

Graphic Sublime

On the art and designwriting of Kate Armstrong and Michael Tippett By Joseph Tabbi

We still like to think of it as “out there”: the Web, the World-System. We’ve had it long enough for a generation of children to reach adulthood using computers, and for a generation of new media artists to build bodies of work. No longer are we looking at literary migrations; hybrids are capable now of being born digital, not carried over from print, punch card, or canvas to the screen. We go there, to the terminal, to look things up, to book our vacations, to network, to post resumes, to find the jobs that our parents thought were being “lost” overseas. Or it comes to us – on a mobile, handheld, cell, or pod. “How old world” it seems, to Kate Armstrong and her generation of literary and graphic artists, how labor intensive and exploratory, to go in “search” of information when it can be brought to us through an RSS feed: a Rich Site Summary, RDF Site Summary, or Really Simple Syndication.

Visit the website? How old world. Why would you, when it – when they – can come to you? An RSS reader, essentially, is a service that can parse any number of sources for updates, so that you don’t have to visit the sites to get their information. The reader pulls it together for you, and rolls everything into one.

The automatic delivery of text fragments can generate new patterns of reading that come to be interspersed with regular life.¹

For several months over the Spring/Summer of 2008, the *Dynamo* came to be interspersed with my own writing life, which increasingly takes place online. The habits of attention and (no less important) negligence I’ve developed over the years are not disturbed by what the *Dynamo* sends me, a Running Sense Stream of snapshots and clips from around the world. The images cycling through the panels are not resized – sometimes only part of a picture fits inside the frame, and this, too, gives the mind something to do. There is always “more” to an image than what we see, and there are also always more images, whose happenstance positioning with each other and with Armstrong’s sentences generate meanings potentially no less significant, and much more patterned and expansive, than (what I can find on) my own.

The relationship to the screen, to the digital page, is changed by having material delivered through feeds. Instead of material coming together into one piece on one screen, where a person can “go” to read it, the material is always being sent out, always in flux. It is never finalized.²

Over centuries of print literacy, scholars got used to visiting archives in “search” of information. We used to *research* documents, we were taught to discern arrangements, patterns, and structures that other writers put there before our arrival, or that they failed to see for reasons of ideology, racial or gender bias, or their position in a medial ecology different from that of today. We tried to bring forward something of the past and, when we finished, we left our results in books and in archives, to be built on and corrected (or not) by future scholars. At the same time, people living their regular lives left everyday documents of their own, the tiniest fraction of which could be retrieved by researchers and converted by authors into history, and stories. All this required time – the long time of art and scholarship but also the incredibly short time it takes for the vast majority of documents to be lost.

The documents themselves, those we have kept, precede even the victors who write history.

IT'S ANOTHER URGENT MESSAGE! THIS TIME FROM DAMASCUS!³

I'm a literary scholar and an editor, by profession – the kind of person who used to keep 3X5 cards in my shirt pocket, who would then, after a bit of mental processing (and much forgetfulness), transfer some of these notes to my word processor. When I read, even now, I make marks – I think about what the author is saying but I also think ahead to what I'll be saying about the author, or about topics an author treats and I may want to treat differently. Commissions like this one, to write catalogue copy on a work that could be art, could be electronic literature, or some new amalgam or anomaly, run contrary to habits that I've internalized throughout a career that's concentrated, mostly, on words in print.

The images that cycle through *Grafik Dynamo!* have been scraped from the LiveJournal site.⁴ These are photographs, mostly, taken by digital cameras and posted on blogs and websites. I can remember seeing Roman, Greek, Cyrillic, Arabic, and Chinese characters among scraps of text that appear in the photos. (The purchase of the source site by the Russian firm, SUP, may have tilted the frequency toward the Cyrillic.) The images appeared to early reader/viewers, and they are in fact, “somewhat randomly retrieved”⁵. “Somewhat” – because randomness is impossible to achieve through programming. Coherence cannot be avoided, even if we try. The *sense* of a narrative, the *impression* of history in the making, persists in what we see.

The similarly "random," though written, captions, speech, and thought balloons confirm the impression that something, somewhere in the background, is happening:

**BUT THE DOSSIER HAD REACHED NEW PROPORTIONS.
BUT THE PROSTITUTE HAD SOME STARTLING NEWS.
SLOWLY, THE IMAGE SWAM INTO VIEW.
...BUT THE BLEAK VISION OF THE PROSTITUTE HAUNTED HIM...⁶**

How little it takes, to place us in the stream: a "but," an "ach!" an adverb signifying development however "slowly"; the hint of something "new", even "startling". A character, the "prostitute" for example, needs only to appear more than once – and this is enough to stimulate recognition, even without her being named or any attempt having been made at characterization. We don't even know if she's a he or he's a she: that will depend perhaps as much on the image that happens to be attached to the text, as on any gender presumptions a male or female, hetero or gay, reader may bring to the word "prostitute". What we experience is a sensation of meaning without meaning's actualization in words. The message is self-contained; it requires no further interpretation on the part of the author, by us, by the LiveJournal, or the *Dynamo*. A narrative always seems to be in process, somewhere.

But not here.

Not in the place where we are reading, viewing, receiving the image/texts. Not in the office working (or playing games) on company time. Not at home where the Internet is paid by subscription. Not at the business center, wifi hotspot, or on the handheld we're carrying.

SORRY, FELLAS, YOU'RE TOO LATE!⁷

The *Dynamo* gathers images already found on blogs, sent through feeds, and located on various sites as they are updated. But the texts were written. Armstrong says she was drawn initially to science fiction and 1940s spy fiction:

I was loving the brilliant innocence of both comics and that literature, where everything happens in either London or Damascus, people carry around suitcases of gems, and scientists become deranged by their magnificent powers.⁸

Armstrong's words arrive on the screen in the form of captions, thought, and speech balloons. They are pulled randomly from the author's flat file, and

sometimes they appear long enough for me to read one and view the accompanying image before I turn my glance to the next panel, and the next. If I'm quick, I can clip a text and paste it to a file of my own, for later reference. But that sort of careful, accurate, and attributed citation really is suited more for print projects. Here, on the screen, the news from London and Damascus reaches me without my having actively to go in search for it or for anyone to consider preserving it.

THEY SLIPPED FROM THE ROOM UNDETECTED AND CAUGHT A WATERTAXI TO THE QUARANTINED AREA.⁹

In the world of crime novels and comics, decisions emanate from some imperial center ("London") in response to news from the outposts ("Damascus"). An atmosphere of international intrigue pervades but the center/periphery model does not conform all that well to the *Dynamo's* present reality. Messages arrive, rather, from all places equally. They are all encrypted, but routinely decoded before they reach us, as plain text or attachments on the computer where we can enjoy a distracted, demanding, but mostly peaceful life in images.

If it is on the screen, if it has been captured already, it cannot harm us.

The news comes at us from everywhere, and if not from everyone in the world exactly, from the cross-section of bloggers who post on LiveJournal. "Incoming mail": here it's as if the "news" that reaches Captain Pirate Prentice at the start of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, early one morning by way of a V-2 Rocket dropped on London, were now as common as the arrival of the morning email. In 1973 Pynchon, too, was playing off the staples of spy fiction and comics: someone, some somebody, a bureaucrat with a sense of humor, went to the trouble of replacing the bomb the Rocket was meant to carry with a little black box containing coded instructions. It's also, for Pynchon, something of a stretch to bring an imagination of technology and international intrigue to the forms of conventional narrative. But readers at the time were willing, enough of them, to go with the flow and "suspend disbelief".

MY AUDIO SENSORS DETECT SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY¹⁰

A willing suspension of disbelief? Try getting one of the kids from the Internet and computer gaming generation to do that. My own students, I suspect, are not put off so much by 700-plus pages of coruscating, brainy prose, as they are simply unwilling to go beyond their own suspicions, their self-reliant conviction that the materials they've gathered on the world are no less valid than what can be compiled by any literary author, living or dead, white, male, or otherwise.

This culture of suspicion, in some ways, is itself a legacy of the paranoid aesthetic advanced by writers of Pynchon's generation. Technology and information, in the worlds of *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Grafik Dynamo*, each can inflict its own violence on the texture of everyday life, but each is also capable of evolving. As cultures evolve through contact with an enemy in wartime, so, too, can one medium evolve when a new medium appears – and this medial evolution is enacted in the *Dynamo* when the texts Armstrong had written take on new meanings through contact with the unforeseen images:

As I was working with these themes I found myself adding references to things that seemed more current, like evangelicals, lobbyists and apocalypse, and started to pull in other concerns, not usually associated with comics or hard-boiled crime novels, such as existential freedom & metaphysical structures like extra-temporal essence. These things started to feed back on each other so that all of a sudden I was discovering implications that philosophical states were being influenced by these mysterious machines, or that powerful non-specific figures were motivated by the desire to have outre religious experiences. So that's how the material evolved in the beginning. When it started to run against the influx of images I was happy to see that these associations became even more complex.¹¹

As the example of *Gravity's Rainbow* shows, past literary practices have worked similarly, not *in* the genres of comics and crime fictions, but *with* these genres to get at the shape of the techno-culture. The "funnies", purportedly written for children, are like more recent computer games and popular entertainments generally: they are ways that people learn to live with technological violence. (Transferred to the video or computer game screen, people also learn to work, as if work were "play", within highly structured, desensitized desktop environments.)

MEANWHILE, THE MOB ARGUED VIOLENTLY OVER THE PERFECTION OF ART...¹²

The best account I've read of the interaction between comics and technology (and the battle within comics between text and narrative, sound and dialogue, image and word) is in print but remains, as yet, (circa 2010) unpublished.

For the past few days, the manuscript on my coffee table has been a memoir in novel form by Phillip Wohlstetter; working title: *Valparaiso*. Going from the screen to the page, *in media res* and literally between media, I have reached Wohlstetter's narrative of the military takeover of Chile on September 11, 1973. Is it so strange that, under fire, Wohlstetter's narrator should enter into a digression about, of all things, the art of comics?

I wonder if the people who drew comic books were vets. Sound bubbles with bold capitals and exclamation points don't exactly reproduce the noises or explosions to which they allude, but they do capture their importance – their constant and imposing presence – by offering them equal space with dialogue or narrative, and I will follow their lead for a page...

TING-TING!
WROOKATOMBA!
POP! POP! TAKKA-TIK-TAKKA
WHOMP! WHOMP!
VROOM! VROOM! VROOM!
TAKKA-TING-TING-TING!
WROOKATOMOBAKKABOOM!!
TING! TING!
WHAKAWHAKAWHAKTHUMP! WHUP!¹³

In his own fashion Wohlstetter, like Armstrong and Tippett, draws on the comic-strip genre even as he reflects on a national tragedy experienced at first hand. With no democratic leaders emerging at this moment to defend the Chilean government, with a personal will to resist the usurpers but no clear political agenda to follow, Wohlstetter (or his narrative persona) follows the lead of comic artists. The list that starts on manuscript page 200 turns into an all-over blast on page 201, filling the left- to the right-hand margin by the same sounds, repeated over and over (with an occasional **POK!...** here and there a **WHUP! WHUP!...** and at least one good old-fashioned **RATA-TAT-TAAT!!**). Thereafter, Wohlstetter's account of the coup continues as conventional reportage, or rather, a report of a halting record-in-progress:

"I am standing here in Santiago, Chile, a corner across from La Moneda palace," says a man in tweeds, "the office of President Salvador Allende." He is talking into a cassette recorder. I didn't notice his arrival. "I'm looking at the smoke and flames—" Click. "Damn," he says. He flips the cassette to the blank side. "I'm standing here in Santiago," he says, but this time he stops, turning in alarm with the rest of us toward the drone of incoming jet engines. ¹⁴

We are here, in front of *La Moneda* palace, with a narrator who will soon be running to escape the flames. Or rather, we might imagine ourselves in a photograph, a famous one (reproduced in the Wohlstetter manuscript) that shows a few civilians taking cover (but now running) under a billboard advertising Schick razors:

*"That one hit the roof," says someone. Meaning it didn't hit us. The planes draw away. I can feel in the crowd of onlookers a kind of collective exhalation, an unwinding in the gut, or maybe that's just me. "Close shave," says Fedora. He nods at the billboard atop our kiosk. It touts the chromium edge of the newest Schick razor blade.*¹⁵

The contrast between Wohlstetter's narrative and the dynamic presentation by Armstrong and Tippett is instructive: in e-lit, there's no narrator around to say, "it didn't hit us"; no need, no reason, to establish a sense of place when the reader inhabits all places at once and is always "here", safe at home, processing images on a screen.

It's a "close shave", for sure, between a moment of lasting historical change and its contemporary representation. For a richly diverse, extended period in North American literary history, it seemed that the novel could still register political changes by noting down the expressive changes in contemporary languages, not least the professional languages that were evolving along with a technological society. An account of the whaling industry in *Moby Dick*, the development of the German-American "Rocket State" in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and the establishment of a neo-liberal autocracy in *Valparaiso*, could each fill in for the emergence of an entire world-system. The quest for domination, by Ahab, by Blicero, by Robert Coover's comedian character, Richard Nixon, might have been strange accounts of a single, overreaching personality. But these narratives were able, nonetheless, to point a direction through the culture at large, to uncover a living aspiration toward world-domination within current arrangements.

The ever open, ever ambiguous literary representation can hold an audience, it seems, only so long as the world-system itself remains incomplete, and only so long as a sense of wonder exists in readers. Once a world-system takes hold in reality (as in Pinochet's Chile), literary activity largely ceases. If the short-lived socialist state under Salvador Allende was unique, conforming neither to Marxist nor Maoist precepts, the counter-revolution and authoritarian capitalism that followed would become all too familiar. Although outright military force was usually avoided, the innovations of the U.S. backed Pinochet government were to be picked up and further developed by the Thatcher, Deng, Reagan, Yeltsin administrations and their successors. The revolutionary impulses of the Sixties and early Seventies, it was discovered, could be reigned in not through military force alone, but with a

more ambitious, more subtle, and long-term expansion of the military into the social and the economic spheres (even as the military itself would be reconstructed on a corporate model: soldiers to be replaced, largely, by security forces, military engagements overseas decided in days or weeks, from the air, and other innovations described by the Mexican philosopher and sociologist, Manuel DeLanda, in *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines*).

**THE COCKTAIL PARTY WENT ON, OBLIVIOUS TO THE
MONUMENTAL ATMOSPHERIC CHANGE.¹⁶**

In North America, world fictions such as *Gravity's Rainbow*, *The Public Burning*, *JR*, and *The Names* ceased to appear as the world-system established itself nearly everywhere, peacefully in some times and places, violently in Chile. "The generation of '73," Wohlstetter's generation, the generation of Robert Coover, Don DeLillo, William Gaddis, and Thomas Pynchon, produced narratives that were as open to innovation, formally, as they sought to be expansive in subject matter. The embrace, by these writers, of comic forms can be seen in retrospect to have been more scandalous than the obscenities and broken sexual taboos, a generation or two earlier, in the work of James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Anais Nin. This latest, arguably the last, generation of world-epical storytellers in the United States felt an attraction to the more popular, generic appeal of the comic strip, its ability to range from the joke to issues of cosmic importance, and its deflation of the high seriousness of modernist fiction between the World Wars. Knowing that the world was changed forever by technological violence, post-modern, post-World-War II writers in North America still went *out* into the world, they researched their themes, at times exhaustively, seeking power in knowledge. These writers sought not just literary materials, but also political alternatives in the countries where they traveled: Allende's Chile, Castro's Cuba, Mao's China, America itself during the colonial, revolutionary, and antebellum eras. (Pynchon, for decades, was rumored to be walking the length of the Pennsylvania/Maryland border in preparation for *Mason and Dixon*, published in 1997).

In the restless tradition of Herman Melville, Henry Adams, Henry James, and Gertrude Stein, U.S. writers of the generation of '73 often felt at home only among a community of expatriates.

Despite their cosmopolitanism, these writers worked, for the most part, alone. And their medium remained, for the most part, print: the medium of memory, the medium of language heard in the head, not in the ears.

Comics, the successor to the print novel, were "what World War II brought back to America. Dulled eardrums."¹⁷ (Wohlstetter)

MY NEXT IMPRESSION WAS OF INTENSE FEELING FOR THOSE WHO HAD BEEN LOST IN THE EXPLOSION.¹⁸

These days, cassettes don't break, journalists don't need to go looking – and authors don't hold onto manuscripts very long – after events. But can there be said to be an "after", or a "before", to be experienced while watching the graphic, dynamic images collected by Armstrong and Tippett? There are many "nexts", frequent "meanwhiles", "buts", "slowlies", "suddenlies", and other signifiers of conflict and change. Repetitions and recurrences abound, contexts multiply but there is never a design-governing principle that would allow a narrative or an argument to develop. We still have, frequently, the drone of jet planes and the sounds of life during wartime. The unprecedented and generalized violence of the past century shows no signs of abating, in the new one. History, as such, is nowhere present in the *Dynamo* – not if we mean, by history, a narrative to be told about the rise and fall of nations, the formation and re-formation of imperial powers, the flows, blockages, collective aspirations, and economic segregation of populations. Neither is history present, significantly, in much fiction in the U.S. since the Eighties. Writers in print, during the past twenty or thirty years, have generally reigned in the previous decade's worldly ambitions. Authors have learned to limit themselves to the domestic sphere, its intellectual range contained by the incorporation of writers into academic Programs, its subjective power channeled into the demands of possessive sexuality and commercial culture.

The comic, it would seem, is the only medium left with a mandate for presenting society whole, in broad canvas.

PATAGONIA HAD FALLEN!

...BUT THE DOSSIER, TOO, WAS MISSING...

...BUT THE SOLDIER COULD NOT HAVE RECEIVED THE INFORMATION IN TIME..¹⁹

As if answering to the changed media environment, comics, and its upscale cousin the "graphic novel", use tensions between image and text as a way to present society's changes and continuing contradictions. This tendency was pushed further, through the Eighties and Nineties in the U.S. and Europe, by electronic media in which text itself could change. In the short-lived experiments in hypertext and interactive fiction, blocks of texts could be connected by hyperlinked words or phrases, producing alternative trajectories through a narrative and in principle, avoiding closure. Yet the programming, that made possible such freedom, was still in the hands of the

author, so that the claim of readerly freedom proved largely illusory, like much else in a culture based on consumer “choice”. Such work purports not to represent the culture but to enact it.

THE WORK WAS A WONDER OF MONOTONY!²⁰

The requirement of the new, post-war, post-imperial order is not simply that all work, including works of art, should change, but that change (like the accumulation of capital) needs to be *endless*.

By contrast, the work on our screen at this moment, a kind of designwriting practiced by Armstrong and facilitated by Tippett, is quite stable, formally and in its use of technology. The images change, to be sure, and the scripts themselves might appear one time as a caption, the next as a thought balloon. But the words themselves – what Armstrong actually wrote – are the same each time, and the simple, unchanging three-panel structure makes it possible for multiple meanings to be glimpsed in each sentence and sentence fragment, for associations to occur, complexities to develop.

Or not.

The creators seem to have realized (and their curators recognize) that stability, at the level of the medium, actually creates more opportunities than so-called “reader-interaction” for freedom in reception:

Together, images and sentence fragments create a strange, dislocated sense and expectation in the reader. Sometimes at complete odds with each other; sometimes in complete synch, they are always moving, always changing. There is no reader-interaction with the work, no way to navigate it by pointing and clicking. Despite this, the work forces the viewer to engage in mental construction...²¹

The use of the word “force”, though overstated, is symptomatic and reinforces the military context behind so much of our contemporary rhetoric of “freedom”. So often, in the open networks of new liberal media culture, the user’s freedom becomes a compulsion to continue:

...to forge a link between text and images...²²

To “forge”: the combination of any two elements (even if only mentally) implies a kind of violence:

...between thought balloons and sentence fragments, to find a connection between frames, to find a story; or to simply submit to the discontinuity and occasional moments of perfect or seeming sense.²³

Submission to the given, finally, is the condition of narrative in the new media, the infrastructure supporting a new democracy, sort of:

*...of the net, by the net, for the net.*²⁴

Now that technologies facilitate the viewing of atrocities, deaths, events that occur at every instant worldwide, the call of narrative is no longer to locate such events in our own lives. What is required, rather, is a space where events can be at once received and held at a distance. Texts can be written, not as commentary or analysis, but as affective outbursts, capable of combining but only randomly, never through authorial purpose or intention.

NOTHING NEW.²⁵

A condition of narrative in the new media ecology is that nothing, no alteration to the social or political order, can be allowed to happen, ever. That doesn't mean that things don't change, but when change is *endless*, when dynamism and innovation are requirements rather than exceptions, the arts of story-telling suffer. The narratives going on, online in the world at any given moment, can be ours *without touching us*, courtesy of the *Grafik Dynamo*! No other instrument performs so well, as the networked computer, the removal from the world of sequence, consequence, argument, and affect.

Or rather, affects are everywhere, but never in "us", the reader/viewers.

**I WOULD DO ANYTHING FOR SOMEONE WHO WOULD FIGHT ME!
BUT WOULD THE MAN BEGIN TO TREMBLE, AND LOSE
EVERYTHING?**²⁶

Still, as nature abhors a vacuum, minds (those accustomed to reading novels, watching films and TV, and listening to radio) cannot live without narrative – and so we respond to narrative's absence by imagining stories of our own. I indulged the impulse "to engage in mental construction"²⁷ on the day when I happened to clip those two *Dynamo* scripts about someone who "would fight me" and someone else, or maybe the same man (why not?) who was trembling. This happened to be the day that Eliot Spitzer resigned as Governor of New York State, hoisted by his own petard when a Federal wiretap recorded his calls to an escort service. A coincidence? Maybe, maybe not – but suddenly the line I'd been noticing for weeks, concerning the man who is about to "lose everything", puts that other line about the prostitute with "startling news" in a kind of perspective. Meaning begins to accumulate.

Or not.

I know that the texts were written before Spitzer became a headline. In the mind of the author, Kate Armstrong, these sentences can have had nothing to do with Spitzer, but that's the story I, the reader, happened to be following, offline in the news, those days.

PUBLIC SERVANTS WATCHED FIERCE LIGHT RAIN DOWN FROM THE SKY...²⁸

The same caption will appear under different images (human, animal, machinic, organic). First the cartoon monkey, then the banana, can be seen speaking the same line. These particular image-captures are part of a poster having to do with Barack Obama, as it happens: the Democratic Party primary campaign was still under way. Around this time, Tuesday 4 June 2008 (the day of caucuses in Vermont, Rhode Island, Texas, and Ohio), I also caught a glimpse of a T-Shirt, "Hot for Hillary".

As it happens.

NOT A BREATH OF THIS HAD BEEN PUBLISHED IN THE NEWSPAPERS OR BROADCAST ON THE RADIO.²⁹

We can be sure that events are happening, unreported and unavailable to the dynamic of Web capture. This knowlege, somehow, is comforting. But not once, not ever, is there more than an accidental connection between one affective moment and another. Narrative is kept, literally, out of the picture.

"There's affect everywhere" - emotion, pathos, psychological involvement. The scripts, capitalized and presented often as exclamations, might be said to combine the spare diction and thematic expansiveness associated with the classical tradition of the Sublime. The word turns up, I notice, in at least two scripts: There's the man who's "clothed in sublime richness." The crowd, a frequent appearance in the *Dynamo* whose collective agency is more consequential than any individual's, is said to be "struck, as one, by the sublime mystery."

But even if the word itself never appeared, Armstrong's scripts would still be sublime in their frequent concern precisely with what is *not said*. Even as the images depict what cannot have happened (not to us), we are made to sense, through combinations of image and text, those places where language has reached its limit.

The Sublime is what Romantic poets felt in the presence of nature. It's what Henry Adams felt confronting the first electronic Dynamo, whose powers he

felt would usurp those previously associated with sex and religion. It's why Frank Zappa can't say where she's coming from when he's just met a girl named Dynamo Hum. It's the sum total of all expression at any moment on the LiveJournal, as captured and presented by the *Grafik Dynamo!*

DISREGARD HIS LOFTY VISION! ³⁰

The *Grafik Dynamo!* graphic – where have I seen this before?

I remember seeing something like it the other day on Travelocity, when I was booking a flight (Chicago to Vancouver, Washington, where Kate Armstrong would be presenting her work, then on to Berlin). There has to be a deeper visual history, I know. Without exactly remembering, I have seen something similar on show posters, in prints, on television, and sure enough an Internet search brings me back to those earlier media. The curvilinear title – it descends from Buffalo Bill Cody posters from the 19th Century, that's where Armstrong and Tippett got the lettering, the drop shadow, gradient red range. It seems to have been a popular choice for monster movies, and the *Grafik Dynamo!* certainly channels plenty of modern monstrosities, mutants, impossible permutations: those animals with diminishing atomic weight, those mysterious things of science, the undisclosed doings, "meanwhile", at the fumigation center and so forth.

The graphic appears also in shows on Vaudeville and in Nashville, Tennessee.

Oh and there it is, the most famous of all probably: the Ben Hur movie poster, foremost among dozens of adventure film titles that I found on GRAPHICINTENETSIT.COM.

Where will I see it, once I've lived with it in my browser window for some several weeks?

In the city of Kiev, en route to somewhere else, I saw it in Cyrillic on a billboard advertising *Индiana Джонс* (Indiana Jones). *Ben Hur* and its filmic tradition have gone global. In Kiev, one can see almost the same curvature as can be seen in the Armstrong/Tippett title, the same lettering in black and orange.

The curavature, I only just now notice when I glance at my bookshelf, is found also in the second word in Scott McCloud's book title, *Understanding Comics* – the very book a designer friend lent me, so that I might write knowledgeably about *Grafik Dynamo!* The oversized critical-essay-as-comic-

book (offering “a ring-side seat for the battle of words and pictures”) went with me on the plane to Croatia, then to Kiev, back briefly to Chicago and then to Vancouver, Washington, where I returned the book to the friend who lent it to me, so that he could return it, in turn, to his library at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. I was given, in turn, Phillip Wohlstetter’s novel-in-manuscript, to read on the plane home.

The Wohlstetter manuscript was passed to me by Rob Wittig at the 2008 meeting of the Electronic Literature Organization in Vancouver, Washington. Kate Armstrong, whom I met there for the second time in four years, followed up by kindly sending me details on the production of *Grafik Dynamo!* Networks, and occasionally narratives, are capable also of forming *around* a work of electronic literature. There is a practice of everyday life for many who create e-lit involving travel, conferencing, collaboration and attempts at co-production, to keep the work circulating in multiple media. As McCloud’s wording suggests, the medial encounter between words and images can be itself part of a “battle”, but there is also the possibility of opening new cognitive possibilities in the spaces “between” media. In comics, there are mysteries within each panel – the head that comes off the torso with a tip of the hat, is the example McCloud provides. And then the hat that comes off the head.

It’s heady stuff, for sure, what the panel can convey with its lexicon of lines, symbols, icons, and images in combination with words: the way a line, by itself, can convey either “fear, anxiety, and madness,” or “calm, reason, and introspection”; either warmth and gentleness, savagery and deadliness, or a rational, conservative disposition³¹; the way that the sketched expression on a face produces the same expression in ours, while reading – even as, in life, we react to others unconsciously with our own expression – and all this happens *prior* to verbal communication.

All that happens within a panel, or inside the panel created when one living body comes into visual range of another – as a friend or enemy, depending on what’s communicated pheromonally and muscularly, in a face-off.

But, for McCloud, “It’s the power of closure between panels” that is most interesting.

*We already know that comics asks the mind to work as a sort of **in-between**er – filling in the gaps between panels as an **animator** might – but I believe there’s still more to it than that.*³²

I think so, too. Within a panel, as McCloud notes, “We can only convey information visually”³³: word balloons and transliterations (CHOP! CHOP! CHOP!) can only *suggest* sounds (but suggestion usually is enough); the

squiggly lines above a boiling pot can be all it takes to locate us in a kitchen, where we know something about smells. The same squiggles above a pile of garbage, locate us in an altogether different setting, stimulating several senses at once.

Still, strictly speaking, the visual is the only sense in use, in us, when reading.

*But **between** panels, none of our senses are required at all. Which is why **all** of our senses are engaged!*³⁴

The total engagement – Arthur Rimbaud would have said the “derangement” or unruliness – of sense experience. *Le dereglement des tous les sense*: this too, is a characteristic of the Sublime, the aesthetic of disruption, the aesthetic of war (in contrast to the Beautiful, which has more to do with sensual life and loves). McCloud has zeroed in on the right aesthetic, for recognizing and realizing the potential of his own “invisible art” of comics. But the engagement, to the point of *disorganizing*, the senses is not, in itself, the full story: the liminal space between frames is all on the side of perception, not communication – and you do not have art without a movement from one to the other, perception, communication, and back, continually. What engages the senses, necessarily, is *operative*: it makes something happen in our minds, but pre-reflectively, and in a way that cannot be communicated to another mind (except by force, even if it’s the genial force of a smile in one person conveying a smile in the other).

Perception works, in aesthetics as in cognition, precisely *because* it is kept offscreen (in comics) and out of consciousness (in face-to-face encounters). When perceptions are fully engaged, this is of course a powerful experience – hence the power of the Sublime in aesthetics, and the highly evolved perceptual power that each person possesses, and has possessed since before the emergence of rational thought. But that power, which necessarily blocks conscious awareness, is only a stage in the development of an artform. The completion comes with reflection, and communication – and for this we need precisely a medium that *reduces* sense experience, which can be conveyed not directly (like light, sound, and touch) but indirectly, as when we grasp a *meaning*.

The medium that remains best suited to such communications, as far as I can tell, is the printed word.

The skilled use of this medium, even in the age of the word’s technological obsolescence, is what distinguishes critical comics by McCloud and the graphic sublime of the *Grafik Dynamo!*

McCloud's work is not criticism, and Armstrong/Tippett's work, as I have argued, is not narrative. But these works have the virtue of letting us know, sensually, what it is we're missing – in an era that systematically denies the development of critical and narrative experience.

THE DEVICE HAS BEEN LOST IN THE GENERAL FLUX OF IDEAS!³⁵

¹ Kate Armstrong, *Tributaries & Text-Fed Streams*, curatorial statement, online at The Capilano Review January 18, 2008

² Armstrong, *Tributaries & Text-Fed Streams*

³ Kate Armstrong, *Grafik Dynamo*

⁴ Until 2008 *Grafik Dynamo* pulled images from LiveJournal. From 2008 onward, the work pulled images from Flickr.

⁵ Jim Andrews, *Poetics*, June 30 2006

⁶ Armstrong, *Grafik Dynamo*

⁷ Armstrong, *Grafik Dynamo*

⁸ Kate Armstrong, Rhizome.org, February 16, 2005 11:14 am

⁹ Armstrong, *Grafik Dynamo*

¹⁰ Armstrong, *Grafik Dynamo*

¹¹ Kate Armstrong, Rhizome.org, February 16, 2005 11:14 am

¹² Armstrong, *Grafik Dynamo*

¹³ Philip Wohlstetter, *Valparaiso (manuscript page 200)*

¹⁴ Wohlstetter, *Valparaiso 188*

¹⁵ Wohlstetter, *Valparaiso 188*

¹⁶ Armstrong, *Grafik Dynamo*

¹⁷ Wohlstetter, *Valparaiso 200*

¹⁸ Armstrong, *Grafik Dynamo*

¹⁹ Armstrong, *Grafik Dynamo*

²⁰ Armstrong, *Grafik Dynamo*

²¹ Turbulence.Org: A Presentation of Select Commissioned Works for Upgrade Johannesburg, Jo-Anne Greene and Helen Thorington, April 7, 2006: 30

²² Greene and Thorington, A Presentation of Select Commissioned Works for Upgrade Johannesburg 31

²³ Greene and Thorington, A Presentation of Select Commissioned Works for Upgrade Johannesburg 31

²⁴ Greene and Thorington, A Presentation of Select Commissioned Works for Upgrade Johannesburg 31

²⁵ Armstrong, *Grafik Dynamo*

²⁶ Armstrong, *Grafik Dynamo*

²⁷ Greene and Thorington, A Presentation of Select Commissioned Works for Upgrade Johannesburg 31

-
- ²⁸ Armstrong, *Grafik Dynamo*
²⁹ Armstrong, *Grafik Dynamo*
³⁰ Armstrong, *Grafik Dynamo*
³¹ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 124-25
³² McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 88
³³ McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 89
³⁴ McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 89
³⁵ Armstrong, *Grafik Dynamo*