Narrative structure in wordless comics[1]

Estrutura narrativa em quadrinhos sem palavras

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Abstract
Applies the terminology and the methodologies laid out in the book *Narrative structure in comics* (POSTEMA, 2018a) to the graphic novel *The arrival*, by Shaun Tan (2006), considered as a wordless comics. Defends that abstraction and simplification are hard to find in Tan's chosen style and that much of the meaning that his images accrue comes from the visual style he uses, which resembles old photographs. Due to the snapshot / photographic quality of Tan's images, most panels, like photographs, seem to represent just an instant, only capturing the sense of time passing across several panels. *The arrival* does not employ any grids, as it is laid out with generous, clear gutters, so the format of closely adjacent panels without any blank space between them, and neither uses insets, but only several implied insets of frames within frames. The article also uses two comic stories by Fabio Moon to illustrate the concept of sequences.

Key-words: Wordless comics. *The Arrival*. Tan, Shaun (author). Comics – Narrative structure.

Resumo
Aplica a terminologia e as metodologias apresentadas no livro Estrutura narrativa nos quadrinhos (POSTEMA, 2018a) à graphic novel *The arrival*, de Shaun Tan (2006), considerada como um história em quadrinhos sem palavras. Defende que é difícil encontrar abstração e simplificação no estilo escolhido por Tan e que muito so sentido que suas imagens transmitem vem da estilo visual que ele utiliza, que faz lembrar de antigas fotografias. Devido à qualidade do instantâneo fotográfico das imagens de Tan, a maioria dos quadros, como fotografias, parecem representar justamente um instante, capturando somente o senso do tempo passando através de vários quadrinhos. *The Arrival* não emprega grades, uma vez que é disposto com generosos, claras sarjetas, obtendo um formato de quadrinhos adjacentes sem qualquer espaço entre eles e tampouco utiliza insertos, mas somente alguns insertos implícitos de molduras dentro de molduras. O artigo também utiliza duas histórias em quadrinhos de Fábio Moon para ilustrar o conceito de sequências.

Palavras-chave: Histórias em quadrinhos sem palavras. *A chegada*. Tan, Shaun (autor). Histórias em Quadrinhos – Estrutura narrativa.

On the occasion of the Portuguese edition of my monograph *Narrative structure in comics:* making sense of fragments (2018a), I will apply the terminology and the methodologies laid out in my book to the genre of wordless comics, using Shaun Tan's graphic novel *The arrival* as my case study. Comics use a system or structure that allows them to create complex meanings from a series of fragments: gaps in graphic narratives invite readers to fill in those blanks while offering all the codes necessary to complete the process of signification. In comics, absences and elisions signify in the abstracted drawn image, the page layout, the sequence, in image-text combinations, and of course in the narrative, where gaps often take up the role of motif. Through consideration of how images, panels and borders, as well as sequences work in Shaun Tan's graphic novel, I will argue how specifically the wordless aspect of *The arrival* drives and affects the narrative. The missing element, verbal text, means this comic is ostensibly lacking the multimodal feature of image-text combinations that is so often seen as fundamental to the comics form. The lack of this dimension, and the attention the work continuously draws to that lack, becomes central to the meaning of this graphic novel.

Since completing *Narrative structure in comics* (POSTEMA, 2013), I have been immersing myself in silent comics, a form of comics which chooses not to use text. In a sense wordless comics flout traditions and definitions of comics: The speech and thought balloons developed for use in comics have become synonymous with the form as a whole, and the combination of text and images, the visual-verbal blend, have been at the heart of what has made comics despicable in the public view – it's not really art, not really literature, but instead some kind of hybrid or bastard… The application of words and pictures together is also, of course, part of the form's great appeal: it's like a low-tech movie, where you contribute the movement and sounds in your own head. Or, to put it in a more scholarly way, as Dale Jacobs (2013) has done, the form has multimodality, engaging several kinds of reading or meaning-making simultaneously. This shows the vibrancy and attraction of the form, and the other appealing feature comics have for me: the extent to which as a reader one is actively involved, forced to fill in blanks, bridge gaps, connect certain words in the right tone to particular pictures where you've had to figure out what that precise facial expression meant.

For the purposes of my research project, I define wordless or silent comics as comics that choose to abide by the constraint of not using (readable) text for dialogue or narration. Consequently, these comics communicate by images alone. When these comics use text balloons, those balloons too will be filled with symbols, images, punctuation marks, made-up scripts—anything except words. There are two types of text which I "allow" as exceptions. One is iconotext or intericonic text: words that appear in the diegesis and are thus a visible part of the world represented in the comic. In figure 1, from Sara Varon's *Robot dreams*, the iconotext includes the titles of the books and the labels on the items on the work bench. The other textual element that often occurs in comics that still generally function as silent comics is sound effects: even as they choose to forego spoken words, wordless comics are often surprisingly noisy in their use of sound effects, as you can see in Figure 1 with the sounds of Raccoon's tinkering in their workshop. While it is somewhat ironic for silent comics to include sound, since such textual sound effects do not actually affect the narration, I accept this kind of example in my corpus.

Fig. 1 – Iconotexts and sound effects

Source: VARON, Sara. *Robot dreams*. p. 167. The author's collection.

Silent comics operate with many gradations of silence. Andy Runton's *Owly* series shows its protagonists speaking, but shows those conversations in speech and

thought balloons full of icons and images (figure 2). Some examples of comics that are very rich in iconotext include Peter Kuper's *The system* and Marc-Antoine Mathieu's *3 seconds*. By contrast, other comics are very "pure" in terms of their image world being uninterrupted by text, such as Jim Woodring's (2010) Frank books and Moebius's *Arzach*, as well as my main text for analysis in this essay, *The arrival*. However, Woodring's books, such as *Weathercraft*, usually include a lot of paratext on the covers or dustjackets of his works, while *Arzach* includes the title word frequently, oddly with numerous variant spellings. In terms of visual style and narrative style, wordless comics run the gamut from cartoonish to photorealistic, from humorous to dramatic, and from graphic in the most adult way possible, including sex and violence, to works for children that are almost indistinguishable from children's picture books. Within the form of comics, I tend to talk about wordless comics as a genre, but it is a genre that itself exists in many genres, including Science Fiction, Romance, and Detective.

Fig. 2 – Icons and images in speech balloons

Source: RUNTON, Andy. *Owly: Helping hands*, p. 20. The author´s collection.

Silent comics have been around almost as long a regular comics. For this pronouncement I follow the school of thought that considers Rodolphe Töpffer to be the father of comics, with comics as printed narratives told in sequential images developing over the course of the 19th century. Wilhelm Busch, of *Max & Moritz* fame,

drew picture stories about animals that did not include captions or explanatory text. Over the following decades many magazines in Europe included part or full-page narrative strips without text (SMOLDEREN, 2014) Some of the best examples can be found in the *Chat Noir* magazine, in the last decade of the 19th century, including work by Caran d'Ache and Steinlen. I am partial to some of the wordless strips that can be found in German magazines of the same period, such as *Simplicissimus* and *Jugend*.

From these early beginnings, silent comics have continually been a presence, in most formats available to comics and to graphic narrative more broadly. I choose to consider woodcut novels such as the works of Frans Masereel as a part of my silent comics corpus, though according to some definitions, the woodcut novel might not quite be comics, since it only shows one panel per page. This form was popular from the 1910s onwards. There have been quite a few wordless magazine and newspaper strip series, including Edwina Dumm's weekly strip *Sinbad*, about a cute but mischievous dog, which ran in *Life*, and E.O. Plauen's *Vater und Sohn* in the 1930s, *Professor Pi* by Bob van den Born in the 50s and 60s, *Nipper* by Doug Wright from the 50s through the 70s, and currently *Liō* by Mark Tatulli. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there have never been many wordless mainstream or superhero comics. Those superhero comics that exist have often been creates as a "special event": G.I. Joe had a "no dialogue" issue in 1984 (Vol. 1, n. 21) and inspired by that, Marvel issued the "Nuff Said" challenge for February 2002, where all creative teams were asked to do a silent comics episode. There is also a wordless Marvel 9/11 commemorative comic book, called *A Moment of Silence* for obvious reasons. In more experimental formats of comics you find far more wordlessness: in minicomics, small press or alternative comics and in web comics. Silent comics flourish there and are currently being produced in abundant supply. I have had to give up being completist about my overview of silent comics. Where I started out thinking this was an interesting oddity of which I would hopefully find enough samples to have something to say about them, I have instead found wordless comics to be a thriving genre that has inspired many cartoonists in innumerable ways (POSTEMA, 2018b).

This brings me to the publication of *The arrival*, my main text for this essay. Shaun Tan is an illustrator from Perth, Australia, and has worked mainly in children's book illustration. *The arrival* was originally published in 2006 and has been published in translated editions all around the world. I always find it funny to talk about translations with wordless works, since in this case, the title is all that needs to be

translated. Even so, some editions credit a translator. The Brazilian edition came out from Edições SM in 2011, and is called *A chegada*. A pretty straightforward translation, though I will talk about some of the implications of the English title below.

Following the structure of *Narrative structure in comics*, I will begin by discussing what I have, perhaps somewhat arbitrarily, set as the first level of signification in comics: the images that form the contents of the panels in comics. The logic here is that I think of the structure I use as a zooming out of sorts: I start from what is contained inside the panel, then draw back to look at the panel itself, its borders and its immediate surroundings, the gutters. Then comes the sequence, multiple panels. This is followed by a shift, where I switch to text-image relations, and then comes the final "zoom out," from the sequence to the narrative as a whole. Of course, it is completely artificial to discuss these levels of signification or meaning-making separately from one another: when we're reading comics, we are taking in and interpreting all these levels at the same time and in relation to one another. It is one of the reasons why comics signification is so sophisticated. But for keeping my discussion clear, I have separated out these levels in as much as that is possible.

The first level is the image and I address pictures and the processes of signification at work there (POSTEMA, 2018a, p. 27). One of my main points is that comics drawing styles tend to simplify the image. This is in part a function of time pressure: the economy of the image means a quicker turnaround to handing in work by deadline. This economy is very applicable to newspaper strips and comics books, which are often produced to very tight deadlines. It is much less relevant for independent creators, and abstraction and simplification in Tan's chosen style are hard to find (figure 3). It still pertains, though, even in his realistic style, since you can often notice simplified or empty backgrounds in panels, which allow for the main subject matter to stand out clearly. Harry Morgan (2009) has discussed the nature of the caricatural style in comics, which comes from a combination of the speed of execution and the artist's personal style: *rapidité d'exécution* and *autotypie*. Morgan calls this a "graphic shorthand," which explains why different cartoonists' styles are often so easily distinguishable from each other. In Shaun Tan's style, this recognizability is not the result of his line: his art does not use the outline drawing commonly applied in comics. But his style is still quite recognizable, from a combination of shading and overall design sense. He captures a world in images we recognize as specific things, the *langue* of his images, but retains a style clearly his own, the *parole* of his art, to follow

Roland Barthes' breakdown of sign systems. Semiotics comes into play in making sense of images by offering various kinds of signification based on a number of different codes. Where (verbal) language has a single, systematic code, images signify using a more complex system, simultaneously using numerous codes, but also generally codes without a formalized system of rules. Images employ denotation and connotation (as language does, of course). Many images are mimetic, visually resembling the thing they represent, but besides this iconic meaning, images can also be coded with symbolic meaning.

Fig. 3 – Abstraction and simplification in Tan´s work

Source: TAN, Shaun. *The arrival*. The author´s collection.

In Shaun Tan's work, much of the meaning that his images accrue beyond straightforwardly the representational, comes from the visual style he uses, which resembles old photographs. Through the main character's habitual hat and coat, old-fashioned garments, as well as through the sepia tones used throughout, these images evoke the sense of a world gone by, now only accessible in old photographs. The design of the book's cover plays along in this as well, of course. This connotation of the style is emphasized and picked up through reference to actual old photographs, in a use of intertextuality that Tan applies throughout the work, and which he highlights in the Artist's Note at the end of the book, where he cites many of his sources. Tan did

extensive research on immigration for *The arrival*, specifically on Ellis Island, which was the main point of entry during the era of mass immigration to the US between the 1890s and the 1910s, and was in use until 1954. Tan references the iconic Arrivals Hall of the building in the processing hall in *The arrival*, using the window shape, balconies and more (figures. 4a and 4b). He also references the procedures of physical inspections in the book (checking eyes for hookworm, for example), and the system of tagging immigrants as they moved through the inspection process. Here again, he often makes intertextual links to actual, specific photographs.

Figs. 4a and 4b – The iconic Arrivals Hall

Source: TAN, Shaun. *The arrival*. The author´s collection, and Arrivals Hall, Ellis Island, available at: http://cdn.history.com/sites/2/2015/04/hith-10-things-ellis-island-great-hall-96762308-AB.jpeg.

This direct referencing of photographs and the real-world history of immigration continues once the protagonist arrives in his new home. The world he enters is fantastical and strange, completely new for both him and any of us reading this work, but still references photographs of immigrant neighborhoods in the early 20th century. Tan also uses intertextual references to other images to help flesh out his narrative. As the protagonist navigates his new home he meets other people, immigrants like himself. In the stories they tell him of their own reasons to come to this new land, Tan again references images from other sources, to underscore the nightmarish, dystopian

qualities of their countries of origin, to explain these people's reasons for leaving home and coming to a new country. One woman's story echoes an engraving by Gustave Doré, "Over London by Rail," while another family's account is rendered with the stark shadows and weird angles of German Expressionism, capturing the atmosphere of the totalitarian regime they are escaping (figures 5a and 5b).

Figs. 5a and 5b – The stark shadow and weird angles of German Expressionism
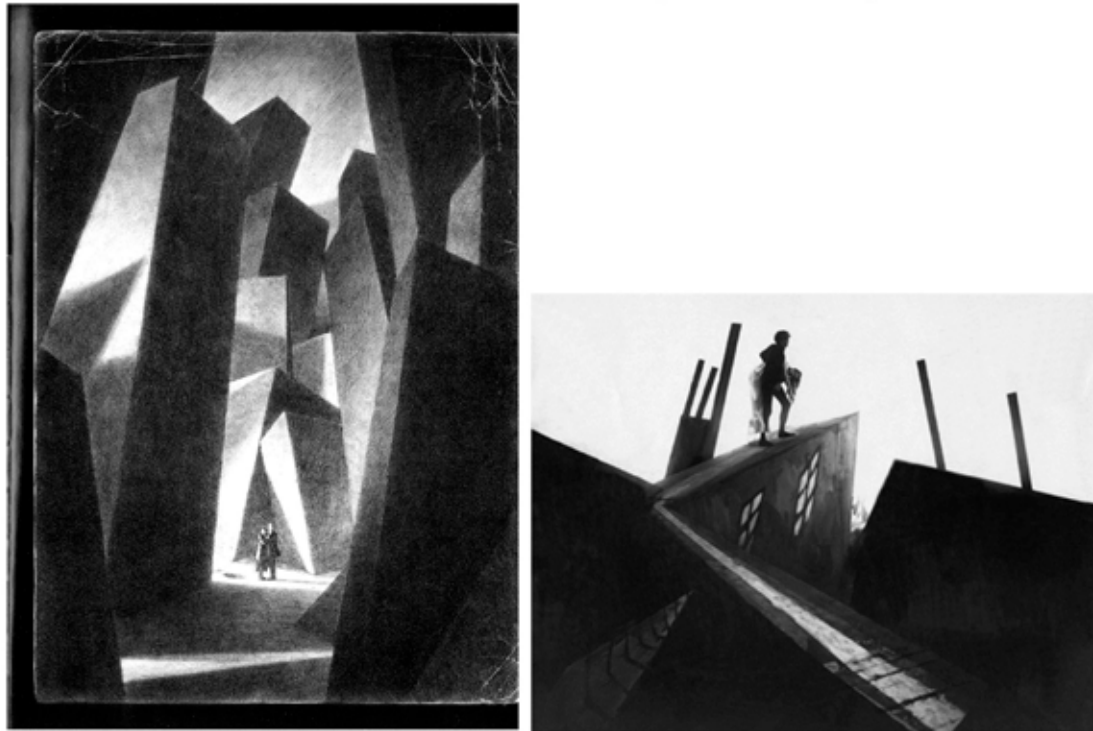
Source: TAN, Shaun. *The arrival*, The author´s collection, and film still from *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. Dir. Robert Wiene, 1920. Available at: http://www.stummfilmkonzerte.de/glossar/stummfilme/cabinetcaligari.html.

In a further nod to photography, Tan presses into action the endpapers of the book, which he fills with drawn portrait photographs. The people represented here are wearing identifiable traditional garb from many different countries: they are a diverse selection of the world's peoples, not representatives of the new land where the protagonist arrives. These pages connect this fantastical and perhaps utopian story back to the real world, as these portraits in many cases are copies of photographs taken of immigrants as they were being processed at Ellis Island or elsewhere (figures 6a-d). I believe the pictures I have been able to identify are all from Ellis Island, since the National Park Service happens to have a lot of archival material online, which explains why these samples are less diverse than Tan's endpapers. The inclusion of these portraits underlines that fact that while this comic is fiction, the general situation

it depicts is very real, has been experienced by countless people, and continues today (POSTEMA, 2015).

Fig. 6a – Portraits of immigrants

Source: TAN, Shaun. *The arrival*. The author's collection. Compare the following photographs to the second panel on the first tier, the first panel in the third tier, and the second panel in the fourth tier.

Fig. 6b and 6c – Portraits of immigrants

Source: Available at: https://i.pinimg.com/736x/35/93/f3/3593f31edb35f42fb6298539420ee130.jpg, and photograph by Lewis Hine, available at: https://static.messynessychic.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/ellisisland.jpeg.

Fig. 6d – Portrait of an immigrant

Source: Photograph by Augustus Sherman. Available at: http://i0.wp.com/www.cubebreaker.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/2DC7129B00000578-3290843-Taken_by_amateur_photographer_Augustus_Sherman_his_portfolio_rev-a-8_1445912618798.jpg.

These photographs bring me back to some of the other modes of visual signification the images in this book use: throughout, codes of facial expression and body language are key modes of communication, from the somewhat anxious expressions on the faces of the people in the Ellis Island portraits to the interactions the protagonist has with the people around him as he is still learning the language and has to rely on non-verbal communication to get what he needs. Colour and other image qualities also play a role, as in a page showing a soldier marching off to war (figure 7).

The shift in colour and the gradual blurring of the image indicate the subject's increasingly dire circumstances. A final code I discuss in my chapter is the temporal code, which allows single images (whether renaissance paintings or comics panels) to suggest the passing of time despite being a still image. Perhaps due to the snapshot / photographic quality of Tan's images, most panels, like photographs, seem to represent just an instant, only capturing the sense of time passing across several panels. One exception to this may be his images on a larger scale: half-page panels or full-page spreads, which begin to communicate time differently, but I will get to those in the next section. Instead, the book employs object codes to show changing conditions. One example of this can be found in a pot, repeatedly shown in three panel sequences, which first, given as a gift, connotes friendships being made, and then suggests time passing through the changing of the pot's circumstances: it is inhabited by a bird which eventually is shown feeding its chicks who live in the pot. The bird has gained a family as the protagonist is about to be reunited with his own.

Fig. 7 – The role of colour and other image qualities

Source: TAN, Shaun. *The arrival*. The author´s collection.

From the images within the panels I now turn to the panels themselves. *The arrival* uses most of the formats I identify in my taxonomy in *Narrative structure in comics*, but not all. Most prevalent is Format 1: Panels framed by frames, separated

by blank space (POSTEMA, 2018a, p. 61). As a default page layout, *The arrival* uses twelve regular, square panels per page, in four tiers of three panels. The panels are separated by generous white gutters, and while many panels do not have formal frames outlining their borders, they are clearly edged and thus separated from the gutter, since none of the panels have white areas that blend or bleed into the gutters. Once in a while, variations are made by pulling several panels together to allow for bigger panels in the same modular layout. Significantly, certain sections change the way the gutters and frames are shown: there, suddenly, the background colour, and thus the gutters, may be black or another darker shade, while the frames may be shown more clearly. This effect makes the photographic quality of the panels clearer, but it also has an important narrative function. The changes in appearance of frames and gutters show that the focalization of these sections has shifted: we are now seeing the experiences of characters other than the main protagonist, instead witnessing stories that people he meets are telling him. These flashbacks stand out through formal qualities of the page because they are differentiated from the default layout the book has already established.

The work employs other page layouts as well, regularly using full-page panels or even two-page spreads, thus incorporating Format 2: One panel per page (POSTEMA, 2018a, p. 62). This format seems to be used for emotional impact, particularly for feelings like fear or awe, as with the "Arrival Hall." Format 3: Several panels per page (p. 66), is not common is this work but appears sporadically, usually with four panels to a page. This page layout seems to be employed almost as a montage in film, to cut quickly between different scenes that show activities taking place without actually developing the individual scenes, as here with the protagonist's search for work (figure 8).

Fig. 8 – The protagonist searches for work

Source: TAN, Shaun. *The arrival*. The author´s collection.

The next three formats are less common in *The arrival*. Arguably, most panels in the book are frameless, but my point about Format 4 (POSTEMA, 2018a, p. 70) was that these panels blurred the lines of where the panel ended and the gutters or margins started, and as mentioned, this effect is not applicable in *The arrival*. The work also does not employ any grids, Format 5, which I discuss as panels that are not separated by gutters, but by borderlines only (p. 72). Throughout, *The arrival* is laid out with generous, clear gutters, so the format of closely adjacent panels without any blank space between them that I call grids does not occur. (I would note here that this is one area in my book where I have slightly altered my thinking. Not about the format itself: I do think a page with multiple panels but no actual gutters between them functions differently from a page that does employ gutters. But the title "Grid" there is unfortunate, since in comics practice and theory, the word "grid" is also used for the layout in general.) Finally, the book does not use Format 6, insets, much as I like that particular layout format (p. 74). The closest one can get in *The Arrival* are several implied insets of frames within frames, for example when the man's window functions almost as a panel amongst other panels within a larger panel, and others where a framed photograph works like a panel within a panel. While the book varies page layouts regularly, it establishes a default layout clearly enough to allow variations to

become significant and coax readers into the action of figuring out what the differences in layout will mean.

When shifting to the level of the sequence for meaning making, we leave behind gutters as blank space on the page and start to consider gutters as blank spaces in time, gaps in sequences of events that call for interpretation of action rather than of structure (POSTEMA, 2018a, p. 87). For reading sequences, it becomes essential that the panels are separate from one another but *in praesentia*: individual panels adjacent to one another but visible within the same glance. As readers, we may focus on one panel at a time, but are aware of panels in the periphery, before and after, which are constantly being scanned as well. This creates what Thierry Groensteen (2007) calls *iconic solidarity*, the condition by which separate panels work together to further the narrative. Scott McCloud (1994) has called this "closure," the process of the reader providing the necessary link between panels to understand what's going on. It is at the level of the sequence that comics begin to move and the reader's interpretive skills are put to work to provide a continuing narrative out of the provided still images. An example in *The arrival* of a scene where panels clearly build an action towards a narrative climax is one of the protagonist's failed attempts at getting a suitable job (figure 9). While performing his task if delivering parcels diligently, he misses obvious signs because he cannot yet read the local language, and has a scary encounter. The panel showing his companion animal running away works for the pacing and for anticipation towards to outcome in the final, larger, panel: why is he scared? Oh, right!

Fig. 9 – Panels build an action towards a narrative climax

Source: TAN, Shaun. The arrival. The author´s collection.

One way in which the sequence in Tan's work draws attention to itself is in his use of sequences to transition between scenes. In an almost cinematic way, the book often uses sequences that zoom in on a particular person or object. Then they zoom out again, showing the focal point of the panels in a different context. This is used when the man is first granted entry into the country, transitioning from his Residence Permit's photograph to the man himself, and then pulling back to reveal he is in an elevator/hot air balloon, being transported into the city where he will now be living. Another sequence shows the transition from the protagonist's new friend telling him of his experiences before coming to the country to the scene being shown from the friend's point of view. In this case, the page turn plays a key role in building tension, as well as the slight change in colour palette, and the scale of the following image. The impact is created by transitioning from the small final panel on a recto page showing the man's eye with flames reflected in it, to a two-page spread depicting the fiery horror he and his wife fled, which is only revealed once the page is turned.

A final aspect of this level of signification is the distinction between the sequence and the series, again drawing on Groensteen's work (2007). As I hope I have made clear, sequences are adjacent panels that have mainly narrative connections to each other. Finding the connections and understanding the transitions

between these panels allows the reader to follow the story. Often the connecting feature is a continuous element like the story's protagonist. *Series* of panels are *discontinuous* panels that are linked in some way: these panels are unlikely to appear on the same page—they may be separated by a page turn or even multiple pages. Instead, such panels are connected by elements, visual or otherwise, that link together on a thematic level. These panels create a network of meaning that itself is not narrative, but which may support the meaning and focus of the narrative in some way, in a process that Groensteen calls *braiding*. Elements in *The arrival* that may be examples of braiding are the depictions of photographs, particularly the man's photograph of his family. Another might be the numerous companion animals that are featured regularly, but which, apart from the man's own animal (let's call it a shark-dog), do not develop the narrative.

Before moving away from the topic of sequences, I would like to discuss several sequences in a short wordless story by Fábio Moon, as a tribute to my conference hosts in São Paulo. The collection *De: Tales* includes two wordless stories, "Estrela" and "Outras Palavras." (MOON, BÁ, 2010) They're both romantic and share similar themes, though at different stages in relationships. I will concentrate on "Outras Palavras". The story starts with a fairly straightforward narrative sequence, of a woman getting out of bed at night, going to her balcony and lighting a candle (p. 103-7). Once the candle is lit, the sequence stops functioning as a simple vehicle for narration: across four pages the panels show cityscapes, shots of urban settings that take us from the women's modern, possibly luxury, apartment to an apartment in an old building in a very different part of town, where a man is sitting dreamily by his window, also with a lit candle. I am assuming the city shown is São Paulo, while the man resembles the artist himself, Fábio Moon.

The sequence in question can be seen to evoke distance, the great divide between these two people, in space and circumstances (Figures 10a and 10b). However, this sequence can also be read in a different way: each panel suggests very direct connections to the next in a way that strikes me as Sergei Eisenstein's collisions in montage. Each panel picks up on an element (or several) from the previous panel, even if they completely change in setting, point of view, composition, use of light and shadow, and so forth. I'll go through this briefly: first the woman's hair gets picked up in the power lines, following through in the same direction (p. 107). After the page turn, we see those power lines again (p. 108). From the top image to the bottom, a

connection is made through the repeated image of the street signage, both showing a sign with a circle cut in half diagonally. Across the middle gutter between pages to the next top panel the connection is made by the focus on shop signage, the name of shops on awnings above shop windows (p. 109). The panel to the right echoes the windows on the left, and then the panel below shifts to focus on the electricity pole and power lines that were also in the previous panel, more closely. Across the page turn, to the full page panel, those power lines are the continuing element again (p. 110). They continue to the next panels (p. 111), but are now joined with the continued presence of the upward movement of step elements and the metal railing, as if the connection is intensifying. The next panel is linked (besides through the wires) with the repetition of the starry sky and the windows in the building we are now approaching. Down the page, the dark rectangle of the window swallows an entire panel, and then in sort of a cinematic pan, moves sideways through the darkness to get to the candle. A candle which the last page reveals is burning next to a man looking out into the night (p. 112).

Figs. 10a – The great divide between two people

Source: MOON, Fábio. Outras palavras. In: MOON, Fábio; BÁ, Gabriel. De: Tales: stories from urban Brasil, p. 107. The author's collection.

Fig. 10b – The great divide between two people

Source: MOON, Fábio. Outras palavras. In: MOON, Fábio; BÁ, Gabriel. De: Tales: stories from urban Brasil, p. 110-111. The author´s collection.

The implication is that there is some kind of connection between the woman at the beginning and the man at the end of the story, perhaps a relationship that ended but still affects them: the electrical lines and their soft buzzing may indicate a sense of tension in this connection. They can't be together (she is in a relationship with someone else, as the presence of someone in her bed at the beginning indicated) and yet these two people still mean something to each other in an important way, something hard to capture in words, but which is performed by the direct links from one panel to the next. "Estrela" builds on these same intangible but identifiable lines of connection and attraction: glances (p. 12-3), the lines turning random stars into coherent constellations (p. 16), the string of saliva still connecting lips after a kiss (p. 19). All these things speak to the growing attraction between the man and woman shown in this comic. Where "Outras Palavras" builds a sense of this connection using sequence, "Estrela" does it across a series of images, using braiding.

In the next chapter of *Narrative structure in comics*, I discuss the use of the verbal code in comics (p. 115). As a wordless comic, *The arrival* doesn't use the verbal code to progress its narrative. All dialogue and sounds are suggested through images only, and we frequently see characters communicating clearly and elaborately through

facial expressions and hand gestures (See figure 8). The book contains written words, but, being a fictional script, this language is unreadable for the protagonist or any of us (See figures 4a and 9). Whatever language in the world we speak or read, the book's script is foreign to us, putting us all in exactly the same position as the protagonist. Thus much of the text included in this work is there to indicate *miscommunication*, underlining the difficulties we encounter in entering a strange country. In various ways, language poses problems for the protagonist, in terms of serving his basic needs, certainly when it comes to getting suitable employment. In the earlier sequence of the watch monster and elsewhere, not being able to read the language puts him at a great disadvantage, funny as these scenes may be. Instead, he ends up with no choice but accepting a menial, monotonous factory job.

While textuality as readable language barely exists in *The arrival*, it is referenced throughout. In the most basic application of textuality, we read the work as a book, scanning pages from left to right and up to down systematically and then turning the page. We are reading the book for meaning. One way in which the book includes actual verbal text is the title. Even that title is brief, just two short words, but surprisingly, it introduces some uncertainty. Generally we think of language as having set, defined meaning, while images are less concrete. In the case of the words of the work's English title, there is, however, some ambiguity: do the words *The arrival* denote the event of the man's arriving in his new home, or do they denote the man himself, a new arrival to this world? Either would fit and the meaning is not resolved by the work's wordless narrative. In translations this ambiguity usually disappears. The Dutch title, *De Aankomst*, simply denotes the event. The French title takes a completely different tack, with *Là où vont nos pères*, (there/the place where our fathers went). I believe the ambiguity of the English phrase does not apply in the Portuguese title, *A chegada*, either. Other textual functions in this comic are taken over by signs and images: chapters are numbered only, and often use a distinctive (9-panel) grid on the first page to set the tone. The transitions that I discussed under sequences lead readers smoothly in and out of flashbacks or framed narratives, performing functions that captions might fulfil otherwise.

As I hope my discussion so far has demonstrated, all these levels of signification are contributing in key ways to understanding the global message, the overall narrative of this work, and by extension of course this applies to comics in general. From the examples I have given so far, you already have a sense of the story

of *The arrival*, but I will say some things about the overall narrative here, things which are less specific to comics and come from narrative theory more broadly. Gaps are an inherent part of narration in all forms, a driving force behind narrative, and indeed, as Wolfgang Iser (1978) explains in *The act of reading*, a way of keeping the reader curious and motivated. Gaps in storytelling allow us to skip over the boring bits (meals and bathroom breaks), or provide the entire point of the narrative in detective stories, where all we want to find out is "Whodunit." In *The arrival* we can find these kinds of gaps in the way the length of the protagonist's sea voyage is captured in two images of a ship at sea and two pages of clouds. These panels relay the long, monotonous days spent at sea. Another notable gap is the transition discussed earlier, where after showing the process of the man's health checks, his interrogation, and his final approval over several pages, his actual entry into the country is elided.

Like other forms of narrative, comics employ scenes that play various different roles within the story. As Roland Barthes explains, some elements work to serve the plot, the plain statement of the actions occurring. Other elements work at the level of indeces or informants, offering "implicit signifieds" or "pure data" (quoted in POSTEMA, 2018a, p. 151) While the images in *The arrival* and comics in general show the key elements that further the story, for example the man looking for food or work, the images conveying the plot simultaneously convey information about his world, such as the types of technology being used, clothing styles, climate, common foods. This abundance of indeces and informants may not come into play in the narrative immediately, or ever, but with visual narrative they are a constant, and thus they form a constant source of potential information, which explains why reading comics is so often a matter of reading backwards as well as forwards, as one needs to check up on a detail from earlier that seems to have become relevant later in the book.

Another concept from Barthes' narratology that is relevant to *The arrival* is his distinction between Cardinal and Catalytic functions (BARTHES[3] apud POSTEMA, 2018a, p. 152-3). Elements of the story that are Cardinal are key to progressing the narrative, while Catalytic functions would be left out in a summary of the narrative, but contribute to it in some ways. In *The arrival* the bits of the narrative that serve Cardinal functions are simple: the protagonist leaving his family, arriving in the new country, finding shelter, community, work, summoning his family to join him, and reuniting with

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[3] BARTHES, Roland. *Image-music-text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

them. The Catalytic functions flesh out the kind of world he has arrived in: each new encounter is followed by a frame narrative of how this person made their way to the new country and why. Significantly, they all seem to have been refugees fleeing violence or degradation. None of their stories are about immigration simply to improve their economic circumstances. These scenes provide context for what kind of a world this is, welcoming to immigrants from all kinds of places that had become unbearable to them, and providing safety and comfort.

The implied signifieds I mentioned earlier come into play here again as well: the food and technology, the man's surroundings – they were given as information, world-building background, but they also have a lot to suggest about this place. In the protagonist's new home, apparently all food is vegetarian. While people do not eat meat, there are animals everywhere, serving as companions, even help, for the people they accompany. Further, there is the strange urban environment which is both technologically highly sophisticated and somehow organic. Many of these details, which feature in the background or sidelines of panels progressing the story are also braided elements suggesting all kinds of things about this new world, especially in combination with the Catalytic scenes of the other arrivals' experiences. The braided details such as the companion animals and strange technology, the Catalytic scenes of other immigrants, what gaps do they suggest and what do they thus contribute to the narrative? One thing they do is establish this place as a kind of Utopia, perhaps setting it up as wishful thinking, or alternatively, maybe as a goal to aspire to.

I have mentioned braiding, the meaning created by a series of images that is not narrative but adds to the meaning of the narrative laterally. I now also want to discuss weaving, as opposed to braiding. If we think of braiding as the function of a series of images spread out across a work that establishes motifs, weaving is a series of images, dis-adjacent images that function to communicate narrative elements. I have discussed the sequence of panels as a source of narrative. With weaving, we are getting narrative from series of panels. In *The arrival*, we see the first page of chapter I and VI operate in this way, capturing a huge development of narrative, but you basically need to skip back and forth, weave between these pages, to get the full impact of what they say about the family's circumstances (figures 3 and 11). They started out as a family in a difficult situation: The page includes hints at the trip with the boat ticket and suitcase, and their poverty in the chipped tableware. The first page of the final chapter suggests they are established in their new home, particularly in

contrast with the first page, which it repeats with a difference: there is plenty of evidence of how they have adapted to their now environment, adopting the new technologies. This also suggests their newly-found comfort here, as suggested by the food, the pretty objects, the newspaper and the coin on the final panel. This page sums up the narrative's trajectory and the rest of the pages in the book only work to reinforce it.

Fig. 11 – First page of the final chapter captures the development of the narrative

Source: TAN, Shaun. *The arrival*. The author's collection.

Years ago, when I named my doctoral thesis *Mind the gap*, I was thinking about gaps from a formal point of view, in terms of the absences and abstractions that comics use to involve readers and progress the narrative, which I have been discussing in this essay so far. Early in 2018, the first annual conference for the Comics Studies Society (CSS) was held in Illinois, which went by the title "Mind the Gaps." This was not at all a reference to my title, and in fact, this conference and its title set me to thinking about some of the gaps that I myself left unfilled in my book. I was not able to attend, but I gather that in its title and its subsequent programming, the CSS conference was drawing attention to gaps that can be found in comics practice and comics scholarship: where are women's voices, for example, and what light do they shed on comics as a form, an industry, and a field of study. What gaps need to be addressed in comics and comics scholarship with relation to the representations of race, or of sexuality and

gender identities? The "Mind the Gaps" conference offered an invitation to identify and address these kinds of gaps. As a formalist, these kinds of approaches don't always come naturally to me, but I want to end this essay with drawing attention to some gaps in *The arrival* that may evoke different approaches to probing this graphic novel.

I have had a lot to say about the representation of historical immigration in this comic, but it is also important to consider its contemporary context. This book came out in 2006, which was a time in Australia when immigration was a sensitive political issue. Many immigrant were trying to come to Australia, often on boats that were barely seaworthy and overcrowded. There was fierce debate across political lines whether these immigrants needed to be admitted, or whether they should be intercepted and turned away. Media and political parties often used inflammatory language, spinning images with the use of headlines. The conservative government pushed the narrative of these immigrants or refugees as "boat people" who were inhuman and were willing to sacrifice their children to get what they wanted. I think it is significant that Tan produced a wordless book within this context: by using silent comics the work is able to bypass politically loaded terms like immigrant, refugee, asylum, boat people and so forth. Instead, the narrative asks readers to focus on the human and emotional aspects of the stories of the people shown in the work, thus working to elicit an empathetic response rather than a response based on policy and politics.

The way this work situated itself in a vague past is also relevant in a number of possible ways. I have discussed how the work references Ellis Island, which makes US immigration explicitly present. The book does use archival images from Australian immigration as well, but these images are less recognizable and thus do not establish as much of a reading context. The multiple ways in which the book sets up a setting that is coded as "the past" as well as "elsewhere" is another way in which the work distances itself from its contemporary Australian context, inviting readers to engage these issues on the terms the book suggests, with empathy and a sense of the many ways immigration has been an ongoing process going back a century and more and in numerous locales around the globe, stripping it of the fraught political discussion of Australia in the early 2000s. Thus we can read the book as using its silence to engage readers on its own rhetorical terms, situating its argument very carefully.

Given this focus, I find one absence in the book that is both natural and somewhat problematic. This absence is the original or native population of this new world where the immigrant protagonist settles. His stories, and the stories of the

people who share their experiences with him are all stories of newcomers, of arrivals. If all the people he encounters and befriends are newcomers, who are the original inhabitants of this land? The population is culturally diverse, and while there seems to be a local style of dress that most people adopt, it doesn't seem to be something that helps us distinguish between newcomers and natives. I have been living for the last decade or so in countries founded on settler colonialism, Canada and recently New Zealand, both countries which are now beginning to recognize the need to come to terms with practices that have in the past marginalized indigenous populations, or worse. My (admittedly limited) knowledge of Indigenous peoples in Canada and Māori in New Zealand, is likely one of the triggers that makes me wonder where the indigenous population is in *The arrival*, and what its apparent absence may say. One could say that their story is not what *The arrival* sets out to tell, since its focus is on the issue of refugees and migration. But by keeping the native population unmarked, unremarked upon, perhaps invisible, does it become "Other," as indigenous people in Canada have become "othered," which makes it easy for the majority/dominant society to also think of them as lesser? Can or should we consider these issues in the work?

The arrival does a lot of detailed world building, but like the gap of the native population, there is also a kind of gap, or perhaps a black box, in understanding how this world functions (figure 12): we are not shown where the technology comes from, where the food comes from. It is different from what we know and it's there. Is that important? One far-fetched theory I might develop is that there may be enough indication to suspect that the animal companions are the original inhabitants this land, somehow using the humans brought there as tools to build up this world based on some kind of symbiotic relationship. How would that change our perception of this work? I have suggested several notable gaps in this book that could be looked at in more detail: the missing "local" population, and the gap between the work's contemporary political situation and its own setting in the past. These absences in the storyworld of *The arrival* may be gaps that can be productive of further probing of this graphic novel. The formal elements get us a great distance in creating an understanding of this work, but I have no pretensions that it exhausts the book, so I am happy to pass it along for further probing and analysis.

Fig. 12 – A kind of gap in understanding how this world functions

Source: TAN, Shaun. *The arrival*. The author´s collection.

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