the voice is written in black and white and takes any tone the reader wants.

The detailed sketches, the surrounding environment, the close-ups, the panoramic views, the zooming in and out techniques, the characters' shining eyes, make you forget that you have a book in your hands. The illustrations leave nothing to chance. The placement of every picture creates a certain mood or feeling, allowing the viewer to perceive fear, the need to hide, mystery, secrecy, loneliness, etc. It allows us to watch every step and action of the characters and feel the emotional state that they are in. The feeling is transferred from the image to the reader in an exceptionally direct manner.

Every chapter ends with a blank black page, as it happens in the old films when there is a scene change. But every new chapter begins with a new number and title in large fonts, just like in classic novels. The film-like “direction” allows us to observe and focus on the story in various ways. The text is used in the cases when the images cannot “speak” (meaning the dialogues) even though they reveal a lot more that they usually do in picture books. A sentence is enough to introduce the next page/image, which can describe the rest of the details (places, time, environment, feelings, objects, and people). A picture is
enough to introduce the next part of the text that will describe the relations of the characters, allow them to express their own thoughts, articulate the necessary words. This gives an extra dimension to the book-film. You can hear, listen to the characters’ voice; it feels like you know and recognise their voice, in your mind. At times, you can even listen to the soundtrack of the movie... the music created by the harmony and rhythm of text-image exchange.

The book manages to affect and awaken all the senses of the reader: You feel, see, smell, hear, even taste the story, and thus you participate actively. Yes, you are actually living the movie... living in the movie, living in the book. You are transferred in another time-space dimension, witnessing a beautiful story that becomes live, right in front of your eyes, as it happens in virtual reality. The creator has managed to put his mind in the book and at the same time to put the book into the reader’s mind. The reader feels that, and this fact is verified by the creator at the end of the story:

But now I have built a new automaton. I spent countless hours designing it. I made every gear myself, carefully cut every brass disk, and fashioned every last bit of machinery with my own hands [...] The complicated machinery inside my automaton can produce one hundred and fifty-eight different pictures, and it can write, letter by letter, an entire book, twenty-six thousand one hundred and fifty-nine words. These words. (pp.510-511)

Petros:

What kind of book is this, then? Is it a novel? An illustrated novel? A picture-book? The publishers are aware of the difficulty in enclosing this particular work into a specific genre-box. This is why they try to avoid any confusion by naming a completely new genre. The title page reads: “The Invention of Hugo Cabret: A Novel in Words and Pictures by Brian Selznick.” Kimberly Gotches, a librarian from Illinois, writes:

Notably, the fact that this 533-page book is the longest to win the Caldecott award for illustrations has caused a resurged effort to define the picture book form. We now look more closely at the Caldecott criteria that notes: ‘A “picture book for children” as distinguished from other books with illustrations, is one that essentially provides the child with a visual experience. A picture book has a collective unity of story-line, theme, or concept, developed through the series of pictures of which the book is comprised’ (ALA). By merging the picture book form with that of the novel, Selznick proposes that the visual and textual experience in a book need not be mutually exclusive and need not only interest the very young. (n.p.)

We prefer to think of the book as a hybrid, a complex and effective narrative that combines elements from different media (novels, silent movies, wordless picture books, and comics) resisting any attempt of categorization.
One might doubt the presence of comic book elements in *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*. But, Scott Mccloud’s definition of comics leaves no space for doubt: ‘Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer’ (p.9). Eisner also describes comics as ‘sequential art.’ At the same instance, film techniques are used within this sequence of images; the *establishing shot*, for example: ‘a shot used near the beginning of a scene to establish the inter-relationship of details to be shown subsequently in closer shots’ (*Film/Editing Terms*).

But the most impressive techniques used in this book are the ones that achieve smooth transitions from, and interaction between, word and image. In page 46 for example, after a long series of images that sets the scene, introduces the main characters, and arouses our curiosity, the text that follows comes to add details and satisfy this curiosity. In other instances, the transition works in a reverse manner; the text sets the mood for the visual narrative that follows. In this manner, the different strengths of images and words are enlisted, and their inadequacies are overcome. Shaun Tan is yet another artist who taps into this potential, creating highly effective and affective *hybrid narratives*.

Frixos:

The inside cover page and title page of Shawn Tan’s *Tales from Outer Suburbia* (2008) predispose the reader for a fictional trip in the real everyday life. They give both the sense of the usual and the unusual that co-exist in our mind and generally in the way we live life. The book includes illustrated short stories and narratives.

In a story under the title ‘The water buffalo,’ the affix of the image next to the text forces the reader to wonder about its meaning. How can somebody trust a water buffalo for directions? Even the position of the girl’s body expresses the same question. On the opposite side we see the buffalo’s insisting statement that leaves no space for arguments. The feelings and question marks raised from the image are managed and explained by the text.

In the story entitled ‘Eric,’ while the text speaks about a real person, the illustration shocks us with the curious presence of Eric; a visitor that hovers till the end between the real and the imaginary. The difference in Eric’s culture is presented in the pictures by his strange physic. The details about Eric being ‘different’ are given elementary in the pictures (his strange responses to electricity, products, and stamps, his room, his strange baggage, the way he expresses his feelings) while the text gives the general idea of diversity (Figure 5). Pictures provide the details, allowing the text to remain economical, short and snappy, and focused on general ideas. In the pictures, Eric meets the new world of the narrator, while the reader is allowed to observe both worlds.

And while Eric is different in presence, came from a foreign place, he leaves as strangely as he comes – in his own way – he leaves behind tokens of love. A love expressed visually by the illustrations, without words and geographical or racial restrictions. Because love is the same everywhere, but its expression and enjoyment are subjected to culture. The text functions mainly as a leading summary and
the illustration plays an explanatory role, leaving the reader to be simultaneously the analyst and the corroborator of what is described from the two.

In ‘Broken toys,’ the placement of the picture of an old-fashioned diver walking in the streets (Figure 6), before the story develops, causes queries, mystery, and an urge to find out what follows. This is a strange picture, which takes the reader on a journey of imagination and speculation. The same speculations that the children in the story make, concerning the Japanese lady who remains locked in her house as mentioned in the text. And the answer of the question: ‘What is the relation between the picture-diver and the Japanese lady-text?’ comes at the end, in order to explain the loneliness and misery that wraps people who end up as broken, unused toys.

The ending also reveals the connection between the first and last pictures with the entire story. The symbolic placement of pictures with broken toys gives the meaning of the story right from the start, a fact unbeknown to the reader. In the first picture the toy is broken, like the Japanese lady’s heart, while at the end the horse is reconnected again, as the Japanese lady’s heart when she finds a lost beloved person.

At the end of the book, the stories end but the surprising combination of illustration and text carries on. Without the last images and words, the book would not function so catalytically on the reader. The strange individuals that compose the reading group depicted here confirms the trip between reality and imagination, while the library tag confirms the purpose of the book: to be read by all of us... The buffalo at the end, gazing far and wide gives each reader the chance to interpret the last picture as s/he wishes. Just like the image of the buffalo in the beginning. This tendency exists in the entire book. The end of the story makes a cycle, taking you right at the beginning. Like the endless cycles of real life and fantasy and the endless combinations between text and image.

Petros:

So, “What kind of book is this?” A collection of short stories, one might claim. An illustrated collection another might add. But, as Frixos has demonstrated, to a large extent this is still sequential art, series of interconnected images that are interrupted, explained, completed, or extended by text. The fact that each story differs drastically – in style, media, technique, theme, and word-image interaction – from the rest of the stories, makes the book as a whole even more complex, challenging, and utterly innovative. Each story asks the reader to read and view it on its own accord, to break away, not only from traditional conventions, but also from the conventions established by other stories in this same book.

Vaughan Prain explains that the manner in which Tan continuously constructs ‘new ways of perceiving’ is particularly ‘disquieting.’ Tan engages with themes such as ‘colonial invasion, a sense of belonging for the immigrant outsider or for inter-generational community members within a town, as well as intense personal themes of loneliness, depression, and hope,’ but,

rather than represent these themes in a tightly structured way, Tan’s (2007) works construct new ways of perceiving and new perceptions about these themes through the interplay of images and
Rather than favouring fixed subject positions and identities, Tan’s work favours flexibility, openness, and a willingness to explore one’s inner and outer world, as if one views them for the first time. The message is of course tightly connected to the medium. While the hybrids analyzed in this presentation certainly do imply an experienced reader – one who is familiar with the conventions of each of the different traditional genres – they also imply a reader who, being a child of the postmodern era, accepts and celebrates flexibility, fluidity, and transmutation. Dave McKean, the final artist to be discussed here, is perhaps the one who consistently constructs such a postmodern implied reader.

Frixos:

In The Day I Swapped my Dad for two Goldfish (1997), by Dave McKean and Neil Gaiman, collages of painted images, photographs, and drawings of basic elements and symbols compose the refined technique of the illustration (Figure 7). The beginning of the book, with a double spread that depicts a map/setting and a second double spread that presents eight separate vertical graphic symbols, informs the reader about the story’s context. Photos of two paper clips with humorous text complete the introduction of the story, providing a sample of the creators’ humour and creating a positive mood in which to read the story that follows. The humour on the clips is sharp and unexpected and makes the reader wonder about the way the story will develop.

At first we see an illustrated story, written in a handwriting that reveals the age and mentality of the child-narrator. But right away it changes to a comic-style picture book, with the dialogues being in bubbles or in quotations, in a “he said – she said” pattern. The text is placed above or next to the image of the person speaking. There is continuous alteration of the relations between text and pictures, and of their expressive mannerisms. The book combines forms and elements from different genres, all at the same time and sometimes on the same page. There is no specific pattern, but rather a constant change and blending. Text and illustrations break every rule, forming a hybrid picture book, comic book, illustrated book, graphic novel.

The Wolves in the Walls (2003), also by David McKean and Neil Gaiman, is yet another hybrid. The book’s cover shows that something is really behind those walls but the pencil in the child’s hand makes you doubt or wonder if it is something real or something the child has imagined and drew on a paper; but the eyes of the wolf are so realistic… Whatever it is, it is scary and mysterious, as you can tell from the font type and the half drawn half real wolf (Figure 8).

The technique used takes you on a journey between imagination and reality, since it is using drawings and paints (fictional part), photos (the real part), collages and graphics (somewhere in between), depending on the illustrator’s approach to the text. A film-like effect is achieved, with the
illustrator functioning as a film-director, choosing long shots, closer shots to the faces, etc. The illustrations focus on the dialogues, making the reader pay attention to the words. The girl, Lucy, is sure about the wolves in the walls (notice her wide-open eyes, compared to her mother's closed eyes), while the mother is sure that there are no wolves... and she is so calm.

The text seems to be ignoring the illustrations in two ways. First: we have no bubbles; only the “he said-she said” pattern. Second: the text follows the rest of the character's version that the wolves are not in the walls, while the illustrations seem to retell the story agreeing more with Lucy's version of reality. A battle between reality and fiction is taking place through the opposition of text and image. At first we have realistic elements in the pictures making Lucy's story appear true, but then, when this outrageous story is recognized as real in the text, the illustrations suggest otherwise, using ink drawings to depict the wolves, making fun of the text, playing with the reader's perception of reality (Figure 9). One could say that the walls represent the borders between reality and fiction, which the mind can easily transgress, as Lucy does, and as the creators of the book do, showing that there are really no borders. The relations and contrasts between text and illustrations are so intense, and the combinations and alterations so vivid, that you have to go along and agree with them.

The last hybrid we discuss is The Savage (2008), by Dave McKean and David Almond. Reading the preface, you get a glimpse into the psyche of the young writer who wrote the original story of savage. The mentality of the writer is transported automatically in the single-coloured drawings, which work marvellously with the text, revealing the intensity of sentiments that are not described in words. The typed text describes a mature self who justifies the angry adolescent in the pictures, while the messy and misspelled handwritten words that accompany the pictures add to the comprehension of the mental state of the hero (Figure 10). And while the typed text describes the soft-aching heart of the hero, Blue, the pictures and handwriting show the wild and enraged side of Blue's self; the Savage.

The sequence of descriptions and images accomplishes to put the reader in Blue's place; a place from where one cannot distinguish fact from fiction. On the other hand, the final sequence reveals the therapeutic attribute of the story that Blue writes. The knife and the mattock become pencil and paper. A key phrase towards the end reveals the philosophy behind the book's form, demonstrating that the alternation of image and text has not being accidental: 'I realized that the savage had drawn me long before I ever started writing him' (p.75).

Petros:
Paul Gravett recalls McKean’s 1987 debut with the Escape graphic novel Violent Cases, written by Neil Gaiman: “I recall the buzz in Titan Books’ basement when he brought in the moody cover art montaged with faded photos, a torn dollar bill and playing card, and real ivy leaves. Comics weren’t supposed to look like this” (n.p.). Gravett explains that,
his techniques were pretty radical, at least in Eighties English-language comics: collaging maps, texts, fabric, movie posters, to convey the unreliable, distorting lens of memory; choosing different media for different effects, even in the same panel; reconfiguring panels, balloons and captions into fresh relations. (n.p.)

This mixing of media and the reconfiguration of how panels, balloons, and captions were supposed to look like and relate to each other is evident in the works presented by Frixos. Their ‘hybridity’ stems exactly from this subversion and mixing of genres, their techniques and conventions.

Through his works McKean has pushed things forward. As Gravett asserts, even though ‘plenty of pen-and-ink cartoonists were wary, even disdainful, then of the fancy, “fine artsy” experiments McKean was making,’ ‘so much of what McKean started introducing in the late Eighties, such as overlapping images on acetate or playing with the distortions of video and photocopiers, can be seen now as hands-on precursors to the image manipulation software common in comics today’ (n.p.).

Scott McCloud draws a diagram, an area described by three vertices (‘reality,’ language symbolic meaning, and the picture plane) to present ‘the total pictorial vocabulary of comics or of any of the visual arts’ (p.51). Close to the reality vertex, McCloud positions realistic art. Close to the language vertex, he positions iconic/ symbolic art and, of course, text. The picture plane vertex is where we have the art object, where shapes, lines, and colours are themselves and do not pretend to be anything else. He then positions some artists on this diagram. Through the diagram he sketches for McKean’s body of work, he makes clear that, unlike most artists whose work covers only small parts of the diagram, in McKean’s case the entire surface of the triangle is covered. McCloud writes the following caption above the diagram: ‘Some artists, such as the irrepressible Sergio Aragones staked their claim on a particular area long ago and have been quite happy ever since. Others, such as Dave McKean, are forever on the move, experimenting, taking chances, never satisfied’ (p.56).

McKean is the kind of artist we have celebrated throughout our presentation. These artists have brought a revolution to the world of visual narratives for children and adults. And even though the complexity and sheer genius of their work cannot possibly be captured by a brief presentation, both of us (an artist and a scholar) hope that we have managed to share with you some of the pleasures we have derived from them.

Frixos:
While reading these books, I travelled with all kinds of art. Literature, painting, cinema, comics, theatre and graphic arts, photos and animations, with music or even sound effects sometimes. So… hybrid graphic novels are… a complicated combination of many things, arts, ideas, sentiments, communication, so they surely are literature. A kind of literature written with letters and lines, words and shapes, paragraphs and colours, chapters and paintings, offering the reader a sensation of fulfilment. Hybrids are a great spiritual stimulation and an exceptional media of heart-to-mind communication. They allow
creators and readers to communicate and share ideas and sentiments beyond the four time-space dimensions.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Secondary Sources