
FOCALISATION IN COMICS. FROM THE SPECIFICITIES OF THE MEDIUM TO CONCEPTUAL REFORMULATION

By Kai Mikkonen





It goes without saying that all components in mixed media such as comics can suggest a perspective. The processing of narrative information in graphic storytelling involves paying attention not just to the distinction between *who perceives?* and *who narrates?*, which is relevant in much literary narratives, but also to the interplay and changing relations between various elements in different media to propel a common narrative. These include the narrative voice (if there is one, if not, the style is what is called 'mute'), a verbal focaliser (if one exists), a centre of visual perception (or the visual focaliser), a centre of attention (the visual focalised), the picture frame, and other elements such as colour, tone and hue, texture, the style of the graphic line and caricature, or the form of the speech and thought balloons. All these elements can suggest a particular perspective in the story. Furthermore, we also have to take into consideration the multiple ways in which the textual element, by which I mean written language, and visual focalisation interpenetrate each other and thus allow a multiplication of perspectives by way of typography, page and panel setup, and other means.

It is thus highly interesting, but also extremely difficult, to describe how we go about constructing a sense of the prevailing frame of perception in graphic storytelling. By this I mean a kind of global frame of narration that enables us to estimate the meaning and importance of the alternating perspectives at the micro-level of the narrative, be this perspective figural, meaning that it may be tied to a particular character or some unnamed observer, or a non-character bound position. How are we to decide which of the multiple focalisations, visual, verbal, or their combination, need to be seen as more important? Also, how do we attribute expressive signals, both visual and verbal, to a certain agent or refrain from doing so? How do we, for instance, know that some story is told or seen in first person? And, further, when or why do we stop worrying about who sees and perceives, meaning worrying about the identity of the see-er, since the question is not relevant for understanding the story?

Here, I will not try to tackle all these difficult and exciting questions. Instead, my objective is to concentrate on certain medium-specific aspects of focalisation that I think we should consider if we wish to investigate the broader issues of perception, reading and viewing in comics. More precisely, my reflections will concern three important strategies for organising and filtering visual perspectives in graphic storytelling:

1. The nature of the spatially explicit (or determined) point of perception in graphic images
2. The simultaneity of different visual focalisers inside and outside the image frame
3. The complex scale of intermediate (visual) focal points between internal and non-character bound positions



These strategies involve, first and foremost, visual information about observation, involving the point of perception, the simultaneity of visual focalisers, and subjectivity in the field of vision. Due to the limitations of the focus and the space available, I will leave aside some equally important questions about filtering perspectives by verbal means, such as the problem of split verbal focalisation, that is, instances when the same person speaks and narrates simultaneously outside and inside the image.

I intend to discuss these aspects in relation to storytelling in a holistic sense, as part of the interplay between different visual and verbal semiotic resources contributing to the narrative. However, I must make one further note: In what follows, I will be operating with a consciously limited notion of focalisation, restricted to questions of access to perception in strict sensory bounds. What I mean by ‘focalisation’, therefore, is the information the narrative conveys about the spatial and physical point of observation, and the sensory range of that position, including information of the spatiotemporal position of the focalised, that thing which is perceived. I will thus neglect the temporal, cognitive, emotional, ideological or other aspects of focalisation often discussed in relation to this notion in literary and film studies. This is simply to avoid making the term too broad to be useful. I admit, wholeheartedly, that it may not be possible to ever make an absolute distinction between an analysis of the spatial point of observation and, for instance, assumptions about the potential meanings indicated in what is seen. Judgments about internality, externality or omniscience in narrative perspective seem to be always accompanied by presuppositions that concern the limits of knowledge and experience, or the cognitive and epistemic motivation in perception.¹

¹ Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri (2011, 331) argue that “optical perspectivation” in comics is only one dimension within a broader category of focalisation that “includes aspects of cognition, ideological orientation, and judgment”. I agree with them that perceptual focus (or what they call optical perspectivation) is only one aspect of focalisation and that concentration on the perspectival construction of the visual viewpoint is potentially misleading in the multimodal context of comics. Horstkotte and Pedri’s readings of *Persepolis*, *Maus* and *Watchmen* illustrate perfectly the latter point, for instance with regard to the framing devices and symbols that cannot be reduced to optical viewpoints. However, I do not accept their idea of the “futility” of the optical perspectivation approach to focalisation in graphic narrative (Horstkotte and Pedri 2011, 351). On the contrary, my article aims to show that the analysis of perceptual focus and spatially determined viewpoints in graphic images, especially in images (which are the majority in narrative comics) that give an impression of three-dimensional space, can contribute towards a more rigorous visual narratology. The concentration on the specificities of visual focalisation in graphic narratives does not require an absolute, and thus problematic, distinction between perceptual and cognitive dimensions of focalisation. An important choice to make in this respect is how we define the focalisation concept in relation to other concepts such as narration or optical perspectivation/perceptual focus (or François Jost’s [2004] ocularisation). I have discussed some of the difficulties confronted if we try to translate effects of subjective vision and perspectival simultaneity in graphic narratives in terms of verbal narration elsewhere (Mikkonen 2012) and I



THE SPATIALLY DETERMINED POINT OF PERCEPTION IN GRAPHIC IMAGES

In his groundbreaking narratological treatise *Discours du récit*, Gérard Genette undermined the hierarchy of 'showing' and 'telling', prevalent in earlier narrative theories, by claiming that 'showing' in verbal narrative discourse can be only a way of telling, while he also made the influential distinction between 'who speaks?' (the narrator) and 'who sees?' (the focaliser). From this distinction, Genette (1980, 187–189) further derived the well-known triadic typology of the focal possibilities of internal, external, and zero level focalisation, based on the degrees of access to characters' minds in a given narrative. The model is roughly equivalent to Jean Pouillon's (1946, 72–114) earlier division into 'vision with', 'vision from without' and 'vision from behind'. Internal focalisation, whether fixed, variable or multiple in kind, involves a perspective that is limited to some character's mind. External focalisation, in contrast, is spatially limited to the role of the witness, without direct access to characters' psychology. Finally, zero focalisation, which Genette sometimes also calls omniscient focalisation or non-focalised narrative, gives the illusion that the narrative perspective is spatially unlimited.

The concept of 'focalisation' has changed a great deal since these formulations and Genette's basic premises have been brought into question numerous times. For one thing, Genette (1988, 64) himself later redefined the question of 'who sees?' as 'where is the focus of perception?' thus moving the focus on focalisation from some character as a see-er to the problem of the affective, perceptive or conceptual centre orienting the narrative. Such a centre of perception need not be embodied by any character. Mieke Bal's early critical comments on this theory were also highly influential in that she threw out Genette's category of external focalisation altogether, because, as she convincingly showed, it rested on a confusion between 'who sees?' and 'what is seen?'. The category is really based on clues about how something is seen from the outside without mention of inside views – if, that is, focalisation is consistent throughout the story (Bal 1991, 83–84). Focalisation was thus redefined as the relation between the vision (of the agent who sees) and what is 'seen' or perceived (Bal 1997, 142; 146).²

tackle the distinction between perceptual and cognitive focalisation in a forthcoming article (Mikkonen 2013 [forthcoming]).

² My limited notion of focalisation corresponds to a large extent with François Jost's concept of ocularisation that Jost has defined as the representation of the visual viewpoint in films as different from the character's mental point of view, which Jost calls focalisation. Ocularisation describes, more precisely, the relationship between how the camera shows the hero and how the hero supposedly sees things (internal ocularisation that comes in primary and secondary forms) or how the hero is seen from the outside, for instance by other characters (external ocularisation) or by no one in particular (zero ocularisation) (see Jost 2004, 74–75).



Recently, there has been a strong trend in so-called postclassical narratology to emphasise perception as a fundamental cognitive frame in understanding any narrative, while these new theories have again challenged earlier definitions and uses of the focalisation concept. Monika Fludernik has called our attention to the fact that focalisation is to an important extent an interpretive move, a postulation that is determined by the processing of certain textual clues, which in literature are verbal clues, such as deictic and expressive markers. The person who ‘sees’, as she claims, “is the reader, but *à travers* the linguistic medium, and not in terms of *visual perception*” (Fludernik 1996, 345; emphasis in original). For this reason, Fludernik argues that narratology has assigned false rigor to the distinction between ‘who speaks’ and ‘who sees’. Furthermore, Fludernik’s subordination of perceptive parameters in a narrative – or the perceptual metaphor – to the question of the presentation of consciousness may help us to see how it does not always matter who speaks or sees in the narrative (Fludernik 1996, 345–346). What may be much more important is how the reader, or the viewer of visual narratives, gets optimal information about a character’s consciousness, his or her motivations, thoughts and perceptions.

What interests me in graphic storytelling in light of the latest reformulations of the focalisation theory is the emphasis on the cognitive importance of the spatial (and optic) point of perception – even if deemed metaphorical in literary discourse – as well as developments in the analysis of the markers for the point of perception. In the case of graphic storytelling, such markers are necessarily both verbal (metaphorical) and visual (literal) clues. Given the multimodal nature of the medium, recent theoretical discussion of point of view in studies of film narratives can complement these narratological findings, which are mainly based on literary examples. When film theorists compare techniques of focalisation in film and literature they often point out a crucial difference between these media in regard to the epistemic access available into the world that is seen. Katherine Thomson-Jones (2007, 88) has argued that the “placement of the camera in filmmaking makes it impossible not to have an explicit point of view in cinematic narration, whereas literary events need not be described from anywhere in particular”. Other film theorists, similarly, contrast the ‘explicit focalisation’ of films to the metaphorical viewpoints in novel focalisation (see e.g. Deleyto 1996, 222; Gaut 2004, 247–248, on what he calls the intrinsic perspective of the film image).

The basic idea put forward in these approaches is that cinematic images give us a view into a space from some determined perspective. In graphic storytelling, as in film, the one who sees can always remain temporarily ambiguous, and sometimes even permanently so, but the image necessarily reveals a spatial point from which something (the focalised) is perceived. This constraint has various potential consequences for the understanding of the text-image

interaction. One result is that it may not really matter that much to the reader of graphic stories who is seeing, or if 'anyone' is seeing at all, since we know (culturally and intuitively) that images always show things rather than tell them.

There are some possible exceptions to the general rule of the determined, explicit perspective, such as non-perspectival or multi-perspectival images. The so-called non-perspectival images might include pure surface images that refuse the window-effect of a built-in perspective. These would be, for instance, pictures that are mere ornamentation, blank panels or frames that only include writing or speech and thought balloons (as in the "La bande pas dessinée" series), conceptual images, or scientific and technical ('objective') pictures that neutralise the viewer's spatial perspective, such as maps, diagrams, charts, and geometric shapes, even if they may carry important conceptual, ideological or other information (as the maps in Corto Maltese's adventures; fig. 1). However, while such conceptual, symbolic or technical images may be easily incorporated into graphic storytelling, they tend to play limited stylistic and thematic roles. Moreover, in as far as such images are graphic images and part of the graphic composition, their visual form and frame may carry information about a particular (experiential, conceptual, stylistic or other) viewpoint related to other images around them. A conceptual image without any particular spatially identifiable perspective also in no way challenges the need to view the printed page from a particular distance, meaning the convention of reading not too near and not too far from the page. Multi-perspective images, moreover, typically acquire meaning as perspectival distortions in relation to the expectation of a fixed viewpoint.

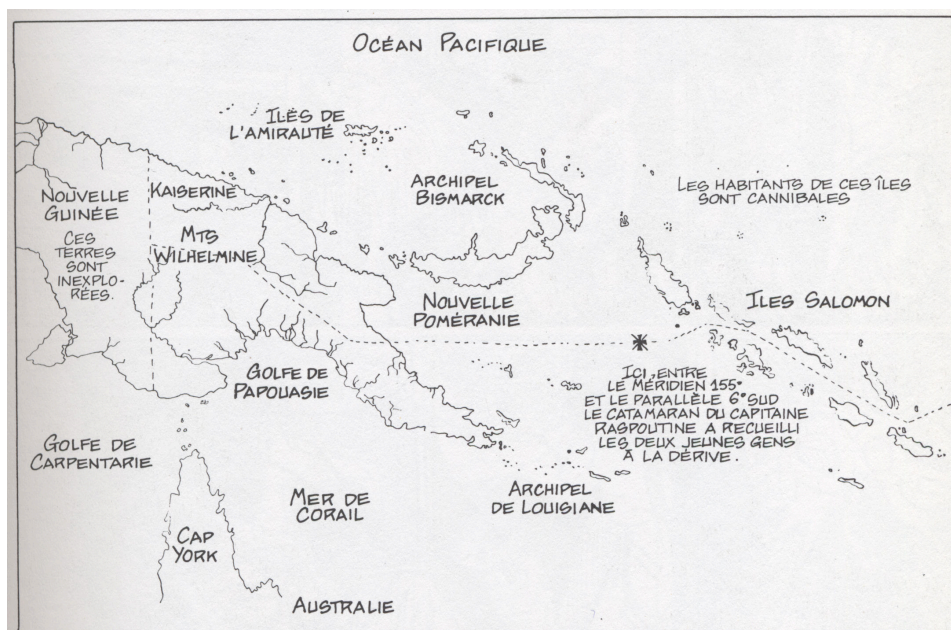


Figure 1. Pratt, Hugo, *Corto Maltese. La ballade de la mer salée*, Casterman, 2000, p.9. © Casterman.



THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FOCALISED AND THE FOLLOWING

Further, if we think of 'focalisation' as the relation between the vision and what is perceived, it is almost as important for a graphic story to have someone or something in the image that is focalised from one panel to another. What seems to matter from the point of view of narrativity in comics, in first-person and third-person narratives alike, is that the main character or the narrator, and sometimes other things like a landscape or a building, is shown regularly in the images, i.e. included in the space of the image as the focalised. The showing of some person and his field of vision from one moment to another, being embedded in a setting and engaged in action, is a strong cohesion device that increases narrativity in any sequence of images. Likewise, indicators of the direction, object or field of a person's gaze can give us a strong sense of perspective into the space of the image. Such indicators may be derived, for example, from a graphic version of the shot/reverse shot technique or by locating a character by the picture frame. Another important category of looking and gazing in comics, and one that carries potential meaning in any visual representation that depicts people, is the direct gaze, meaning participants in pictures who look directly at the viewer. We could recall here the theoretical division into 'demand' and 'offer' images, as defined by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996, 126–127). Realising a visual 'you' in this way, the 'demand' picture suggests a particular, often genre-specific type of interaction between the picture and the viewer. The technique can also increase narrativity by suggesting a heightened level of involvement for the reader.

One way to explain the importance of the focalised character in graphic storytelling is the *following* function in narration. Rick Altman has argued, in his recent ambitious cross-media narrative theory, that following a character or a group of characters is more essential to the category of narrative than the notion of a point of view or focalisation, which he sees as only applicable to a small portion of texts (Altman 2008, 21–22). By the latter he means narratives mainly in so-called third-person narration, when some character clearly functions as a secondary filter of perceptual information. While Altman's theory goes far in reducing the question of point of view to instances of internal focalisation, the notion that there is always some following-unit, from single-focus to dual-focus to multiple-focus, that "covers the entire narrative portion of every text treated as narrative" (Altman 2008, 22), is highly suggestive. The suggestion seems particularly compelling in regard to visual narratives or theatre where the narrator's role is much more restricted than in literary fiction.

I already mentioned that the focalised in graphic storytelling need not be limited to characters, but can be a landscape or a building. Things, places and events are often part of the focalised and may constitute the focus of the story. However, we can safely say that graphic narratives without



characters are more marginal than, for instance, the so-called mute stories that do not use any written words. The permanence of an identifiable character, or a continuing consciousness frame, is a strong cohesion device for most genres of graphic narrative. This becomes evident also when Thierry Groensteen, in his *Système de la bande dessinée*, lists ways to get around the presence of an identifiable character in comics and still tell a story (Groensteen 1999, 19–20). Groensteen includes in these techniques six different cases, even if actually only the first technique involves a radical exclusion of all human figures from the visual level of the story. The other five strategies concern examples where the characters' visual and physical aspects are not clearly seen or are not stable, for instance when the characters keep changing from panel to panel. As is obvious in most of these examples, such fragmented and instable figures are dependent on the viewer's expectation of being able to follow a particular person from one panel to the next. As to his first category, Groensteen includes three examples: "Intérieurs" by Régis Franc (1979), "The Short History of America" by Robert Crumb (1979), and *The Cage* by Martin Vaughn-James (1975), where the only 'engine' of the story seems to be the changing décor and the world of objects and things held in the field of vision. The space that is seen thus functions as both the focalised and the only actor in the scenes. The material world, therefore, appears to control the narrative.

We must make two immediate reservations to the supposed characterlessness of these stories, however. In the case of Franc, the verbal narration creates a strong sense of a continuing consciousness frame for the story as a whole. I mean by this that the interiors that are depicted become meaningful as a narrative since they are part of a presentation of a human mind, the first-person narrator's contemplation, memory and experience. Similarly, in Woodrow Phoenix's *Rumble Strip* (2008), where the only human-like characters are figures from traffic lights and signs, the narrating consciousness creates a sense of continuing narrative. Also, Crumb's short story is not, strictly speaking, without human figures, since small figures are part of the décor in about half of the twelve images. Furthermore, what is important in this case, as is also the case with Martin Vaughn-James's complex graphic work, is that the spaces that are seen are strongly marked by human experientiality, by signs of human embodiment, experience, and society. Therefore, the (near) absence of human figures in these images is again indicative of the expectation of seeing people who inhabit and experience the spaces shown to the reader. The verbal elements in Vaughn-James's *The Cage*, even if they do not directly refer to any speaking or narrating subject, further suggest that some human consciousness is filtering the images (fig. 2). Yet, the case is clearly different from Crumb's and Franc's non-character narratives, or from Phoenix's statements and anecdotes about traffic accidents for that matter, in that we can ask if in reading *The Cage* we are reading a narrative at all. *The Cage*, after all, could be better categorised

as a visual poem, or perhaps a series of tableaux that involve various spatiotemporal conditions only loosely or partially connected with each other as a narrative.



Figure 2. Vaughn-James, Martin, *La Cage (The Cage)*, *Les impressions nouvelles*, 1986. © Martin Vaughn-James.

THE SIMULTANEITY OF DIFFERENT FOCALISERS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE PICTURE FRAME

As can be easily shown in relation to film narratives, several internal and external focalisers can appear simultaneously at different points inside and outside the image frame. In his analysis of classical films, Celestino Deleyto (1996) has, for instance, analysed the tendency to use external perspective to make the internal gazes understandable. Similar practices and effects are known to us from picture books where, for example, it is almost automatic to combine first-person verbal narrative with uninvolved third-person visual perspective (e.g. Nodelman 1991, 4; Yannicopoulou 2010, 66–67; 73–75).

What interests me specifically in this respect is that while different internal and external focalisers can appear simultaneously at different points inside and outside the picture frame, this capacity can also set up tensions between visual and verbal narration on a global scale (Thomson-



Jones 2007, 88). As to the medium of comics, furthermore, the principle for organising visual perspective makes use of specific *graphic* means and techniques for multiplying focal points and suggesting perspectival simultaneity. The play with the divergence and convergence between visual and verbal perspectives is a common practice also in autobiographical and other kinds of nonfiction graphic narratives (Baetens 2008, 83–84). This is different from literary narratives where the possibility to present characters at the same time from the outside and from within is usually another indicator of the fictionality of the world (see Patron 2009, 169).

To illustrate these points about multiple visual perspectives in graphic storytelling, I will briefly discuss one specific device for multiplying perspective, which is the use of embedded photographs. In the following three examples, the photograph, whether a real photograph incorporated in the story or a graphic rendition of an imaginary photograph, draws attention to the choice of perspective, and the use of juxtaposed perspectives, by multiplying points-of-view. In thus remediating photographs, the stories further pose the question of the specificity of their medium for representing visual experience. Here comics, so to say, think with their own medium by way of the other medium.

The Australian artist Shaun Tan's graphic novel about immigration, the prize-winning *The Arrival* (2006) is a story with wordless images. What I would like to highlight in this wonderful book are some of the functions of the drawn family photo portrait that we see at various moments of the story. The portrait is pictured at the beginning of the narrative and at its end, in addition to when the father of the family is shown looking at it after being separated from his wife and daughter in a strange new land. First of all, it is significant that this image draws our attention to the characters, who gaze directly at us and, further, that this exchange of gazes is seen through the father's eyes. The subjective aspect of the viewpoint is revealed by the father's hand, which we see taking the picture from the shelf and packing it in his luggage (fig. 3). Besides the subjectivity of the gaze, the introduction of the portrait reveals the emotional intensity that accompanies all the later viewings of the image. Another important aspect of the viewing is that it emphasises the impression of a photographic frame, that is, the sense in which all the panel images in Tan's book more or less resemble old black-and-white photographs in sepia tone. The effect is even more prominent in the father's passport photo and the worn-out panel frames in some of the embedded stories, which recall an old photo album.

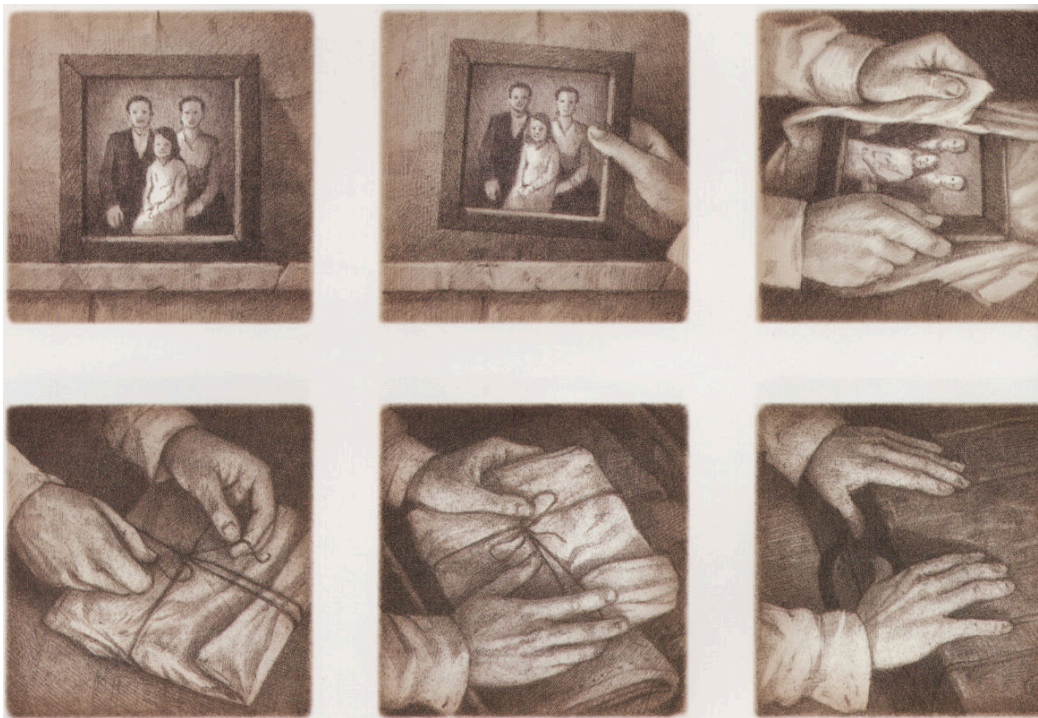


Figure 3. Tan, Shaun, *Là où vont nos pères (The Arrival)*, Dargaud, 2007. © Shaun Tan.

Jarmo Mäkilä's fictional portrait of an artist, *Taxi van Gogh in korvaan (A Taxi into Van Gogh's Ear, 2008)*, the second part in a trilogy by this Finnish painter³, is a complex mixture of childhood memories, hallucinations and a Dantesque journey into the world of the dead. The main character is split into different personalities: a lonely boy, a clown, and an adult man, the artist called Itikka (meaning 'bug' or 'mosquito'), who seem to live in two different realities at the same time, the world of the living and the world of the dead. At one moment in the narrative, the artist is lost somewhere in the forest where he finds a photograph in his pocket depicting himself as a young boy with his parents and a girl he loved (fig. 4). The incorporation of a graphic version of this photograph again multiplies perspectives by introducing subjectivity into the sequence, and underlines the interpenetration of different levels of reality and memory. The effect continues in the next panel, spread over a whole page. Here we are suddenly taken, as if through the main character's gaze which we momentarily share, into another world where we meet the artist drifting in space amidst toys on a plastic rowing boat (fig. 5). The multiplication of perspectives leads us to other levels of experience, contrasted with the verbal focalisation of the story that gradually moves from first- to third-person narration.

³ The first part of the series was the album *Daydreamer* (2002). The third part is still to be published.



Figure 4. Mäkilä, Jarmo, *Taxi van Goghin korvaan*, Itikka, 2008. © Jarmo Mäkilä. [Caption: “It is a photograph of Itikka on the way to celebrate May Day with his mother and father. At the back you can see Satu who chased Itikka throughout his childhood...a love”, my translation]



Figure 5. Mäkilä, Jarmo, *Taxi van Goghin korvaan*, Itikka, 2008. © Jarmo Mäkilä. [Caption: “Here everything is taken by the current. This world has so many secrets passageways that you cannot find in maps.”, my translation]

Finally, Emmanuel Guibert and Frédéric Lemerrier's travel book trilogy *Le photographe* (2003–2006) raises quite explicit questions about media hybridity and the realism of the photograph. It is based on a true story by the French photographer Didier Lefèvre involving a Doctors Without Borders mission in Afghanistan in the late 1980s. Almost every page and spread of this story includes Lefèvre's actual photographs from the dangerous journey, and sometimes a whole page or a double spread is composed just from them. The graphic image and the photograph have pretty much equal weight throughout the book (fig. 6).



Figure 6. Guibert, Emmanuel, Frédéric Lemerrier & Didier Lefèvre, *Le photographe*, tome 1, Dupuis, 2003. © Emmanuel Guibert, Frédéric Lemerrier & Didier Lefèvre.

What interests me here is not so much the remediation of the photograph as part of graphic storytelling – a process by which comics, as in the two previous examples, refashion photographs, break them into a story and thus try to improve upon them – but a more balanced dialogue between the media, where photographs have an impact on the graphic images, and vice versa. On the one hand, the various instant moments that are captured by the camera and included in *Le photographe* are given narrative shape and meaning by the graphic images and the first-person verbal narration that accompany and surround them. The photographer, his medium, and his equipment are literally made part of the graphic narrative. On the other hand, the integration of photographs has an obvious, many-sided impact on the graphic images and their sense of veracity. This is not so much that the photographs give an air of authenticity to the graphic



panels, even if this might happen as well, but that they make the graphic images look more like photographs, like an instant shot.

The effect of this intermedial composition may perhaps appear awkward to eyes not accustomed to it, but once one gets used to the hybrid form, the alternation between the media itself becomes interesting. Neither medium serves as the other's relay or amplifier, but both move the story forward. Sometimes one of them dominates a single page, double spread or an episode. The photographic images are interwoven in the sequential order of the narrative with the graphic panels while the photographs also preserve something of their status as individual images illuminating an instant. We can note that the photos enjoy a certain distance from the verbal 'voice-over' in the narrative boxes. The same is not afforded to the drawn images. While verbal narration often accompanies the photographs, the photographic images never include dialogue, and the verbal narration next to them remains carefully separated, not part of the frame.

The question of veracity is further complicated by the very *graphic* nature of the images involving real objects and people. The reality of the point of observation and the field of vision in graphic storytelling, even if it is nonfiction, is necessarily make-believe. No one ever saw the world as drawn, or as caricature, no matter how detailed or instantaneous the graphic line may be. Naturally, no one sees the world as photographs either. Yet in graphic images and caricatures there is a specific graphic distance, or opacity, between the image and the world that it represents.⁴ As happens here, the tension between the photographs and the drawn images, and their respective perspectives, provides graphic nonfiction with a particular self-critical potential, pointing out that the reality in pictures is always mediated. In *Le photographe*, the hybridity of the visual form and the multiplication of visual points-of-view thus highlight the meaning of the perspective both for narrative organisation and for the sense of reality.

THE SCALE OF (VISUAL) FOCAL POINTS BETWEEN INTERNAL AND NON-CHARACTER BOUND POSITIONS

Drawing on these observations, I would like to underline the fact that graphic storytelling, when it comes to the visual perspective of the narrative, uses an extremely rich and complex scale of potential intermediate positions between the subjective or internal focalisation on the one hand, and clearly non-character bound perspective or external focalisation on the other hand. This

⁴ Philippe Marion (1993, 36) argues that the graphic material in comics is always at least to some extent turned towards itself, that is, towards the graphic trace, thus creating an impression of opacity and resistance to transparency.



scale, however, is not organised in a strict external/internal, or reflector/narrator binary as may be the case in literary narratives. Rather, it reflects varying degrees of congruence and divergence between a character's point-of-view and the reference world of the narrative, as well as the fact that graphic storytelling can use internal and external viewpoints at the same time.

To better describe this multitude of positions classifiable as 'vision with' or 'vision from behind', we can first point out that graphic storytelling has at its disposal most of the cinematic techniques for getting close to a specific subjective point of view, from suggesting a subjective perspective to adopting and wholly assuming it. We can use as our starting point Manfred Jahn's (2003) list of the five most important subjectifying filmic devices.

Firstly, the point of view shot (POV) is the most internal and subjective perspective in film narratives. It assumes the viewer's position; the image frame functions as the representation of someone's gaze and a field of vision. Edward Branigan has defined POV more precisely as "a shot in which the camera assumes the position of a subject in order to show us what the subject sees" (Branigan 1975, 55). Yet, we must also add that the presumed subjectivity of a POV shot always involves an interpretive move and potential ambiguity: How do we know that a certain perspective belongs to someone? And do we understand the object that we see in the same sense as the viewer whose vision we share? The subjective implications of a given subjective viewpoint may remain indeterminate (see Gaut 2004, 244). The technique also cannot be used extensively for obvious reasons, as studies of 'subjective camera' in film or in the picture book medium have shown (Verstraten 2009, 96–97). The main difficulty of a POV image is that the character whose perception we share could never appear in any picture except in a mirror or a reflection.

Secondly, the gaze shot depicts a character looking at something. More precisely, this is an image with external perspective that shows a character looking at something that cannot be seen, thus drawing our attention to perception. Generally speaking, in viewing any visual narrative we keep making inferences from people's looks, gazes, glances, and facial expressions so as to have access to their subjective states, even if these states may remain fairly indeterminate.

Thirdly, the eyeline shot/match cut is a combination of a gaze shot that is followed by a POV shot (the gaze shot cues the audience into interpreting the preceding or the following shot as a POV shot). The use of shot/reverse shot technique is common, for instance, in dialogue scenes.

Fourthly, the over-the-shoulder shot is less direct and less internal (fig. 7). In a film, this means that the camera gets close to, but not fully into the viewing position, or that a camera follows closely the movements of some character. In graphic storytelling, the image is shown from behind a character's back or it can mean a sequence of images closely following a character's movement

(as if the point of viewing were tied to this movement). What matters is the composition of the frame that implies and includes the character's angle and field of vision, wholly or partially.



Figure 7. Ellis, Warren and John Cassaday, *Planetary* #4, WildStorm Productions/DC Comics, 2010. © WildStorm Productions/DC Comics.

Finally, the fifth device is the reaction shot (fig. 8), which shows a character reacting to what s/he has just seen. Similarly to the gaze shot, the reaction shot draws our attention to perception, but does so retrospectively, after the act of viewing or perception. In comics, to know that a panel shows a reaction image requires that the reader makes inferences of a sequence of panels that draw his or her attention to someone's act of perception.

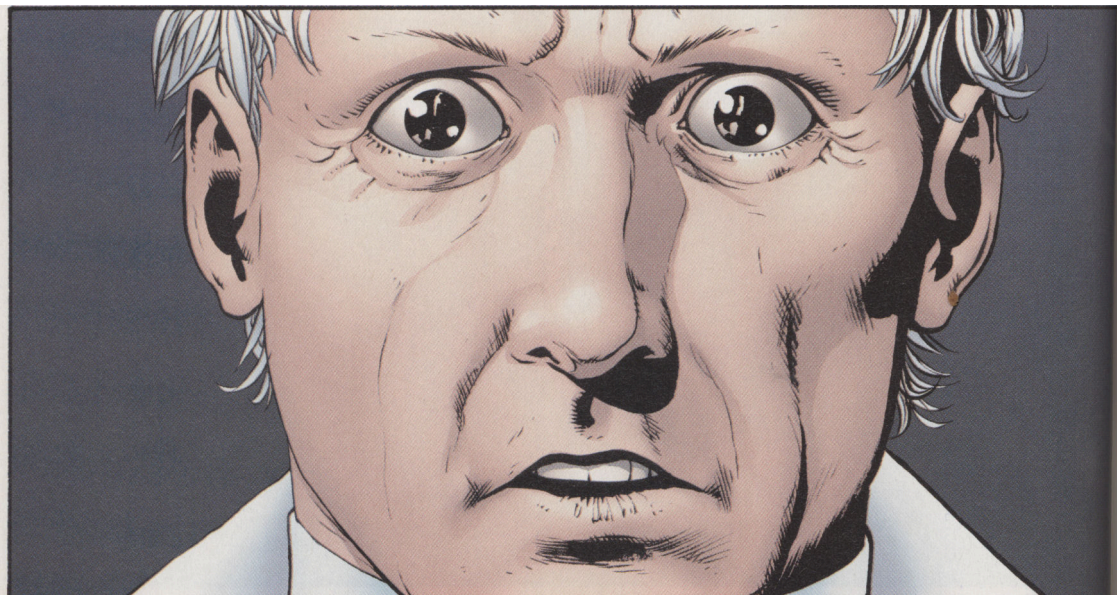


Figure 8. Ellis, Warren and John Cassaday, *Planetary* #4, WildStorm Productions/DC Comics, 2010. WildStorm Productions/DC Comics.

To these techniques we can add some other possible subjectifying techniques or subcategories of the devices just described, amongst them a few that are available to a number of visual media, but

also some that are more or less typical to graphic storytelling. One such device is the placement of the character in the image in such a way that his or her position can subjectify the perspective, for instance when the character's back or side profile is placed by the image frame as to heighten our association with his or her perspective (fig. 9). This is related to the over-the-shoulder image, and may also be accompanied by the eyeline match, but is also different from the over-the-shoulder in that that the reader does not pretend to look over the character's shoulder even if what he or she sees in the image coincides to some extent with what the character sees. In other words, the character's position subjectifies the perspective even if the angle and the position in the image do not pretend to correspond with the character's field of vision. Similarly, when a character looks straight at the reader, as in the above-mentioned 'demand' picture, this can engage us in a make-believe exchange of looks and create an effect of shared subjective perspective. Likewise, the depiction of a character's hands or lower body by the image frame, or his or her image in a mirror, also points out that we share his or her perspective. The drawing of a character's fingers by the panel frame, as in the example above from *The Arrival*, is still another graphic convention that reveals the subjective perspective of the image.



Figure 9. Ellis, Warren and John Cassaday, *Planetary* #4, WildStorm Productions/DC Comics, 2010. WildStorm Productions/DC Comics.

What film studies calls the perception shot is also always possible in comics (Branigan 1984, 81). This is a specific type of POV shot that, as Branigan defines it, reveals the mental condition of someone looking at something. A perception image most often shows difficulty in looking or the viewer's heightened attention, typically a blurred scene that presents the vision of a drunkard or someone who is fatigued. Moreover, the way something like a landscape is visually rendered, by using conventional implications of colours, varying intensities of lines and shading, or patterns of shapes, etc. can suggest to the viewer how one should respond, emotionally or otherwise, to the things that are seen. In this respect, but mainly technically speaking, there may be great differences between different visual media. The tone of a film narrative, for instance, is the result of a wide variety of stylistic choices concerning for instance lighting, cinematography, *mise en*



scène, and the editing of both the image and sound tracks, while graphic storytelling can use means specific to the medium like the panel setup, *mise en page*, the expressive use of the frame shape and size, and the graphic line. Another question is whether films and comics use the above-mentioned subjectifying devices in the same frequency. I believe not but, without the support of extensive corpus analysis, it is impossible to verify whether, for instance, comics on average employ over-the-shoulder images less than films.

All these techniques and devices amount to an extremely complex scale of intermediate positions between clearly subjective and clearly non-character bound perspectives. The fact has some important implications for the processing of information in graphic narratives. One conclusion I draw from this is the central role of ambiguous or doubled focalisation in the medium. This could also be characterised as the predominance of ‘free indirect discourse’ and ‘free indirect perception’. The first category, derived from a linguistic distinction among types of discourse that present thought and speech, entails a reference to both a narrator/author and some character who thinks or speaks in a way that blurs the boundary between the two. In literary narratives, such ambiguity is achieved by grammatical and/or idiomatic means, as well as through intonation, immediate context, and content (see McHale 1978; Mildorf 2008). As this regards written language, however, we have to remember that free indirect discourse is most typically not ‘vision with’ a character, but thinking or speaking with someone in third-person narration (Cohn 1978, 111), and that the possible coincidence of perspectives between a particular character and the narrator/author is based on our analysis of various kinds of verbal clues. The visual perspective is only metaphorical. The category of ‘free indirect perception’, in turn, comes originally from literary narratology where it refers to a kind of ‘narrated perception’, which occurs when the narrative describes or clearly implies the perception of a character. A character’s mind is thus implied as the perceptual angle of some textual passage, but his perceptions are never directly introduced by perception verbs or other linguistic means (Chatman 1978, 204; Mikkonen 2008, 309–312).

In films and graphic storytelling alike, similar effects are commonplace. Charles Forceville, for instance, has suggested – even if he does not make a distinction between free indirect perception and free indirect discourse, or between *vision avec* and *pensée avec* – that studying techniques like character-bound camera movement in terms of free indirect discourse, specifically when such techniques create ambiguity between the external “narrator” and the character, could contribute to a transmedial narratology (Forceville 2002, 133).⁵ Such free indirect instances in films, which take place when audiovisual information is shared between the character and the overall narrative

⁵ I have analysed some of the limitations and creative reformulations of free indirect discourse in graphic storytelling in Mikkonen 2010; 2011.



frame, involve also passages when certain things are distilled through a character's perception by means of colour filters, visual distortions, and other such techniques. In comics, as we have already seen above, there are a number of ways by which the narrative can focus on the character and his or her field of vision and make us systematically look either with him or her or look from behind him or her. These techniques may allow the reader to look deeply into the character's field of vision, even limiting the view to the range of perceptions available to some character, while at the same time retaining the sense of a hypothetical viewing position that does not belong to any character (or narrator). In comics we often watch along with a character, from the character's back or side, or gain insight into his or her point of view through what we see in other ways, but focalisation is not entirely left to the person, or any person.

A second conclusion that I would like to draw from the importance of the vast midway between a supposed non-restriction and an internal restriction of the visual focalisation is the way the intermediate positions may heighten the play of divergence and convergence between words and images. These techniques for instance enable graphic storytelling to fully exploit the distance between a self who speaks, a self who sees, and a self who is seen, or the split between a narrating and an experiencing self. Think of Mäkilä's portrait of the artist where the gradual move from the verbal I-narrator to a He-narrator complicates our understanding of the constant perspectival transformations and embeddings between personal and impersonal viewpoints in this narrative. The shift in narrative voice accompanies the changes in verbal and visual focalisation and thus prompts the reader to adjust his or her understanding of these viewpoints and their relation to the storyworld.

At the very end, I would like to briefly return to Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* where a great quantity of the images imply a strong subjective angle, even if there are relatively few clear cases of a subjective POV image. Consider the end of the episode where the main character, the father of the family in the main story, who at this point is still living alone in the foreign country, is invited to have dinner at the home of another immigrant family. In one large image that spreads over a page we see a scene around the dinner table (fig. 10). The following twelve close-up images consist of a series of eyeline matches, leading us from one subjectified field of vision to another, motivated by the direction of the character's gaze in the previous panel, and at the same time restricted to what these characters may see from their respective positions. This creates the effect of intertwined looks around the table that reveal to the viewer things happening from different angles as if we could alternate between each person's perspectives (fig. 11 and 12). However, while the lonely father's subjective vision is at times strongly implied, especially at the end of the scene when the couple looks directly at him and us, we also see him from the outside. We also observe

the other people from angles that could belong to any of the characters present or to no one in particular.



Figure 10. Tan, Shaun, *Là où vont nos pères (The Arrival)*, Dargaud, 2007. © Shaun Tan.

I do not deem it necessary, therefore, for the understanding of this scene, to postulate one particular subjective viewpoint. Instead, what matters, and what to some extent subjectifies all the views at the dinner, is the restriction of visual information to the immediate views of people around the table. This limitation of the perspective, combining a possible gaze image with a potential POV image, emphasises the joyful atmosphere and the feeling of sympathy among the members of the party. In a sense it does not matter whose perspective we share since, roughly speaking, we share them all.



Figure 11 & 12. Tan, Shaun, *Là où vont nos pères (The Arrival)*, Dargaud, 2007. © Shaun Tan.

We could conceive this situation as a case of what Manfred Jahn (1999, 98) has called *ambient focalisation*. In this technique of perspective-taking, something is perceived from more than one side, or possibly from all sides, while the condition of specific time-place anchoring is relaxed, thus creating an impression of a mobile, summary, and communal point of view. Instead of any one subjective, fully personalised vision, we have access to many potential subjective or communal views. The host couple of the scene also looks out of the space of the picture at someone as if they were inviting the reader, or someone who is supposedly close to them and at the same time close to the reader's viewing position, to participate in the event. Another way of formulating the complex source of focalisation in this scene is what literary narratology sometimes calls the *empty deictic centre*: a position that is clearly on the scene with the characters, but without the possibility or even the need to identify with any of them (Banfield 1987, 272–273; Fludernik 1996, 192–198). Both the techniques of ambient focalisation and the empty deictic centre enable an impression of relativ alternation, and ambiguity, between subjective and communal viewpoints and the impersonal but space-bound perspective.



CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, having focused on three principles for organising and filtering visual or perceptual information in comics (explicit viewpoint, simultaneous perspective, and subjective ambiguity), I would like to make one more meta-theoretical remark about studying focalisation, and the framing of perception, in graphic storytelling.

All focalisation, be it in a literary or visual narrative or somewhere else, is always variable. While proposing his original typologies and distinctions, Genette was fully aware that it is difficult to find pure examples of his three categories: external or zero focalisation, and internally focalised narratives. Yet, such categorisation may be even more challenging when it comes to mixed media narratives like comics since here focalisation, at least on the narrative micro-level, by which I mean the transitions from one episode or scene to the next, is much more varied and combinable. We need, thus, not only a revision of the old narratological concepts, or the invention of new and sharper ones, but the creation of more flexible ones.

The panel frame, the gutter, the *mise en page*, and the graphic line modify the structures and devices of focalisation used in this medium in ways that I have not been able to discuss here. We may also pose the question of the reader's disposition to appreciate the medium-specific play in graphic storytelling with a kind of anthropogenic distance between a narrating and an experiencing self, between a self who speaks, a self who sees, and a self who is seen. This said, many of the devices of focalisation common in graphic stories exceed the boundaries of the medium. The devices and strategies of focalisation in comics are in many ways structurally similar to techniques in other visual narratives like film and picture books, or theatre, where the pictures and the language (or the sound) together suggest a perspective and help to create the story.

I should finally clarify that the aim of my inquiry has not been to identify devices of focalisation in comics with the help of narratological concepts or to simply apply postclassical narratology to principles of graphic storytelling. Rather, it has been to evaluate some of the key functions of these devices and in this way reflect critically back on the system of narratological concepts that I am using. This intervention will hopefully also point to new ways for understanding the construction of global frames of perception in graphic storytelling. My further premise is that the complexities of the point-of-view technique in this medium can suggest possible new methodological insights for narrative theory, originally (mainly) developed for the study of literary narratives.



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