

Reading graphic novels in school: texts, contexts and the interpretive work of critical reading

Shari Sabeti*

School of Education, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK

This paper uses the example of an extra-curricular Graphic Novel Reading Group in order to explore the institutional critical reading practices that take place in English classrooms in the senior years of secondary school. Drawing on Stanley Fish's theory of interpretive communities, it questions the restrictive interpretive strategies applied to literary texts in curriculum English. By looking closely at the interpretive strategies pupils apply to a different kind of text (graphic novels) in an alternative context (an extra-curricular space), the paper suggests that there may be other ways of engaging with text that pupils find less alienating, more pleasurable and less reminiscent of 'work'.

Keywords: graphic novels; critical reading; interpretive communities; extra-curricular space; secondary English teaching

Introduction

In the last 60 years the role and reputation of the medium of the comic has radically altered. (By this medium I refer to the kind of text in which images and usually – though not always – words are combined in a predetermined series of frames in order to produce a narrative.) Not only are 'cultish' texts now finding their way into mainstream film adaptations, but the texts themselves, previously only available in specialist stores, occupy stands in high street book shops. New graphic novels are reviewed in broadsheet newspapers; they are assimilated into undergraduate English courses and degrees in the creation of comics are offered in some higher education institutions. Against this backdrop, and arguably prior to it, some educationists working in schools have embraced the medium as one that unlocks a plethora of possibilities. Comics were part of the impetus to employ children's 'popular culture' in the classroom, particularly as a 'stepping stone to other kinds of reading' (Marsh and Millard 2000, 107–8). It has been argued that they are useful aids in the acquisition of literacy skills (Bucky Carter 2007; Gibson 2008, 2009; Bitz 2009); props in supporting the understanding of more complex texts such as Shakespeare and the classics (Thomas 1983;

*Email: shari.sabeti@stir.ac.uk

Gibson 2009); support for pupils accessing a new language (Cary 2004) and even as aids to memorising information (Mallia 2007). They are regarded as being more attractive to boys – often viewed in the UK as being weaker in literacy skills than girls – and as inclusive of the increasingly visual literacy of young people today (Brenner 2011). They are even regarded as tools for social cohesion and raising self-confidence, particularly in school-based projects where pupils create comics of their own (Bitz 2009; Ritchie 2009). More recently, the potential to enhance the transfer of multimodal literacy skills through the use of comics has also been suggested (El Refaie and Horschelmann 2010). We have, it seems, come a long way since George Pumphrey (1954, 1955, 1964) and Frederick Wertham (1954) decried children's reading of comics as a threat to both literacy and morality.

In this paper I use the example of an extra-curricular Graphic Novel Reading Group in a Scottish independent secondary school in order to explore further some of the claims being made for comics in an educational context. (The term 'graphic novel' has been used recently to indicate a substantial text within the medium of the comic both in terms of its length and 'literary' quality.) In particular, I am interested in the notion that they are useful in supporting the *critical skills* required to read more complex verbal texts. Much of the research carried out on picture-heavy resources focuses on the primary school setting where such materials have traditionally been more commonplace and have been useful in supporting children to learn to read. Moss (2007, 69), for example, identifies three main purposes of reading in primary schools: 'reading for proficiency' (learning to read, and to read well); 'reading for choice' (or pleasure); and 'reading for procedure' (as a means to an end). While 'reading for proficiency' is regarded largely as a primary school practice, the latter two of these reading purposes still exist within the formalised secondary school curriculum ('reading for choice' perhaps with a greater emphasis in the early years of secondary). There is, however, the introduction of a new purpose of reading within the English curriculum – reading for critical thinking and appreciation. The value of this, in current policy terms, is often placed in the importance of the notion of critical literacy or the development of what is called higher-order thinking skills (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2011). It is this kind of 'reading', with all the nuances of that phrase, that I wish to concentrate on here. Different communities have different understandings of what it means to 'read'. A teacher of secondary English is expected to teach pupils how to deconstruct literary texts in order to discuss character, theme, setting, language and structure. When pupils sit exams in 'English' or 'English Literature' they are given the task of writing essays in which they are expected to analyse and evaluate the work of a writer with reference to the techniques they have been taught to identify and explain. One of the 'Experiences and Outcomes' of the new Scottish Curriculum for Excellence, for example, is to 'identify how the writer's main theme or central concerns are revealed'

(Learning and Teaching Scotland 2009). Given that the Reading Group in question tended to select and read ‘quality’ graphic novels, and that in interviews the pupils involved drew parallels with the classroom study of literary texts, this paper will focus on the distinction made between the two activities. I consider in detail the differences between what takes place in the extra-curricular space of the Reading Group in contrast to what takes place in the classroom. The different reading practices and interpretive strategies opened up by both the text (graphic novels) and context (an extra-curricular space) are discussed, as are the limitations and restrictions imposed by these and other contexts (the school, the classroom).

The Graphic Novel Reading Group – the research project

The school in which the project was based is a large, co-educational independent secondary in Edinburgh. Most pupils live locally and come from middle-class, economically comfortable, families. The school offers financially supported places and full academic scholarships – one in 10 pupils at the school are in this category. The provision of extra-curricular activities is an important part of the culture of the school and an agreement to run clubs or coach sport is written into the contract of each member of staff. The Graphic Novel Reading Group (or ‘the Cool Club’ as it came ironically to be known amongst its members) took place once a fortnight during Tuesday lunchtimes in a classroom (see Sabeti 2011). The membership was entirely open and was advertised through a daily school bulletin; in practice, however, the small group of pupils that formed the Group all belonged to one year group (fifth year in the Scottish education system, making the pupils approximately 16 years old). The core of the Group was composed of 10 pupils: eight boys and two girls, though the attendance of the boys was more regular (and it is for this reason that the material presented later in this paper concerns only the boys). Three of these pupils were on academic scholarships; at least three of the others made references in their interviews to a perceived lack of money in comparison to other pupils in the school. All of these pupils had an established but covert history of reading the comic medium. Most of them were readers of ordinary novels; some had a particular affinity with fantasy and science fiction. Two of them, in particular, had sophisticated reading histories, having completed texts such as *Ulysses*, *The Castle* and *Crime and Punishment* in the past year. These were not, in other words, what we might straightforwardly consider ‘reluctant readers’, though they did consistently identify themselves as pupils who struggled with self-expression in class. This immediately threw into question some of the assumptions about comics at play, both in schools and within the large publishing industry of graphic novel adaptations being promoted to school libraries.

The data from this project are based on qualitative research: one semi-structured interview was conducted with each member of the group and six

of the reading group discussions were recorded and transcribed. At the time, I myself was working as an English teacher in this school and it was at my instigation that the Group was set up. When I formed what I called a 'Reading Group' I had a certain set of assumptions about how it would work and what we would do. These assumptions were rooted in the critical reading practices of the classroom; I did not entertain the possibility that either the text or the context might change the ways in which we approached the idea of reading. I bring, therefore, to the analysis that follows, not only my participation in reading group discussions but my experience of working in this school context for a period of six years; my knowledge of the practices of the ordinary classroom context as opposed to the extra-curricular space in which this Group met. During the progress of the sessions, I reflected in some depth both on my presence and my role in that context. I became acutely aware of what it was that I was doing, or trying to do, in the discussions that were taking place; in looking back over the data, I was also struck by the shifting interpretations which the pupils used to engage with the texts we were reading. Some of these were employed *because* of my presence as an English teacher (indeed *the* English teacher of two of the pupils present at the time of the recordings). Others illuminated the multiple approaches that pupils took to interpreting text that would have been hidden in a classroom environment.

In interviews the subjects clearly identified three distinct moments or contexts in which reading (of both graphic novels and conventional literary texts) took place for them. These were: the school classroom/English lesson; the Graphic Novel Reading Group; solitary reading at home. As my main interest in this paper is in the potentials of the comic medium within a school context, I will focus on the first two of these contexts in detail. The pupils who participated in this project were working towards their Higher qualifications, the most important assessment in the Scottish curriculum and often the determinant of university entrance. While I am aware of the particularity of the independent school context of this study, I would also emphasise the similarities in the culture of fifth-year classes in all Scottish schools. For these pupils, the English classroom was a place representing the official curriculum and exams. In this school English in fifth year was compulsory and punctuality was required. Quite often, pupils would be expected to sit in seats allocated by the teacher. Pupils were not allowed to eat or drink during class. There were conventional classroom 'rules' in play: pupils were expected to raise their hands when they wanted to contribute to discussion; there was a tacit agreement that talking over each other or digressing from the subject matter were unacceptable practices. The time was structured, and activities organised, by the teacher. The text was chosen by the teacher and deemed to be at the appropriate level for the class. It was expected that each pupil owned, and brought to the lesson, *their* copy of this text. Pupils did not tend to share personal information with each other, or the teacher, in

any formal way. If this took place, as it often does in classrooms, there was an understanding that it was not part of the 'business' of the lesson; pupils would continue with their work, the teacher would remind them of what they had been asked to do. There was an understanding that this time was about concentration; this was 'work'.

By contrast, as I have indicated earlier, the characteristics of the Reading Group were not necessarily the ones I had assumed they would be. The obvious constraint placed upon it as a meeting was that it had to be slotted into free time within the school day; in this case, the group met over the lunch time period lasting approximately one hour. It took place, in other words, temporally and spatially, outside of the curriculum at a moment of the day that the pupils regarded as their 'free' time. The start and end times were casual and the members of the Group arrived at different times on different occasions. The Group sat around a large table in the middle of a classroom and I provided tea and biscuits for them. The graphic novel under discussion was the loose reason why we were gathered, although there was fluidity in this. It was not unusual that members would arrive without having read the agreed text – hence one of the most basic of my assumptions was questioned – what, I would have wondered, could be gained by attending a 'Reading Group' discussion of a text you had not read? Perhaps this, in turn, encouraged the large amount of digression that took place in the discussions. Personal information was quite often shared, particularly stories about siblings and parents. They also discussed school assemblies, individual teachers and lessons with some candour. Pupils constantly spoke over one another and interrupted each other's points – something I was initially unsure about allowing. The text, when read by a number of us, was often shared so that several members of the group had read the same physical copy of the graphic novel. While it was perfectly acceptable not to have read the text, many were also happy to re-read texts that they were already familiar with (something else which, at the time, took me by surprise). The discussion of a text, on occasion, spanned more than one session – the amount we had to say dictating how long we had to say it, as it were. Compared to some of theirs, my 'inexpert' position with regards to the comic medium was widely acknowledged. This made my position as 'teacher' ambivalent; when it came to accessing and interpreting the content of some of the graphic novels we read, it was clear that they were 'teaching' or 'telling' me. The pupils tended to dictate the terms of the conversations taking place and when they thought I would not follow their interactions, they excluded me from them altogether. In contrast to the implied importance of concentration in a normal classroom setting, here there was a sanctioning (perhaps unconsciously) of the notion of distraction. The conventional English lesson represented 'work' and the pupils consistently associated the classroom with purposeful action – with exams, with attempts to grasp the critical reading skills transferred by the teacher. On the other hand, the

semiotic resonance of comics, the extra-curricular positioning of the Reading Group, the practices which constituted it, suggested ‘play’, even though some of the graphic novels we discussed were actually quite hard ‘work’ in terms of the demands they made both formally and intellectually. Neither the social and discursive dynamic of the Reading Group, nor the nature of the interaction with a member of staff suggested ‘work’ to the pupils. I was not there to teach them how to read comics or to ‘test’ their critical reading skills; the casual, relaxed nature of the Group was constantly emphasised by pupils in interviews.

Interpretive communities and ‘reading-really’

Given that most discussions about comics in education tend to focus on literacy and that the interests I myself have stated so far in this paper centre on practices of reading (or ‘critical literacy’), the work of the New Literacy Studies (NLS) is perhaps an obvious analytic framework to apply. The emphasis on literacy as a situated practice which is dependent on the institutional, social and cultural contexts in which ‘events’ of reading take place (see Heath 1983; Street 1984; Gee 1992, Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic 2000; Moss 2007), is potentially useful when considering the opposition between the hegemonic practices of the classroom and those outside of it. However, I am deliberately choosing not to take this route and this is in order to highlight my discussion of critical reading and interpretation as the particular domain of secondary English teachers. It is, therefore, the work of Stanley Fish and his theory of interpretive communities that I will employ in this paper. Like NLS scholars, Fish (1980) also examines the way in which a specific practice is situated and shared by a community but he is particularly concerned with the ‘interpretive community’ of literary critics whose main pursuit is to interpret text. His work is appropriate when considering critical reading practice in school classrooms, particularly as the interpretive communities he describes are the same as those which most English teachers have come from – within the universities from which they gained their degrees. Fish’s general argument is that communication occurs ‘within situations and that to be in a situation is already to be in possession of (or to be possessed by) a structure of assumptions, of practices understood to be relevant in relation to purposes and goals that are already in place’ (1980, 318). I am arguing that this ‘structure of assumptions’ is transferred into the teaching of literature in schools; indeed it is this ‘structure of assumptions’ which I took into the first Reading Group session. In the secondary English classroom it is the teacher’s role to instruct their pupils in these practices and ‘interpretive strategies’ and to enable them to deploy these in their encounters with text. While the teacher believes that what they are doing (and teaching pupils to do) is both obvious and natural, the pupils tend to see it as interpretive ‘work’. And, in a very real sense, it *is* work for

them because they have to learn to discuss and interpret text in this way in order to succeed in exams. It is important to note, however, that even classroom teachers are restricted in their deployment of literary critical readings. While within a university context, a variety of different critical framings are allowed (feminist, psychoanalytic, queer theory, Marxist) many of these are discouraged, even unacceptable, within a Scottish school context. I will come back to this later in my analysis of the pupils' discussion of graphic novels.

Fish argues that what university practitioners of literary criticism do is to instruct students in how to recognise properties within texts. For example, how to observe poetic texts, with what he calls 'poetry-seeing eyes' (Fish 1980, 326). He demonstrates this effectively through his description of an experiment from one of his own classes: following on from a linguistics seminar where he had written a reading list for an assignment on the board, Fish then took a class on seventeenth-century English poetry. In the instance he describes, he told the second group of students that what they could see on the board (the reading list from the linguistics class) was a religious poem from seventeenth-century England. The students then proceeded to deploy the 'interpretive strategies' he had taught them in order to interpret, analyse and evaluate the 'poem' they saw. The list of names, the random structure of the list as it appeared on the board, even a query about spelling signalled by a question mark, were interpreted as references to Biblical characters and events. A 'reading' of the poem as one about the tension between the Hebrew and the Christian and the reconciliation offered by Jesus Christ was produced. 'If your definition of poetry tells you that the language of poetry is complex,' writes Fish, 'you will scrutinize the language of something identified as a poem in such a way as to bring out the complexity you know to be "there"' (1980, 327). Fish argues that rather than demonstrating what is 'there', we are in fact *working* to naturalise the act of interpretation. Eric Livingston's articulation of a "'text"/"reading" pair' as constituting 'one object' similarly highlights the cultural practice behind the activity of literary criticism – the 'reading' presents itself as identifying a 'truth' in the text when in fact, the reading/interpretation comes first – the text is worked in such a way as to bring it out (1995, 14). What literary criticism means by 'reading' is different from what the lay person might mean; indeed, he argues that critical reading presents itself as 'reading-really' when in fact it is a different interpretive strategy from lay reading. I argue that this is precisely what English teachers imagine that they are doing; by teaching pupils 'to identify' (the phrase used in the Curriculum for Excellence document referenced earlier) certain properties in texts (characters, themes, structure) they are teaching pupils to 'really read' or 'read really' and the pupil is subsequently tested on how well they are able to do this. When we analyse and interpret literary texts we imagine we are identifying inherent properties in those texts that our interpretation demonstrates; in fact, Fish argues, we are

not demonstrating but *persuading*. As he puts it, '[i]nterpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them' (1980, 327). If interpretation is seen as persuasion, rather than demonstration, it becomes easier to understand why it appears as 'work' to pupils for whom it has not become naturalised – it is still, within secondary school, a relatively new skill. While the teacher believes they are demonstrating the existence of properties, the pupils feel they are being persuaded something is there and hence the scope for *resisting* this interpretation is greater.

This culture (Livingston), these interpretive strategies (Fish), are vital if we are to understand what goes on in secondary English classrooms when literary texts are under study, and why some pupils may be resistant to, or find it difficult to engage with, the practices being modelled. If all pupils are instructed by their teachers to look at literary texts in a certain way, with for example in Fish's phrase 'poetry-seeing eyes', then this severely limits the kind of reading that they are allowed to practise. In this paper I follow these arguments to show what they illuminate about school reading practices. When do pupils see reading as 'work' and when do they perceive it as a pleasure? And further, when do they see *critical* acts of reading or identification of properties as pleasure and when as work? All of the pupils revealed in interviews that they read for 'pleasure' away from the English classroom but not all of them enjoyed English as a school subject. This is an important distinction to understand and by looking at the interpretive strategy of critical reading we can begin to do so. What other interpretive strategies exist? In the analysis of the data I explore and take seriously the interpretive strategies that the pupils deploy. Fish's theory also gives us an insight into the relationship between text and context and I end by considering this relationship in a little more detail in my conclusion – what else is at play here other than the interpretive strategy and what further light can these shed on critical reading practices in secondary schools?

The Reading Group discussions

For the purposes of the discussion that follows I am going to take the example of three reading group sessions that occurred in sequence. The first is a discussion of Joe Sacco's non-fiction work *Palestine* (2003), the second a graphic novel adaptation of Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (Kafka, Montellier, and Mairowitz 2008), and the third is a conversation about Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2007). Each session began, as perhaps can be expected, with some informal banter amongst the pupils while we poured tea and got settled. The subject of these was often quite self-reflexive and was related either to comics, comic reading culture, their own reputations or appearance, or their ruminations on my life and its relationship to theirs. In these three examples I have identified interpretive strategies that struck me as unusual and

undermined some of the assumptions I had; none of these were commonplace in the conventional classroom. I have also identified moments where pupils deploy the critical reading practice of the classroom or reach what might be an acceptable 'critical reading' but by *means* often discouraged in class. I also reflect further on my own changing perspective; while the pupils 'taught' me much about comics, they also ensured that I learned something at a much more profound level. As far as the pupils were concerned there was no accepted 'interpretive strategy' for the comic medium – these are not poems or conventional literary texts; there are no 'comic-seeing eyes'. This resulted in a kind of eclectic freedom in terms of interpretation and showed me some of the limitations of the critical interpretive strategy applied consistently in English classrooms.

Palestine – 'a small country, sealed in'

I had suggested Joe Sacco's work of graphic non-fiction because, in the spirit of the Reading Group, it was a text I had always been interested in but had not found time to read. There was good attendance at the meeting and, as ever, there was a mixture present of those who had, and those who had not, read the text. One of the refreshing features of the Reading Group was that pupils were happy to make claims about how texts made them *feel* (a claim often associated with middle-brow readers; see e.g. Radway 1991, 1997), but were also happy to ask questions from positions of relative ignorance. This was in stark contrast to the classroom where expressions of personal feelings tended to be discouraged in critical discussions or were then questioned by the teacher in the hope of revealing a more 'in-depth' analysis. What was fascinating, however, was that in their comfortable revelation that they did not know the text, they ended up revealing what they *did* know about other things and used these in order to understand the text and position themselves within the discussion. Neither Scott nor Rhys had read *Palestine* which put me, Andrew and Robert who had read it, in a different position in the conversation.

Transcript 1: Palestine

RHYS: I've not read it but I'm quite interested to know ... does it make any point about Israel's involvement in Palestine? Is it very objective, or is it in support of it, or is it just critical?

Me: Overall he is very critical of Israel ... [I go on to give several examples].

Andrew: I don't know, I think it does depend who he is speaking to. There are clearly some Palestinians who he is critical of and doesn't like and then there are some that he is quite impressed by.

- Me: Yes, I think he is critical of some of them. He is critical of the culture of conflict amongst Palestinians which sanctions a 12-year-old boy going out and throwing stones at Israeli soldiers for his country.
- Rhys: So does it make a criticism of patriotism? Or nationhood?
- Robert: Well maybe to an extent ... he doesn't think very highly of people who are doing so much for a country, or maybe it's just a value that he can't understand.
- Me: No, I suppose we don't have that kind of patriotism here.
- Scott: Talking about patriotism here ... apparently *Mock the Week* is one of the most watched programmes here.
- Robert: Yes, people just sit there and mock the country.

[*There is much laughter and nodding*]

There are different kinds of interpretation at play in this conversation. Rhys enters the discussion by using his previous knowledge of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in order to understand the bent or bias of the text. Scott introduces the example of a popular culture programme, *Mock the Week*, to agree with the idea of our depleted sense of patriotism in this country. Furthermore, Andrew clearly feels confident enough in his knowledge of the text itself, to challenge – or qualify – comments that I make about it. Later on in the discussion Scott and Rhys look through a copy of *Palestine* and reach a number of pages where Sacco has employed black borders to frame the sequence of images.

- Scott: It gives the image of prison walls, being sealed in.
- Rhys: Palestine itself is also sealed in?
- Scott: Borders really.
- Rhys: Well Palestine itself is a small country sealed in.
- Scott: Yeah, because it keeps the sealed box even when it looks outside at all the crowd, it sort of zooms out into the crowd and still, it's sealed in.
- Rhys: Well Palestine itself is a sealed-in nation, it's purposefully isolated, so it's good that that is portrayed.

While Scott is responding to what he sees on the page, Rhys is again bringing in his knowledge of history and current affairs to interpret the visual symbols in the text. On these pages Sacco is telling the story of a man who was imprisoned for protesting, so the black borders evoke the literal imprisonment but, as Scott points out, these borders are continued when the view exits the prison suggesting that the imprisonment is metaphorical as well as literal. This interpretation is collaborative – the pupils work together to produce a 'reading' of the text, arguably a correct one, though neither have actually 'read' the text.

Many have outlined the importance of pupils making use of everyday 'funds of knowledge' in order to grasp sophisticated curricular content

(Moje et al. 2004). While, in the case of Rhys, this other knowledge was not necessarily about his experience of everyday life at a practical level, it *was* based on information he had acquired out of the school context and had brought to bear on his ‘reading’ of (although, of course, he had not technically read) *Palestine*. But would Rhys have made the same move within a classroom context in order to come to an understanding of something with which he was unfamiliar? This is, I would argue, an interpretive strategy that would not necessarily be acceptable as part of classroom practice, but it is a successful one in terms of bringing about both engagement with, and understanding of, the text under discussion. Within the criteria for the Higher English examination these pupils were about to sit there is no requirement for a candidate to display knowledge of the historical or cultural context of a text, suggesting that this kind of contextual ‘reading’ is invalid. Whilst every English teacher and university lecturer would argue that certain texts are difficult to understand without some prior knowledge of the context in which they were written, the fact that this knowledge is not rewarded in examinations suggests that it does not ‘count’. Not only did Rhys appear at a meeting about a text he had not read, but he engaged in the discussion and contributed to a shared understanding of that text using knowledge of its political context. Instead of being alienated from the conversation, he felt able to involve himself in it; in this context his knowledge was valued. For Fish, an interpretive community constitutes ‘a way of thinking, a form of life [which] *shares us* and implicates us in a world of already-in-place objects, purposes, goals, procedures, values, and so on’ (1980, 304). This group was not shared by a way of thinking – I, with my schooled approach to textual interpretation – even a comic book – was consistently surprised by the ways the pupils approached these texts. Not only did the Reading Group allow alternative interpretive strategies or reading practices to emerge and be experimented with, but it also, we could argue, enabled the pupils to enact the critical reading practices of the classroom in a manner which appeared to naturalise them. The discussion about the black borders is really one about visual symbolism; pupils are interpreting signs, or identifying properties in the text, in order to reach a conclusion about theme or message. While in the discussion above, this appears submerged; pupils are not explicitly employing the terminology of literary criticism (theme, character, setting, symbolism), in the following transcript they do so more consciously.

The Trial – ‘that stupid little skeleton that appears’

Other than a manga version of *Hamlet* (Appignanesi and Vieceli 2007), out of all of the texts that we read, an adaptation of Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* was the most contentious.

Transcript 2: The Trial

Scott: I really liked it.

Robert: I hated it.

Me: Why did you hate it?

Robert: Well, it's nonsensical. I like things that actually make sense when I'm reading them. This was just random pages ... I mean, that stupid little skeleton that appears. What's the point of it?

Andrew: I didn't understand the skeleton or any of the visual things that they used. I think it was well drawn.

Robert: Yes, I'll admit it was well drawn. I just couldn't stand it.

Andrew: Josef K only seemed to have one expression throughout the whole thing.

Robert: Yes.

Andrew: Bewildered.

Scott: Or, a sort of indifferent smirk.

Struck by Robert's honest and aggressive reaction to the text I make that classic English teacher move of asking him to explain his dislike. He is happy to admit that he could not make sense of it and is comfortable blaming the text for this, rather than feeling that it is a lack of understanding or ability on his part. The fact that he felt alienated from the text did not mean that he felt alienated from the group or the discussion – this was vitally different from his experience of the classroom where, as he revealed in interview, he felt marginalised because 'describing is not one of the things I'm good at'. Out of all of the pupils who attended the Group, Robert was the least willing to engage in the interpretive strategies of the English classroom even within the sessions themselves. He consistently expressed personal likes and dislikes, conflated the 'author' with a 'representation of the author' ('I don't think I like Joe Sacco himself. He doesn't seem to be a very nice person') and used language or turns of phrase which would have been discouraged in English lessons for being either vague or clumsy ('He does a good job of writing'; 'It's very interesting to read'). In Fish's analysis, Robert resisted becoming part of a particular 'interpretive community' focused on 'acceptable interpretations'. However, despite this, he found himself coming round to these interpretations as a result of the fact that other pupils with whom he was comfortable, were willing to do so. Scott returns to the skeleton:

Scott: It's a recurring image. There are also lots of clocks, knives, birthday candles.

Robert: With no relevance as far as we know.

Me: Time – ?

Andrew: [*Interrupting me*] Unless the whole bureaucratic thing is a metaphor for life which we're all trapped in until death? I suppose the constant skeletons make sense if it's all about the fear of death.

Robert: Yeah.

Scott: Knowing Kafka, it's probably some metaphor about the bourgeoisie and the working class. The judge and jury are the bourgeoisie telling people to work. Why? Just work. We told you to. It's like the trial. Just stay in it because we told you to. We don't know when it will end, just stay in it forever.

Me: A bit like life then?

Speaking of why he enjoyed the Reading Group later Robert told me that:

I suppose it makes you read a bit more into things. I mean, sometimes when you're reading you don't think very much about what you're reading. I mean you take it in but not to the extent that we're properly discussing it ... it [the Group discussion] gives a better understanding of the book at times.

In the transcript above both Robert and Andrew can be seen to be arriving at a 'better understanding' of the text or, at least, an acceptable interpretation of it that wouldn't be out of place in the English classroom. But how did they get there? As the transcript shows, with very little help from me, and yet it was their familiarity with the interpretive strategies of the English classroom, the willingness to identify the visual symbols in a certain way that prompted this discussion. The language which Scott employs to explain the text (one which he himself suggested the group read) is reminiscent of that which he would use in writing an English essay, 'recurring image', 'metaphor'. He also, as Rhys did in the previous discussion, brings in knowledge of the context – this time some familiarity with Kafka's themes and concerns. In fact, this discussion then prompted a further discussion about *The Great Gatsby*, a text I had been teaching some of them at the time in preparation for their Higher examination.

Andrew: Is the fact that it's his 30th birthday relevant? I can't help but be reminded of Nick noticing that it's his 30th birthday in *Gatsby*...

Fergus: I've not read *The Great Gatsby*. Did you read it yourself or in class?

Andrew: We did it last term.

Fergus: I just remember Gemma talking about it. Something about the new world and it being green...?

Me: Oh, 'the fresh green breast of the new world'.

Fergus: [*Laughing*] Something like that. Something about it being new but also rotten.

The Great Gatsby is a text replete with examples of symbolism where objects, colours (green), even ages (Nick's 30th birthday) are representative of important themes. Or, this is what I had been teaching them in preparation for an essay on the effective use of symbolism in a novel of their choice. I do not think it was a coincidence that a discussion of the study of texts in English (what they were 'doing in English' as they put it) followed from the turn in conversation that enabled them to interpret the *The Trial* in the way in which they did, a turn which meant some of them applied the interpretive strategies they had been taught to use in the classroom. So, if the interpretation of the English classroom can find its way into the space of the Reading Group, provide a useful way of engaging with a text when all else fails, can the situation be reversed? The knowledge of what is expected of them when faced by a literary text – the critical interpretive strategy, or act of identification (however confidently or tentatively grasped), can be a stumbling block for some pupils. It does not always appear to be the strategy itself that is insurmountable (even those resistant to it showed me that they could perform it), but perhaps the institutional pressure of *having* to apply it. For these pupils there was no official or institutional 'definition' of the comic medium; the complexity or 'literariness' was discovered, not taught. And yet, here in this discussion, pupils appear to be at ease applying an interpretive strategy several of them revealed in interview was alienating in the classroom. When Robert says the Reading Group helped him to 'read a bit more into things' he is expressing the fact that he is made to 'read-really' or to view the text with certain 'seeing-eyes' which he would not exercise on his own. Instead of being presented as *the* way to read, as it is in the classroom, here it is simply one of many interpretive options available to him. The next transcript reflected more so than any of the others, the sheer variety of interpretive options the pupils could and did employ. Arguably, this was a result of the nature of the text itself – a wordless comic by Shaun Tan.

The Arrival – 'Men with hoovers'

Tan's *The Arrival* is usually found in children's picture book sections in bookshops; I would argue that the text explores the immigrant experience, the strangeness of new places, and alienation from culture and language. Tan presents the language barriers placed in front of immigrants cleverly through the use of a medium free of verbal language itself, a fact which was not lost on the pupils who read it. Typically, several pupils arrived at the session without having read the text – it is expensive, heavy and not that easy to find. Those who had read it had been sharing my copy and their reactions to it were overwhelmingly positive, 'Very, very nice, really lovely'; 'The artwork was amazing.' Perhaps encouraged by these responses, one pupil who had not read it – Adam – began to do so in the session itself.

The transcript of the discussion is punctuated with his reactions to a first encounter with the text.

Transcript 3: The Arrival

Adam: Oh my, oh my.

Robert: Oh yeah.

Fergus: What bit is that?

Robert: The giant –

Fergus: Oh yeah.

Scott: The chemical warfare people.

Robert: Men with hoovers.

Scott: Are they hoovers?

Fergus: I thought that was like – wait, which part is that?

Adam: It's just after he's been talking to the –

Robert: The man and his son.

Fergus: The bread stuff?

Robert: I think it's the bit when he describes to the man how he got there.

Fergus: I thought it was just general suppression of – can I get more tea?

Adam: Look at the things in the background!

As well as the delight some of these pupils showed in their process of discovering the text, interpreting its meanings and sharing the experience, I was struck by their willingness to proffer possible meanings or connections between images. Are these chemical warfare men/men with hoovers/giants part of the immigrant's back story (the tale he tells of how he came to arrive where he has) or are they, as Fergus suggests, a symbol of 'general suppression' or both? Together, pupils who have and have not read the text, work these things out. Later on, Adam and Scott reach a section where the man gets a job as a poster plasterer but hangs these up the wrong way round.

[*Laughter*]

Scott: That's because he can't read it, it's just symbols really.

Adam: Oh my... [*flicking through the book*]

Scott: It's like the first one.

Adam: Yeah.

[...]

Adam: What's happening now? He's switching... Oh, he's telling the story.

[...]

Adam: It's the fruit now ... They've arrived home. Is that, wait ... is that? Oh, no, no, no. A reflection of the first image? [*He flicks back through the book*] Yes. Or is it? Yes.

They show me what they have found:

Adam: I think my favourite bit of it is when you see a plant growing –

Me: On the window?

Adam: Yeah, and then it turns to winter and you see –

Me: Is that the one where you read across the two pages? He's clever the way he plays with the order of the narrative. [*I flick through trying to find it*]

Adam: The flower growing is quite late on. That's it!

Robert: No, you missed it. It's a page back.

Adam: Also, I noticed he reflects ... one of the pages here reflects the very first page. You know how the very first page has nine panels about what his life was like?

Me: Yeah.

Adam: That's copied in this new lifestyle. [*He takes the book back*] I'll find the one that's the same as the one before.

Scott: As the one in the beginning?

Adam: Yeah, that's the one.

Fergus: Can we see?

[*Adam passes the book over and Robert and Fergus look at it*]

Fergus: What was that little dog-like thing?

[...]

Me: He's really captured that sense of strangeness when you go somewhere new –

Adam: When everything around you is not a function of a certain kind of thing.

Fergus: Like those balloon transporter types of things. He just steps in and there's a balloon.

The constant comparisons the pupils make to other images and ideas they are reminded of is a similar strategy to the one deployed by Rhys in attempting to interpret *Palestine*. It is very clear from the transcript that the pupils understand the strangeness of the experience Tan is conveying. Objects are at once familiar and unfamiliar: 'the dog-like thing', 'those balloon transporter types of things.' This empathy and understanding is not made absolutely explicit until I prompt it – Adam responds with, 'When

everything around you is not a function of a certain kind of thing.’ However, they get there, or ‘get’ the text, the pupils are clearly enjoying the experience of interpreting it collaboratively; comfortable in expressing their emotional reaction to the text, they are working in quite sophisticated ways in order to reach an interpretation of *The Arrival*. They bring their knowledge of everyday objects (and, later in the discussion, of Ellis Island and the First World War) to help them decipher the images in front of them. They express their enjoyment of the text in unabashed language; they collaborate in an unstructured and undisciplined conversation where they constantly interrupt one another. If we follow Fish who links strategies of interpretation to acts of identification – they are also using the dominant interpretive strategy of literary criticism – the pupils were imagining properties in the comics to identify and analyse. The patterns and echoes they identified in the text were ascribed to the comic itself, they simply demonstrated the existence of these and showed them to me and to each other. While a variety of strategies (contextual reading, emotional reading) were used through the use of a collaborative act of reading, what we end up with is something that looks very much like a critical act of identification or interpretation.

Conclusion

I began this project because I was interested in, and slightly suspicious of, the avid promotion of the comic medium within the educational context. As a secondary English teacher, I was particularly concerned to explore the links between these texts and critical reading practices. Rather than assuming that the ‘skills’ required to read comics are the same as those required to read conventional text (one assumption) and furthermore, that these skills are transferable between texts (a second assumption at work in the promotion of comics in schools), in this paper I look at the culture of reading which exists inside and outside the secondary English classroom. In using the work of Stanley Fish I have chosen to follow a particular trajectory; I have been considering the act of critical interpretation and the strategies pupils are taught in order to perform interpretations of texts. As the three examples outlined in this paper show, a number of interpretive strategies which had been hidden to me became visible. Looking back through my own comments and contributions to these discussions, I can see how constrained they are within the conventional interpretive strategy of literary criticism. The pupils, on the other hand, draw on a multitude of interpretive strategies (some of which have been discussed in this paper). They were not ‘possessed by’ one interpretive strategy. The fact that some of the pupils were comfortable with the dominant interpretive strategy of the classroom, comfortable enough to use it when they felt it was appropriate or helpful, while others were not, also became apparent. The problem of critical reading for some appeared to be that it was not naturalised enough; it always

appeared to be ‘work’, something specific to the classroom, whereas their own interpretive strategies did not. The Graphic Novel Reading Group was not constituted of weak or reluctant readers, it was a place where pupils who felt alienated from the English classroom could read and discuss their reading in a social context.

While much of the freedom and enjoyment they experienced was ascribed to the properties of the comic medium, I would also suggest that it derived from the culture of the Reading Group itself. Some of the interpretive strategies used did not represent ‘work’ to them because they were using them on a text and within a context that they did not associate with the work of the English classroom. There was something about the text (its potential for collaborative acts of reading, its relative unfamiliarity to the ‘teacher’), yes, but there was also something about the space in which that text was read. As Fish (and the NLS) highlight, the same text would not necessarily be read in the same way in a different context; what if we had read these graphic novels as part of curriculum English? Would we have had the same eclecticism of interpretive strategies or would we have felt constrained to the dominant critical reading practice common in English and university classrooms? These are important questions, for however central the interpretation or interpretive strategy is, there is something else at play here and that is to do with the space or context in which the texts are encountered. The willingness of pupils to bring out of school knowledges into the space of the Reading Group in order to help them make sense of texts is important if we are to begin thinking about how we might use these to construct ‘third spaces’ (Moje et al. 2004) within curricular spaces themselves. However, my experiences of setting up this Group also highlighted many of the problems we might encounter in doing so. When a teacher establishes, organises and dictates the terms of the classroom, is there any possibility of incorporating different interpretive strategies into a mainstream setting, or of making a critical reading appear less like work? While my position as ‘expert’ was destabilised because of my relative unfamiliarity with the comic medium, my very presence in the Reading Group appeared to guarantee the emergence of particular discourses and interpretive strategies. The structure (the lesson, the position in the curriculum) is still imposed on the pupils – they are not free. These pupils did not use any of the new interpretive strategies, or the new processes for reaching the critical interpretive strategy of the classroom that developed in the Reading Group, in the traditional classroom space – it did not transfer. They ended up clinging to the value of the extra-curricular space that had been carved out and what it had to offer them, how it validated them.

The examples of the sessions above show, I hope, the potential educational uses of this space and these texts. Robert was brought to a ‘better understanding’ of a text he was originally hostile to; Rhys acquired a grasp

of a text he had not read; others acquired a greater knowledge of the political context of that text; Adam, Scott, Fergus and Robert collaborated and shared their ideas, interpretations and reactions to the wordless text of Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, coming to an understanding not just of its content – the immigrant experience – but of how they might work together, and show each other the meanings, connections and discoveries they make. When I set up a 'Reading Group' I had a set of assumptions about what we would do and how we would read. I assumed that the text would be read by those who chose to come; I envisaged a discussion that would be focused, even formal in terms of the discipline with which it would be carried out. I thought that the manner in which interpretation would take place would be similar to the way in which it was carried out in the classroom; I even thought some of the terminology would be the same. These assumptions were proved wrong because I failed to take into account either the semiotic resonance of the texts we were reading or the semiotic resonance of the context in which we read them. 'The mental operations we can perform,' Fish argues, 'are limited by the institutions in which we are already embedded. These institutions precede us, and it is only by inhabiting them or being inhabited by them, that we have access to the public and conventional senses they make' (1980, 331–2). The Reading Group revealed to me the embedded-ness of my own practice and the restrictions teachers, schools, examinations, the discipline of English, place upon pupils and their 'reading'. What emerged from the Reading Group was much more interesting, enjoyable and informative than I could have imagined. Not only did it illuminate the restrictive critical reading practices of the classroom, including my own, but it offered alternatives which were just as successful. Perhaps it is time to begin thinking about how we can employ these in better and more structured ways so that critical reading does not always appear to be such hard 'work'.

References

- Appignanesi, Robert, and Emma Vieceli. 2007. *Hamlet*. London: Self Made Hero.
- Barton, David, Mary Hamilton, and Roz Ivanic. 2000. *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context*. London: Routledge.
- Bitz, Michael. 2009. *Manga high: Literacy, identity, and coming of age in an urban high school*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Brenner, Robin. 2011. Comics and graphic novels. In *Handbook of research on children's and young adult literature*, ed. Shelby Wolf and Karen Coates, 256–67. New York and London: Routledge.
- Bucky Carter, James. 2007. *Building literacy connections with graphic novels: Page by page, panel by panel*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Cary, Stephen. 2004. *Going graphic: Comics at work in the multilingual classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- El Refaie, E., and K. Horschelmann. 2010. Young people's readings of a political cartoon and the concept of multimodal literacy. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 31: 195–207.

- Fish, Stanley. 1980. *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gee, James Paul. 1992. *The social mind: Language, ideology and social practice*. New York and London: Bergin & Garvey.
- Gibson, M. 2008. 'So what is this mango, anyway?' Understanding manga, comics and graphic novels. *NATE Classroom* 5: 8–10.
- Gibson, M. 2009. The war of the worlds? Classics, comics and ways of thinking about adaptations. *NATE Classroom* 9: 11–3.
- Heath, Shirley Brice. 1983. *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kafka, Franz, Chantal Montellier, and David Mairowitz. 2008. *The trial*. London: Self Made Hero.
- Learning and Teaching Scotland. 2009. Critical literacy. <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/sharingpractice/c/criticalliteracy/introduction.asp?strReferringChannel=learningteachingandassessment&strReferringPageID=tcm:4-536738-64>
- Learning and Teaching Scotland. 2011. Experiences and outcomes: Literacy and English. <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/learningteachingandassessment/curriculumareas/languages/litandenglish/eandos/index.asp>
- Livingston, Eric. 1995. *An anthropology of reading*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Mallia, G. 2007. Learning from the sequence: The use of comics in instruction. *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* 3, no. 3. http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v3_3/mallia/ (accessed January 31, 2012).
- Marsh, Jackie, and Elaine Millard. 2000. *Literacy and popular culture*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Moje, Elizabeth Birr, Kathryn McIntosh Ceichanowski, Katherine Kramer, Lindsay Ellis, Rosario Carrillo and Tehani Collazo. 2004. Working towards third space in content area literacy: A examination of everyday funds of knowledge and discourse. *Reading Research Quarterly* 39, no. 1: 38–70.
- Moss, Gemma. 2007. *Literacy and gender*. London: Routledge.
- Pumphrey, George. 1954. *Comics and your children*. London: Comics Campaign Council.
- Pumphrey, George. 1955. *Children's comics: A guide for parents and teachers*. London: The Epworth Press.
- Pumphrey, George. 1964. *What children think of their comics*. London: The Epworth Press.
- Radway, Janice. 1991. *Reading the romance. Women, patriarchy and popular literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Radway, Janice. 1997. *A feeling for books: Book-of-the-month club, literary taste and middle class desire*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Ritchie, Meabh. 2009. Comic belief. *Times Education Supplement Magazine*, December 11.
- Sabeti, S. 2011. The irony of 'Cool Club': The place of comic book reading in schools. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 2, no. 2: 137–49.
- Sacco, Joe. 2003. *Palestine*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Street, Brian. 1984. *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tan, Shaun. 2007. *The arrival*. London: Hodder Children's Books.
- Thomas, James L. 1983. *Cartoons in the classroom*. Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited.
- Wertham, Frederick. 1954. *The seduction of the innocent*. New York: Rinehart.

Copyright of Pedagogy, Culture & Society is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.