

Time and Narrative:

how philosophical thinking can support the discipline of Illustration

Paul Ricoeur is a philosopher who wrote three volumes on the theme of time and narrative, highlighting the capacity of storytelling to touch and reconfigure people's lives (temporarily). His work suggests that narrative has the capacity not simply to re-present events but to provide rich contexts of experience wherein ideas can be explored and, to some extent, lived-through. This paper will argue for the value of applying such ideas to the reading and development of Illustration within an educational context, encouraging individuals (particularly within the art school sector) to enhance existing aspirations for their discipline that include making sense of the world, exploring the referential function of illustration, and the potential of narrative to re-structure life experiences.

This paper will argue that by foregrounding philosophical thinking within the curriculum of Illustration, the work of writers such as Paul Ricoeur can assist in highlighting a range of methodologies that are currently embedded (implicitly) within its histories, and everyday thoughts and actions. It can begin the process of making these existent practices explicit, re-conceiving them as strategic methodologies for the undergraduate practitioner to explore in the present day. A conscious retrieval of philosophical thinking, such as this, allows individual approaches to be retrieved as elements of a wider discipline, one where practitioners consciously adopt or acknowledge an attitude or position within their field of expertise. Whether Illustration is recognized as a place of business, education and/or social commentary, philosophical thinking can assist in developing a sense of common ground within this diverse system of communication.

At undergraduate level, for example, it can enable students to find points of similarity and difference within a range of common practices: a shared sense of discipline can be identified and explored in relation to these philosophical modes of analysis. For these points of similarity and difference are ultimately based on shared understandings that already underpin contemporary and historical practices; it is not a question of imposing from the outside but reinforcing a sense of discipline from the inside. One can use philosophical thinking to re-conceive existing teleologies, for

example, such as those running from narrative artists such as William Hogarth and Honoré Daumier to Sue Coe and Russell Mills (Heller and Chwast 2008). Within such a methodological framework, individual practitioners can be seen as exemplars of narrative depth; that is to say, as practitioners who use linguistic techniques in order to communicate socially shared meanings. This would support existing histories around satire and utopianism, for example, and provide a timely corrective to highly individualistic accounts that focus on contemporary illustrators as significant points of reference in-and-of themselves (Wiedemann 2011; Klanten 2006).

Educator and illustrator Lawrence Zeegen, is among those who express the timeliness of such a methodological review. He describes contemporary Illustration in terms of a tight-knit community of individuals that has become ‘entrenched in navel-gazing and self-authorship’ (2012: 52). In a recent article in *Creative Review*, Zeegen delineates a discourse that has lost touch with a wider social purpose; he argues that Illustration has forgotten its sense of critical engagement and contact with those outside its immediate community. ‘It’s all style over content ... Illustration has withdrawn from the big debates of our society to focus on the chit-chat and tittle-tattle of inter-sanctum nothingness’ (52). While the article can be read as personal polemic, it is also indicative of the timeliness of the debate around the social and narrative role of Illustration. It highlights, for example, the value in locating implicit philosophical tendencies within contemporary practice; at the very least, it poses a methodological solution to a discipline that appears to have lost contact with its explicit philosophical traditions. The study of Ricoeur’s ideas could offer a way of overcoming this period of apparent social confinement and of reaching out to a wider range of audiences, histories and motives for illustrational practice. The philosophical thinking of Ricoeur is offered, therefore, as an intellectual model for developing socially minded and content-driven narratives. It provides an opportunity to focus on the visual and textual language of Illustration - across its diverse genres and functions - and to generate an analysis that foregrounds the relation between form and cultural meaning (rather than form and individual style, for example).

Quoting Aristotle, Ricoeur argues that drawing resemblances to and from the world can enhance people’s understanding of it, ‘bringing together terms that at first seem “distant” ... suddenly “close”’ (Aristotle in Ricoeur, 1984: x). Through the

application of such philosophical understanding, this paper suggests that young illustrators can see one function of their discipline as providing ‘semantic pertinence,’ unifying miscellaneous elements in order to secure deep understandings. Using the ideas of Ricoeur, the paper will explore the themes of mimetic and metaphoric value, arguing for a re-examination of the potential of illustration to take the viewer beyond the image and/or illustrator itself to ‘the elsewhere’ of social and fictional narratives.

The illustrational work of Tim Vyner has been selected in order to explore the ways in which this metaphoric value of illustration might be achieved and utilized in relation to contemporary practice. Perhaps there are more immediate and knowing examples to be found in the sequential work of illustrators such as Maurice Sendak, Quentin Blake or Anthony Browne. However, Vyner’s work - situated in the field of visual journalism - offers an example of a narrative approach that has the same capacity of comics, graphic novels and children’s picture books to tell independent stories and yet finds itself situated in a closer relationship to the highly negotiated world of art directors and commissioned illustration (Taylor-Gill, 2012). In this respect, there is potential to develop new themes and teleologies beyond the consideration of highly authored or openly political work. This paper argues that Vyner’s work, specifically his drawings of sporting events, provide an atypical example of narrative and metaphor. It shows how non-sequential or single panel illustrations, even those located in the mediated domain of agency work, can also afford an opportunity to explore the elements that enable illustrators to exert control over content. Vyner is a good example of a practitioner who might be conceived as a reluctant author and yet, may still be viewed as an intuitive philosopher. As the paper now argues, Ricoeur’s analysis helps to make this subtle and everyday process of interpretation more overt.

What is philosophical thinking?

Existing literature in the field of Illustration is already dominated by ideas of narrative and storytelling, although this is largely confined to the area of comic novels. In *Graphic Storytelling*, for example, Will Eisner discusses the historical effort of individual practitioners to tell ‘stories of substance’ (1996: 1). He identifies Frans Masereel, La Feuille and Otto Nucker as practitioners who have transformed

the comic book genre into a serious medium, believing that storytelling comprises a significant cultural practice with regards to the wider social scene. He argues that graphic storytelling assists in the preservation of knowledge and tradition, and states that: ‘Stories are used to teach behaviour within the community, to discuss morals and values or to satisfy curiosity’ (7). Furthermore, Eisner describes how this discipline is characterized by the imaginary and material construction of stories; narrative structure is seen as key to understanding this area of Illustration. He proposes that: ‘While words are a vital component, the major dependence for description and narration is on universally understood images, crafted with the intention of imitating or exaggerating reality’ (2). Eisner uses the term ‘graphic narrative’ to describe such practices, outlining how images are employed to transmit ideas (sometimes with the help of words) in highly organized and sequentially motivated ways.

In order to develop this argument, *Graphic Storytelling* builds up and utilizes a repertoire of key terms that can be seen as characteristic of such treatises on Illustration: empathy, structure, social symbolism, human experience and productive imagination.ⁱ There is evidence of an underlying conceptual proposition at work here, one that is revealed through its precise use of terms and ideas. In the process of speaking directly from experience as an individual practitioner, Eisner intuitively draws on shared understandings of narrative that, as this paper will explain, echo established modes of philosophical thinking (such as the work of Ricoeur). The first instance of this parallelism is when Eisner expresses the belief that illustration can establish a deep connection with its audience, working by a process of ‘empathy’ in order to gain and retain the reader’s attention. He explains that empathy is a ‘visceral reaction’ that can bind the reader to the story, arguing that: ‘The ability to “feel” the pain, fear or joy of someone else enables the storyteller to evoke emotional contact with the reader’ (47). A second example of his philosophical thinking is revealed through his generalized understanding that ideas can be meaningfully conveyed through the use of symbolism and sophisticated storytelling structures. Finally, Eisner reveals his philosophical aspirations for Illustration by claiming that comic books and other graphic narratives have the capacity to carry serious content: they are a medium for adults as well as children. As this paper will demonstrate, Eisner is typical of contemporary illustrators in the sense that he draws intuitively on established

philosophical thinking in order to communicate his practice (phenomenological thinking, to be precise).

Although Eisner's writing is maintained and developed through established philosophical principles, these terms are proposed in a spirit of independence. *Graphic Storytelling* offers, on the surface, a highly personal understanding of practice. The book presents itself as one man's observations on creative process, as though any common ground to emerge from the text is incidental and merely the product of a coincidental empathy with the text. The inference is that those who share his deep experiences of - and engagement with - life processes will understand his mode of expression; the visual and textual languages will make the right kind of sense to audiences who can *empathize* with Eisner's approach. Those who approach life in the same way as Eisner can apprehend him (intuitively). Ultimately, the authority of Eisner's treatise on graphic narratives is located solely on his active engagement with - and tacit understanding of - craft; it is his deep commitment to the endeavour of illustration that enables him to communicate ideas effectively to audiences (who trust and understand his work). It is also aligned with the specific media of comics and graphic novels, which specialize in narrative sequence.

Yet, as this paper will now explain, the recurrent use of specific concepts and terminology is far from incidental to Eisner's work. Eisner is, in effect, drawing on a body of philosophical ideas that maintain and develop his process-oriented approach to Illustration.ⁱⁱ Arguably, he appears to be, intuitively, a phenomenologist, working with first hand experience to develop a fuller understanding of his own activities and thought processes. He places value on gaining knowledge empirically; that is to say, he believes one can learn by direct experience of the world, such as the direct experience of reading and creating stories. In conclusion he clearly states that 'an image is the memory of the object or experience recorded by a narrator' (15).

What is phenomenology?

An established mode of philosophical thinking that supports this belief in learning from direct experience is Phenomenology. This philosophical discipline can be usefully summarised as one that investigates the immediate context of the subject-

object relation. In other words, this approach tends to study relationships, as they unfold in real time, between people and things. It is interested, for example, in the relationships that comprise the experience of reading, the way in which the illustrator ‘reads’ and recreates the world and the way in which the viewer ‘reads’ and recreates the illustration. As a body of philosophical principles, phenomenology is often advanced as a way of exploring the interplay between the interiority (or thought-processes) of an individual, and the exteriority (or the outward orientation) towards the immediate environment. This approach tends to emphasize the physiological relationship that unfolds between a person and the space s/he inhabits, focusing on the micro level of empirical experiences generated by contact with other people and other things. It asks: where is this relationship taking me? What does this relationship feel like? How do I move me from one experience to the next? For this reason it is frequently understood as an empirically-based discipline, one that encourages the retrieval of ‘immediate’ data from the physical contexts of worldly relations. It is a discipline, moreover, that bases its observations in the act of doing and how that relates to thoughts about doing. It is for this reason that it lends itself to the analysis of illustration practices, specifically those already working with Eisner-esque understandings and graphic sequences (that prove to be phenomenological and narrative understandings, respectively).

Phenomenological thinking acknowledges that even the most basic experience of contact with, and perception of, the world, carries some ‘baggage’ from the past: an accumulation of past experiences. This ‘baggage’ does not constitute the object of analysis however. Phenomenology does not use the present in order to offer an interpretation of the past; rather, it uses the present as its intended object(ive). One of the goals of phenomenology is to heighten awareness of what is present and to understand the mechanisms by which an understanding of presence comes into consciousness, such as the visual organization of a story through relations established between words and image. In general terms it is about learning to pay more attention to the immediate unfolding of subject-object and subject-subject relationships, and appreciating the present-ness of the subject in each moment as it unfolds (Bergson 2004). This calls for a focus on both the spatial and/or temporal orientations generated by the material object (in a single panel or sequential illustration format, for example) and its relations with the maker and/or reader.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Work of Paul Ricoeur

The philosophical ideas of Paul Ricoeur are linked to the discipline of phenomenology, although his own attention is specifically focused on the relations of reading; that is to say, the act of reading a text. This gives Ricoeur's approach an hermeneutic emphasis, one where the focus is on the process and relations of interpretation. Ricoeur argues that his own deployment of phenomenological concerns proposes a conscious counterpoint to a linguistic analysis of the image, which tends to focus on the internal workings of an artefact and on excavating its 'hidden' meaning. Ricoeur believes that a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach to literature can augment this linguistic model because it addresses the *practical* experience of reading and producing a text. It identifies the key elements engaged in the *relations* of reading, highlighting the dynamic or interactive aspects of this process of emplotment or storytelling. It opens up the possibility of recounting other stories about the process of making the initial stories themselves, seeing texts as a life force that comes out of everyday experiences. As Ricoeur explains, 'The reader belongs at once to the work's horizon of experience in imagination and to that of his or her own real action' (Ricoeur in Wood, 1991: 26): reading is 'a way of living in the fictive universe of the work' (27).

In this way, Ricoeur makes an appeal to both a practical/physical and metaphysical/imaginative appreciation of a text. A single story makes one event - the event of reading - out of a multiplicity of life happenings and experiences, integrating concordant and discordant elements into a unified narrative structure or 'temporal totality' (Ricoeur in Wood, 1991: 22). A narrative might be understood as performing a significant social function in this regard, as it can bring deep structures to life/light. Ricoeur believes that in the process of engaging with stories, readers can experience the triumph of narrative concordance over otherwise discordant and simultaneous life elements.

In relation to such philosophical thinking, one can therefore propose the idea of an illustrator as someone who configures life through narrative and who, thereby, facilitates the reconfiguration of the lives of others (temporarily) through the act of

‘reading’ an illustration. This can be seen clearly in the work of Tim Vyner, which advances an historical narrative around single panel illustrations of live sporting events (see Figure One). In an interview at his studio, Vyner describes how his aim is to capture ‘the emerging stories’ around major competitions (Vyner 2012). These stories are less to do with the players and participants and more to do with the effects of sporting events on the everyday lives of people at the host location. Vyner states that: ‘My illustrations comment on a place in a state of change and transformation; a kind of journalism that captures records a moment in time ... at an extraordinary moment in history.’

For example, Vyner went to China to document the impact of the Olympic Games on the inhabitants of Beijing. What he discovered was the collision of two worlds: the residual world of indigenous living and the emergent world of an accelerated tiger economy. This story is composed of discordant visual elements that are meticulously plotted within the unifying landscape format of a single panel illustration. The viewer is presented with an elevated perspective that surveys the overlapping monochromatic rooftops of lowly tenement dwellings and their proximity to the expansive and spectacular hoardings of global brands. While the viewer is clearly embedded in a specific place - at an iconic moment in time - the narrative is constructed in such a way as to offer a deep perspective or long view. The illustrator configures the world in visual and conceptual terms, using the diminishing horizon to function practically and metaphorically. This technique amplifies Ricoeur’s thesis about narratives having practical and abstract aspects. It is as though Vyner has articulated philosophical thinking, wherein the language of illustration takes on a double meaning in narrative terms: the single panel or non-sequential work also provides ‘a longer story.’ As Vyner concludes, Beijing ‘is grey, apart from the hoardings’.

Through such philosophical framing, the visual language and processes of illustration retrieve their depth and highlight an ongoing dedication, by illustrators such as Vyner, to providing social content/context (even when they are not cast in this role). When Vyner describes his own approach to illustration, in absence of such framing, he tends to convey the story of his own practice in understated ways. He speaks pragmatically about choosing a subject matter that has ‘a ready made

audience,' identifying collectors for his illustration work among those who are already interested in sporting activities (such as the Chief Executive of the Professional Footballer's Association, who collects work on the basis its footballing content). He identifies those who collect his work as people who are looking for something 'beyond the headlines ... to the reporting of an event.' Vyner describes how he 'nurtures' the emerging stories around sporting events and how he believes that people simply want to look at them, and to pick up on the atmosphere and mood of a place. However, in the context of phenomenological-hermeneutic thinking, one begins to pick up on additional resonances in his otherwise no-nonsense account. He talks about spending months on planning trips to host locations, of having 'been, recorded and drawn.' At other moments he uses the same words to evoke different meanings and allusions, describing how he was 'drawn' to reportage work while studying at Camberwell College of Art in the 1980s, and drawn to 'the colour and character of a place.' If one takes a philosophical view, one can see an overlap between different life practices, different moments in time and, most importantly, an overlap between the readily acknowledged mode of practical action and the more marginalized mode of metaphoric imagination.

As Ricoeur states, every narrative presupposes a familiarity with its signs: 'In a sense, there is no structural analysis of narrative that does not borrow from an explicit or implicit phenomenon of "doing something"' (1984: 56). Ricoeur believes that people can only represent or configure real-world action through a having pre-understanding of those activities of life. At the initial stage of transforming a three-dimensional world into a two-dimensional structure, Ricoeur describes how the transcriber needs to be perceptive of resemblances and those aspects of the world's story that carry 'semantic pertinence' (64). He describes how the prefiguration of the world, or its production as image, requires a productive imagination to constitute the world in terms of significant moments or elements of plot. The choice, he suggests, is based on a familiarity and experience with everyday life. In the process of transcription, the transcriber brings distant things close and enables the viewer to 'see as' though he was there. In this way, the use of a personalized perspective in Vyner's illustrations allows the viewer to view the event 'as if' he was there. As such, following Ricoeur's thinking, these illustrations 'could be the revealer of a being as

on the deepest ontological level' (1984: xi). Maybe so ... but Vyner prefers to speak of this process another way, as building 'a kit of parts that can be read by anyone.'

Ricoeur describes the process of transcribing the world as an act of mimesis, which he then divides into three parts. The first part is where the illustrator uses metaphor to prefigure the world as plotted elements (as outlined above). The second part to mimesis is the production of the illustrated work itself, which stands alone as a composition wherein events have been organized and configured in terms of a story. It is in this area of configuration – that surrounds the construction of an illustration as an independent artefact – that each practitioner can develop different strategies and intentions. Vyner, for example describes how he uses the landscape or setting to carry the story. While in Ghana for the World Cup, Vyner tried to capture the spirit of this international sporting event from the situation of a nation who had qualified for the first time. He describes how, 'I was trying to draw the atmosphere and mood from an African perspective' (See Figure Two).

In order to bring the distant events in Accra up close, Vyner painted discrete or single image compositions of urban space that are populated by barefooted children with 'no fixed kit' who are playing football in the town square. In 'Jamestown Mantse Palace,' for example, Vyner captures the impressive stature of a large white building, marked out in contrast to a monochromatic foreground of monolithic sand. He accumulates visual elements that start to configure a story through the careful detailing of the location, which is presented as an everyday stage for unfolding social events. As well as capturing the gestures of enthusiastic amateur footballers, Vyner records evidence of local advertising campaigns and documents various other pieces of vernacular writing, which eventually build up to form a set of subtle signs or clues. Vyner explains that, 'The image carries a lot of narrative ... local adverts appear in contrast to the adverts of the World Cup's legitimate sponsors ... and the building at the back refers to a darker history.' With subtlety, the impressive architectural structure slowly reveals itself to be a Museum of Slavery, captured through the images of canon and crouching human forms on its front aspect and the eponymous title of the image itself. In this way, a powerful historical narrative is gently articulated through the understated employment of visual identifiers. As Vyner

concludes, 'It's an opportunity for your voice to be portrayed; you can't draw everything.'

At this second stage of mimesis - the appearance and circulation of the configured illustration - narrative offers a network of actions, captured in symbolic form, that are imbued with conceptual potential. These illustrated actions are structured, symbolized and given a sense of time; that is to say, in addition to their descriptive or documentary currency, they have been given a metaphoric value that can take the viewer elsewhere. Speaking about the specific metaphoric value of colour, Vyner summarises this view as follows: 'Colour is a funny one for me. I've just reacted to what feels right. I'm observing the colour that is actually there but actively looking for a palette that represents a place.' This additional value is achieved through a process of assembling different visual elements within a frame but also through the conscious application of allusions to take the viewer somewhere beyond the frame (establishing a potential for paradigmatic correspondences). As 'Jamestown Mantse Palace' demonstrates, an illustration can be viewed descriptively in terms of what the image contains (in terms of syntax) but also, philosophically, in terms of a heightened and mediated experience of the world (in terms of paradigms of colour, for example). Ricoeur therefore refers to such work as engaged in 'the symbolic mediation of action' (54).

According to Ricoeur, people don't simply plot action; they allow actions to be re-experienced in the act of reading. Indeed, the final act of this three-fold mimesis occurs at the point of reading the configured story. Reading, he suggests, reactivates the time of the initial act of productive imagination (wherein the illustrator prefigures the world with semantic pertinence). In the process of reading, narrative structures contribute to the process of life – it offers an experience of life in microcosm. The reader unlocks the diachronic structures of the illustration, allowing the metaphors to take them somewhere beyond the image (to the time of slavery or to a consideration of the processes of globalization, for example). In the case of Vyner's practice, it allows one person to re-experience elements of an original event through the productive life of the illustrator/illustration; it is literally seeing the world through his/its eyes. In this way, the viewing of an illustration can be seen as more than a viewing of a thing; there is a complex temporality at work here. In the process of

engaging with a narrative form, Ricoeur argues that readers are opened up to the experience of a three-fold present; they witness the *coming to be* of the illustration (there are traces of prefiguration in its semantic pertinence), the *making present* of the illustration as a configured object (in the eyes of the beholder who is being there with it), and the *having been* of the illustration (where past experiences are re-figured). Ricoeur concludes that, 'I may now add that is in the act of re-telling rather than that of telling that the structural function of closure can be discerned' (67). This closure can be understood as temporal, for the ultimate function of narrative involves the care of the reader; the illustrator is actively engaged in getting someone to a place of a fully integrated *being here*.

Conclusion

Using the ideas of Ricoeur, this paper has demonstrated how explicit philosophical thinking towards narrative adds to practical understandings of the function of illustration. By a process of mimesis and metaphor, narrative has been shown to integrate and configure historical and fictional meanings, working through three different stages towards the effective integration of the life, the observer and the reader in the work. The paper has explored these themes of mimetic and metaphoric value, arguing for a re-examination of the potential of illustration to take the viewer beyond the immediate image (or even the illustrator himself) to 'the elsewhere' of larger social 'truths' or narratives.

This paper works with an assumption that there is value in consciously applying philosophical ideas to the reading and development of Illustration as a discipline, demonstrating that there is implicit philosophical content evident in a wide range of contemporary practices (even those that are not obviously embedded in social and political traditions). In this sense, there is more to Illustration than meets the eye; at the very least, through a discussion of narrative and metaphor, it appears that illustrational practices are open to the horizon of time and care of the reading subject. With this in mind, the paper hopes to encourage individuals (particularly a pedagogical remit) to develop explicit philosophical methodologies for their discipline. This would amount to a retrieval of existing content that is currently

camouflaged by understated and largely descriptive accounts of process. Through the application of Paul Ricoeur's thesis on time and narrative, the paper has shown how practitioners - such as Tim Vyner - are already making sense of the world, exploring the referential function of illustration, and realizing the potential of narrative to re-structure life experiences.

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Interview

Tim Vyner interviewed by Julia Moszkowicz at his studio in Bath, UK. Monday 12 March, 2012.

Endnotes

ⁱ In *Pictures and Words: New Comic Art and Narrative Illustration*, for example, Roanne Bell and Mark Sinclair highlight the capacity of illustration to offer visual prompts that encourage readers to 'fill in the blanks' with productive acts of imagination (2005: 10).

ⁱⁱ Paul Wood argues for the influence of phenomenological thinking on art practices from Cubism onwards, specifically the work of Henri Bergson in *Creative Evolution*. At first explicit, he believes that the precise philosophical principles became lost in an eclectic mix of ideas, contexts and influences. See Paul Wood (2003).

ⁱⁱⁱ This approach is far from unique in demonstrating an interest in these matters. Psychoanalysis, for example, has also emerged as a significant humanistic discipline, and is one that covers similar territory: the subjective experience and conditions as an individual moves through the world/life. However, whilst the underlying epistemological interests bear a resemblance to one another, the methodological concerns of psychoanalysis and phenomenology are starkly different. Firstly, these may be summarised as different spatio-temporal orientations towards the object of study.