



## Unidentified Graphic Objects? Eccentricity and Graphic Afterlives in Contemporary British Graphic Novels

(Martin Rowson; Bryan Talbot)

Brigitte Friant-Kessler

### Introduction: Lost in Adaptation

“As a good housewife out of divers fleeces weaves one piece of cloth, a bee gathers wax and honey out of many flowers, and makes a new bundle of all, I have laboriously collected this cento out of divers writers” (Burton 11).

In the introduction to their study on eccentricity in Britain, Sophie Aymes-Stokes and Laurent Mellet write: “Any oddity hunter runs the risk of losing their conceptual way in the hunt for an elusive Snark, or of reinforcing stereotypical views” (3). Conversely, the minute we stumble upon an oddity we strive and struggle to define the nature of the object. Eccentricity, almost like an umbrella term, then tends to become the most convenient pigeon-hole for what can precisely not be pigeon-holed. Carroll’s Snark hunting seems particularly apposite when one looks at Bryan Talbot’s much acclaimed *Alice in Sunderland* (2007) which was qualified by the artist himself as “entertainment,” an expression that is no doubt destined to herald on the cover a special experience for the reader, and one that may imply a departure from more traditional graphic narratives too. The two other examples selected for this essay are by Martin Rowson, a well-known British editorial cartoonist, author and illustrator who has adapted two eighteenth-century literary classics so far: *Tristram Shandy* (first edition 1998, second edition 2010) and *Gulliver’s Travels, Adapted and Updated* (2012).

Talbot’s publication, hailed by Paul Gravett as “a tour de force landmark in graphic literature” has been referred to as a “non-genre comic book.”<sup>1</sup> But does Talbot’s graphic novel—along with two other examples examined in this essay—fall into the category of UGO, i.e. an Unidentified Graphic Object? Borrowed from Thierry Groensteen’s famous 2006 title *Un objet culturel non identifié* (translated as *Unidentified Cultural Object*), a UGO may be defined as any form of graphic narrative which departs from a norm that is framed and constrained within the context of a given social and cultural history of the medium. Eccentricity when explored from a number of vantage points, is underpinned by a specific attractive force which pushes from the centre towards the margins, and thus takes the text as a springboard for graphic games and multiple discourses. The common point between those

---

<sup>1</sup> See Paul Gravett’s interview of Bryan Talbot. 5 Nov. 2017.  
<[http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/bryan\\_talbot](http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/bryan_talbot)>

three UGOs is that they are graphic adaptations of works belonging to the British literary canon, as would fiction by Daniel Defoe, Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, Stevenson, Dickens and Oscar Wilde, to name but a few. However, Talbot does not claim to have created an adaptation of the Carrollian narrative but offers instead a re-evaluation of the author's mythologised biography, together with a host of images that are related to Sunderland itself. In spite of such a deliberate biographical approach, a large array of fictional elements from the *Alice* books feature in the volume. Rowson and Talbot both point to classics with a zest of satire and humour, which is why adapting them in a graphic medium opens broader avenues and offers more possibilities. This is a process I have termed "comicking the canon," whereby the literary piece is adapted in the editorial comic book format but in such a way as to convey a secondary and parallel-tracked message, often satirical or humorous. Unsurprisingly, *Alice* and *Gulliver* have also had a good fortune in visual satire outside literary adaptation, particularly as tropes in political caricature.

In the case of Talbot's and Rowson's graphic objects three types of eccentricities are at play. The first type is medium-driven eccentricity. Broadly speaking, this encompasses any spin-off pattern related to changes in editorial formats as well as the use of a self-reflexive metacomical discourse. In other words, it suggests a sub-text on how comic books re-appropriate comics as a genre, a cultural object and a stylistic device. The second type is afterlife-driven eccentricity, a process which covers remediation and transmediation, whereby a specific iconographic object, category or genre taken as the centre is revived but presented and reproduced in a different visual context. For images with a satirical purpose, graphic afterlives often come in the shape of pastiche or parodic versions of original images with a model role. One such example consists in recontextualising, for instance, a print or the detail of a print into caricature. This in itself can already be seen as a form of eccentricity. Any page-to-panel adaptation may imply the presence of graphic afterlives, some directly derived from images first published in illustrated fiction. Another mode of circulation concerns repackaging from the press to comic book. This is when the original image published, for instance, as part of a serialised medium becomes a component of a sequential narrative published as a stand-alone volume or book. The question again is one of reshaping, form, size and integrates it into a new narrative and visual format. Graphic novels offer a perfect opportunity to revive ghosts as well as to construct a graphic stage for comedy or satire, given that satire and theatre have a long parallel history.

The third type is ideology-driven eccentricity whereby the graphic novel's literary content is used as a platform to make a secondary statement, often one with a sub-text that refers to the author's political agenda. In this instance theatricality and its pertaining elements of staging (masks, curtains, cues, set, props) are frequently used as a trope. Rowson's *Gulliver* strongly

exemplifies this mode of eccentricity. So does Talbot's *Alice in Sunderland* by emphasising the artist's position in favour of northern culture as opposed to what comes from a hegemonic south. Furthermore, in Matthew Green's words: "Sunderland recoups the political force embedded in the Menippean tradition, an impulse seriously attenuated in the Alice books" (Green 123). Talbot's airbrushed collages shape the lines of a phantasmagoric transfictional backdrop and at the same time contribute to blurring the lines between different narrative levels: the local history of the city of Sunderland, its theatre, its landmark heroes, the connections with Carroll to the area, and even a long disquisitive rant on anti-immigrant campaigning (Talbot 298). In an interview, the author Daniel James described the Talbot as "the father of the British graphic novel."<sup>2</sup> Talbot's UGO is likely one day to become a landmark piece in the history of British comics to which it adds an intriguing fragment and from which it widely draws its inspiration too. Part psychedelic diversion, part polyphonic tribute paid to a large variety of famous authors, artists, inventors, people from Sunderland of all walks of life, as well as members of his own family, this graphic object, for want of a better word, delves deep into the history of British comics. Collection and recollection are keywords in the case of *Alice in Sunderland*, particularly as the sections about National Heritage and the Empire Theatre prompt the reader to construct in the mind a visual library collection. With regards to politics both Rowson's and Talbot's graphic objects showcase the third type of eccentricity which is ideology-driven and which aims to accentuate the performative power of their draughtsmanship to depict satire in a very idiosyncratic fashion.

All three types of eccentricities (medium-driven, afterlife-driven and ideology-driven) can be combined, mixed and modulated, and are largely present to enhance a sense of hybridity which in turn articulates the postmodern stance that underpins those graphic objects. Contemporary graphic artists like Martin Rowson and Bryan Talbot overtly and consistently rely on strategies of borrowing, whether fragments from other graphic works to create an effect of visual citation, or lifts from their own body of graphic work which are incorporated and repackaged as visual devices. Some are used to emphasise the humour of pastiche and parody, some underscore a more dire satirical discourse. By doing so, the two artists engage in and with a process that conjures parallel or overlapping visual worlds, whereby graphic afterlives blend in the reader/viewer's mind and memory, and reshape the perception of the original texts, the original images, always under the proviso the reader can identify the primary visual source.

While Talbot refigures Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* by interlarding his vision of Sunderland with bio-graphic fragments and well-known citations from visual Aliceana, Rowson's adaptation of *Tristram Shandy* in comic book format showcases visual Sterneana,

---

2 See Talbot's website. 15 July 2018 <<http://www.bryan-talbot.com>>.

alongside landmarks of British visual culture from the eighteenth century, intermingled with light-hearted caricatured characters.<sup>3</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, Rowson's much more somber *Gulliver's Travels* in which Swift's narrative is paradoxically at the centre but simultaneously also at the periphery, oozes with vitriolic satire and darkness. This version of such a visual *Gulliver's Travels* however is not so much based on visual Swifteana than on graphic afterlives lifted from visual Rowsoneana, that is to say a set of images culled and recycled from the cartoonist's own body of graphic work which includes a number of caricatures, most of them previously published in the British press (*The Guardian*, *The Independent*) and also reproduced in Rowson's 2009 manifesto as a political cartoonist entitled *Giving Offence*.

Sterne's fiction, by nature zany and whimsical, has from the beginning sold as an atypical, "aesthetic object" as demonstrated by Sterne scholar Peter de Voogd (DeVoogd 1988). It has even been argued that it could be defined as a proto-graphic novel (Tabachnik *Companion* 27). Sterne used typographic eccentricities in his page layout and thus opened the sluice gates for imitations and all manners of visual quirkiness in non-linear fiction. From a formal viewpoint, both Rowson and Talbot take advantage from games with panel and page layout to transform the page in a visual and verbal collage, frequently featuring visual citation. For instance when adapting *Tristram Shandy* Rowson replaces the embedded *Slawkenbergius' Tale*, at the beginning of volume IV, with a selection of iconic graphic artworks across centuries. He thus shifts the reader's gaze from Georgian England to George Grosz, Albrecht Dürer and Aubrey Beardsley and creates not only chrono-visual conflation in the course of a few pages but uses adaptation to underscore an invisible genealogical link and an aesthetic continuum between his own graphic style and those who influenced him or stand as models. This is done not so much for the sheer sake of mixing genres and artworks, but to challenge commonplace layouts and incorporate excess and saturation into a new aesthetic flare. The urge to cram in details seems simultaneously reminiscent of pop art culture from the 60s and 70s and a visual approach rooted in a very British graphic style that dates back to Hogarth, whose prints were famously replete with variety. It is thus hardly a surprise that in all three examples many references and afterlives of characters come from Hogarth prints.

### **Looking for Hogarth: From Print to Panel**

---

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed study of how caricature from *Tristram Shandy* is re-appropriated by Rowson, see for example the case of Thomas Patch's portrait of Sterne and parson Yorick in Friant-Kessler, "Visual Sterneana: Graphic Afterlives and a Sense of Infinite Mobility." For studies on Rowson's adaptation and intericonicity, see Richter on Rowson and Friant-Kessler and Lasne on the comic book as an epistemological compendium.

Like the director of the famous movie *Looking for Richard* (1996), in which Al Pacino wittily reflects on the challenge of staging a Shakespearean character, Martin Rowson and Bryan Talbot create Hogarth-haunted pages that demonstrate afterlife-driven eccentricity but also cross modal medium-driven eccentricity in order to mediate the variety of ways in which adaptation and double coding can operate.<sup>4</sup> Hogarth is given attention as a visual reference to which both artists pay tribute, now as a cultural reference, now even as a pivotal moment in the visual narrative, which contributes to pushing the main narrative, admittedly the starting point of the adaptation process, towards the margins. Rowson uses a whole page in *Tristram Shandy* to cite visually “The Reward of Cruelty” plate IV from the cycle entitled *The Four Stages of Cruelty*, in which a corpse is being dissected in a medical theatre. This may be a tangential echo to the otherwise acknowledged Hogarth-Sterne connection but it also enables the artist to draw attention to what used to be a morally normative behaviour in Hogarth’s days and to forms of corporeal violence to which bodies, whether dead or alive, were subjected. As a “parallel illustration” to the rest of the graphic novel, this afterlife-driven eccentricity posits a comment on cruelty across time.<sup>5</sup> To quote Linda Hutcheon, “Parodic reprise of the past is not nostalgic, it is always critical” (Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism* 89). The visual citation of eighteenth-century fragments taken from familiar prints that are probably the most famous and beloved samples of visual heritage in Britain creates a chrono-visual conflation in which time frames and graphic frames are deliberately blurred. They also provide the artist with a space for comment on what this particular visual heritage signifies nowadays and to what extent it has been shored and distributed through a particular mainstream culture, in Britain and abroad. Baetens and Frey discuss the genre and note that blurring the boundaries appears to be an accepted characteristic of the graphic novel as a genre (Baetens and Frey 141). But that does not necessarily imply eccentricity, at least is not sufficient to account for it. Cultural ghosts and visual graphic afterlives characters from Hogarth prints are refreshed and at the same time relegated to a second plane of interpretation. Yet, in spite of the undisputable Britishness of Hogarth as a cultural icon to which artists like Rowson and Talbot readily acknowledge their debt, there is a non-British pattern to that too.

On another level, in Talbot’s *Alice*, the reader-viewer experiences a strange encounter with a teaching figure describing Hogarth’s emblematic *Beer Lane*. Talbot reproduces the print *Beer Lane* but misses out on the companion piece *Gin Lane*, incidentally Rowson’s favourite print by Hogarth and which he has frequently parodied in cartoons. Nonetheless, the underlying

---

4 See Mark Thornton Burnett in Hatchuel and Vienne-Guerrin’s *Shakespeare on Screen*, Richard III.

5 The concept of parallel illustration was coined by Leigh Dillard. See Leigh Dillard, “Drawing Outside the Book: Parallel Illustration and the Building of a Visual Culture,” *Book Illustration in the Long Eighteenth Century: Reconfiguring the Visual Periphery of the Text*, Ed. Christina Ionescu, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, 196-241.

didactic discourse is made to combine with a reflection on the medium itself. Here a parallel can be drawn with Pier's commentary on metalepsis as it "solicits temporary entry of the reader into a re-centered modal system. Metalepsis abolishes the distinction between storyworld and the world(s) from which addressees relocate" (Pier, 2009 198). In relation to narratology theory, Pier further discusses rhetorical versus ontological metalepsis and notes that narratives can follow heterarchical structures (Pier, 2014 337). The same could be said of the graphic novels by Rowson and Talbot which both set in motion a recurrent contamination of levels in which there is no single highest level, as in a Moebius strip, and whose effects are distributed throughout deliberately entangled strains of a multi-layered narrative.

### **The Art of Metacomicality as a Critical Tool**

In Rowson's *Tristram Shandy* there is a page<sup>6</sup> in which Derrida's deconstruction as a philosophical concept applied to language is turned into a series of panels that undergo a process of literal graphic deconstruction under the pressure of visual punning "Dear Reader / Derrida." This shows the vitality not only of cross modality in this graphic novel but it fosters added value for the margins, which in fact are made to vanish. This kind of acting upon the page and panel layout is done in much the same way by the French cartoonist Fred who played with panel and page layout in his *Philemon* albums. Rowson's *Gulliver*, on the contrary—and again with Fred in mind—exemplifies a panel layout based on a composite structuring rather than Derridean deconstruction. The recomposed horse figure of Gulliver's fourth voyage looks very similar to the well-known page thirty-one from Fred's *Simbabbad de Batdad*. Such a parallel precludes any hasty conclusion on the exclusive Britishness of playful games with page and panel, one essential element though that makes graphic novels and page-to-panel adaptations eccentric. Depleting or, on the contrary, saturating the page are part and parcel of an in & out motion too, especially with media-driven eccentricity.

Comics allow for graphic space in which the prefix "meta" is writ large: metafictional, metacomical. Metacomicality is when comics are used to comment on comics, the typical example of that is Scott McCloud's seminal 1993 study of comics presented with drawings and panels. Metacomicality abounds in Rowson and in Talbot. Bearing in mind that the original *Tristram Shandy* was already based on the notion of self-reflexive page, Rowson's comic book adaptation pushes the visual boundaries further by introducing even more metadiscursive elements on the page, the book, the medium. Talbot's metacomicality, on the other hand, shows medium-driven eccentricity combined with afterlife driven eccentricity to revivify old British comic books as part of forgotten national treasures. Metacomicality functions like a force behind the spiralling out dynamics which characterises this UGO.

---

<sup>6</sup> The comic book adaptation does not have page numbers.

Talbot also introduces a panel in which the graphic afterlife of the famous comic theoretician Scott McCloud enters on stage, conjured up like a spectral guru but nonetheless operating in a non-traditional graphic environment. In other words, eccentricity has to be apprehended as part of a more global ecological approach in which a given graphic adaptation intersects with a vast archive of previously-known and circulated graphic objects but is shaped by a unique ecology conditioned by idiosyncratic features<sup>7</sup> (Grennan 221).

Talbot's graphic novel is difficult to comprehend precisely on grounds of the heterarchical interlarding of the different embedded graphic worlds. The very characteristic of eccentricity makes the object sometimes incomprehensible as a whole while paradoxically fragments and details remain clear signifiers. The interlarding of sub-plots is done by inserting originals that are imported and reproduced as full-page facsimiles. The Hartlepool Monkey episode, the *Boy's Own Paper* pages narrating Jack Crawford's adventures pay tribute to characters from the local history of the north of England and to British comic magazines as a popular genre. His rendering of Sunderland's local history is intertwined with the history of British comics. Talbot introduces metacomic fragments, displays a digressive style, and is thus self-reflexive in another way. The same can be said of Rowson's adaptations, so that with all three objects, we constantly move in and out of the Carrollian, Shandean, Swiftian and not least Rowsonian centres. In terms of format, what can be termed conventional sequentiality of the panels is constantly thwarted by a multitude of breaks in colour, continuity, bio particles advocating variety by interfering with one another, be it visually or verbally, and not least when the author's *personae* intrude and are made to adopt an oratorical stance, ad libbing with self-reflexive remarks. All three graphic objects thus feature a multilayered surfeit of heterotopic images (print-based caricature, self-recycling in Rowson's case) and a metacomic discourse. These pages also act out what I have termed chrono-visual conflation, which is a shortcut from expansion to reduction, in a binary mode that can equally go towards defining eccentricity in those graphic objects. Hence, all three works display graphic hybridity and multiplicity, and in view of the persistent presence of the layers, they can be described as heterotopic polypsests, which is one of the components involved in the process of comicking.

### **The Stuff Comicking is Made On**

Eccentricity has a lot to do with humour. *Tristram Shandy* and *Alice in Wonderland* were designed to entertain and create something humorous bordering on self-derision, sometimes mixed with slapstick comedy. Less concerned with humour and more suffused with acerbic satire is *Gulliver's Travels*. For Rowson it is the opportunity to adapt Swift's verbal satire and

---

<sup>7</sup> On this question of unique ecology and its impact on representational models, see Simon Grennan, *A Theory of Narrative Drawing*.

simultaneously import graphic material to ridicule and satirise British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Comicking thus entails not only the editorial repackaging but means making a literary or visual source more comical. In Talbot's case, there is a wink at Warner Bros, Looney Tunes and the American cartoon industry with a humorous parody of the famous Porky Pig ending line "That's all Folks!". The latter is re-appropriated and spiced up in Geordie-style dialect. Avery's toons are well-known for being parodies and in colloquial English a porky is a lie. The reader is thus alerted to a possible similitude between Bugs Bunny reinvented as a transatlantic White Rabbit. Both Rowson and Talbot rely on visual games and puns, thus mingling eighteenth-century wit and Victorian nonsense à la Carroll or à la Lear. For instance, when Talbot splits the name of Bede the Venerable in two equally rhyming segments so that Bede forms the French Bé/Dé, he signposts the ludic dimension of his graphic entertainment, which is yet another way to counterbalance several other grim fragments of northern history. But the play on Bede / Bédé is not only a typographic pun; it is also a metonymical device that articulates the alchemy of comicality. Beyond the historical, social and political rationale, both Talbot and Rowson as graphic artists deliver the essence of their work by affording diversion and by having the reader engage with multi-framed storytelling.

In Talbot's *Alice* there are nodal points between popular culture icons such as Sid James, for instance, and fragments from Shakespeare's *Henry V*. But the character of an armoured Henry haranguing the troops at Harfleur with one foot on a soap box is a give-away that the comic book is made to look like a flamboyant impromptu delivered by a character from the popular comic *Viz*. Yet nothing could be further from the truth than improvisation. As Talbot himself comments he has painstakingly drawn and reworked all the scanned images, and working on the computer to airbrush an image pixel by pixel takes more time than tracing lines with a pencil. Some pages are so saturated with intericonicity that you can pore over them for an almost endless length of time. Readers familiar with visual Aliceana will immediately recognise all the references to the nation's favourite illustrators: Tenniel, Rakham, Peake, Steadman and possibly try to identify the sources as in the game "Where's Wally?". Steadman's splashed and splattered ink in turn is the stylistic technique on which Rowson modelled the composition and rhythm of the Brobdingnag voyage in his updated *Gulliver*.

The High-Low divide is further bridged by Talbot's plebeian avatar and *persona*, and that is also one of the functions of Pete, the narrator's stooge in Rowson's *Tristram Shandy*. The reader-viewer is addressed directly, which creates Shandean and postmodernist interruptions that constantly jostle the reader-viewer in and out of different narratives and sub-narratives. Characteristically Talbot also plays on page turning and page numbers, and



Rowson revisits Sterne's blank page by making the characters disappear in a hypermedia-wrought universe of binary numbers. The point of all this is to create cliff-hanging effects and bewilderment, to generate a constant effect of surprise and amusement. By audaciously interfering with formal conventions and transgressing boundaries of the comic book genre, these UGOs can be defined as mind-boggling *teatrum mundi*. Talbot and Rowson invite the reader to open countless Chinese boxes filled with ghosts of artworks, and graphic afterlives from the past. They also afford a large gamut of readerly pleasures. One blogger critically wrote: "This is not only the weirdest graphic novel I've ever enjoyed—it's also the most ambitious. Talbot's doing things here that I've never seen done before, and he's doing all of it, all at once."<sup>8</sup> Another critic reviewed *Alice in Sunderland* by commenting: "It's a happening more than a graphic novel."<sup>9</sup>

The ghosts on the page mingle with the invisible ghosts since every image can potentially trigger individual and specific iconographic references/memories. For Rowson, Shandyworld is a pastiche paradise, which prompts him to indulge simultaneously in medium-driven eccentricity and afterlife-driven eccentricity. Adapting and updating *Gulliver's Travels* appears to have been more than an ideal opportunity seized to hack away at Tony Blair: it features a strongly ideology-driven mode of eccentricity that vicariously allows to settle accounts between a disillusioned Labour supporter and a left-wing Prime Minister. Since eccentricity is also characterised by graphic excess there are saturated pages and style breaks in all three examples. Talbot's pages function like polypsests inasmuch as the previous layer is not erased but deliberately presented so that several separate graphic narratives can be read and absorbed at once, rather like the layers used to create images with a graphic design software. Comparable to a gigantic graphic contraption, with fragments scattered over, within and underneath the picture surface, this graphic object often gestures towards trompe l'oeil imagery, particularly when one looks at the interplay of mixed media (photographic scans, drawing, comics) and the combination of graphic artwork digitally-modified. The whole constructs in the reader's mind a kaleidoscopic vision of Alice, made of multilayered spatio-temporal dimensions in which several metaleptic narratives alternate, collide and coalesce all at once. In an interview Talbot gave Paul Gravett in 2007 he explained the digital process of adding dozens of layers so as to create the sought-after effect of a blurred and bleeding collage. Technically speaking he prepared the panels with ink, colour and wash and then digitised the material so as to be able to create the special multi-layering effects on the computer. Some pages are so densely layered that the eye actually struggles to make sense of them and the brain needs time to reposition each element in a particular time frame and a

---

8 5 Nov. 2017. <<https://boingboing.net/2007/08/09/alice-in-sunderland-2.html>>

9 "It's a happening more than a graphic novel." 5 Nov. 2017.

<<https://comicsworthreading.com/2008/04/23/alice-in-sunderland-best-of-2007/>>

specific graphic environment. The pause enforced upon the reader's brain is also what allows Talbot to distil satirical comments in the hope that his footnotes will be not diluted but instead distributed at regular intervals across the volume.

### **Diverse Fleeces and Fanciful Carpet-Pages**

Contamination, ingestion and (in)digestion are key tropes to apprehending all three graphic objects. When Talbot's narrator re-enacts the famous Carrollian "Eat Me" and "Drink Me" episodes he does it by adding a spoonful of American cartooning to the potion. Comics being a medium in which formal plasticity and Protean characters can thrive, Alice's original distortions neatly fit the author's purpose. *Tristram Shandy* has gone down into history as a model of and for eccentricity. Adapted by Rowson it is also indirectly influenced by his scatological political cartooning though *Gulliver* features what I have elsewhere described as an astonishing display of "fecographics," one which tangentially takes the reader-viewer on an additional fifth voyage, like a coda to the original Swiftian travelogue, because of the cross-fertilisation between caricature and literary adaptation. In a more carnivalesque form, scatology can also be traced at the beginning of *Tristram Shandy* when the Piranesian vaults morph into Walter Shandy's inhabited scrotum. More than anything else all three works are echo-chambers and, therefore, function as mnemographic objects since they are based on the reader-viewer's mnemonic ability to re-inscribe visual fragments within the context of original sources, and simultaneously take pleasure in the recomposition offered by artists who align themselves with visual and graphic traditions from the past. The graphic objects under scrutiny are, therefore, far from being mainstream reading material, or for the matter easily accessible. The pages look like a repository for a British heritage catalogue and are densely filled with interwoven cultural references, akin to what Peter Ackroyd termed a "carpet-page" (43). All three subsume comic books, old and new, literary adaptation, historic novel-inspired genre, as well as caricature, satirical prints and intellectually demanding examples of landmark fiction such as Joyce or Woolf, two authors comically portrayed in Rowson's *Tristram*. Amidst scattered particles of historically-documented disasters, Talbot's *Alice*, Rowson's *Tristram Shandy* and *Gulliver* display the choicest morsels of national treasures that have spiralled down history, as well as in and out of various time frames.

Finally, handling all three UGOs may best be experienced without the quest for a compass but rather like sailing through stormy weather on a Moebius strip-shaped raft. From the vast array of images of visual Aliceana circulating in and out, Talbot's "Entertainment" emerges like one multi-faced surviving white rabbit. During an interview conducted by Ross Robertson for *The Sunderland Echo* newspaper (Tuesday 27, March 2007) the artist commented: "The subtitle on the front is 'an entertainment' and I think that's what I was

trying to do, to create an imaginative and enjoyable read. And because it's set in a palace of varieties it's like a variety show, so that the different styles on the drawings and the differences of the comic story telling techniques change according to the themes of the story."<sup>10</sup> If read as a means to relocate political satire, *Gulliver's Travels* updated offers the possibility of reviving yet more rabbits in the shape of fixed smiles stuck on sterile faces lost in a sea of dystopia. Lastly, to prove Samuel Johnson's remark inadequate once more—"Nothing odd will do long, *Tristram Shandy* did not last" (Boswell 696)—Sterne's fiction in comic book format is further evidence of the novel's longevity and plasticity. Since formerly published Rowsoneana is destined to reinvigorate Swift's satire, comicking *Gulliver* as a whole is a daunting project but it may well contribute to throwing Blair in the ground for good, at least until next a cartoonist grants him another graphic afterlife.

As to the question of identifying those graphic objects or labelling them, I hope to have shown that whether you name them comic book, graphic novel or graphic object, their principal aim is to entertain, possibly in a transgressive fashion, and take the reader on an unexpected journey, as expressed in this review: "Over the course of this mesmerising journey you, like Bryan Talbot the Plebeian, will be introduced by Bryan Talbot the Performer and Bryan Talbot the Pilgrim to the richest tapestry of history, location and invention with a wealth of wit and breadth of accessible composition that will leave you breathless."<sup>11</sup> Rather like Robert Sikoryak's *Masterpiece Comics*, in which the artist incongruently but successfully weaves the warp of one style and the weft of another content, *Gulliver* and *Tristram* follow the draughtsman's hand and become idiosyncratic artworks as well as finely-wrought literary adaptations, each with a touch of satire and humour. Whether an adaptation is advertised as a graphic object or a variety show proves to some extent immaterial. These graphic objects display a vantage point from which one can re-appraise classic fiction as well as digress at leisure, to take up the Shandean metaphor of digression as applied to a rhapsodic narrative.<sup>12</sup> Christopher Pizzino argues against the grain by criticising the ongoing myth of comics as part of a Bildungsroman process which at some point reaches a degree of maturity. He clearly contradicts the idea that a domineering logic of upward mobility for comics justifies the rebranding as graphic novels. In the same way, any given editorial format should not override the goal of its content and that of the targeted readership. The pursuit of firmly pigeon-holing the graphic objects discussed in this essay may thus readily be dismissed as a false debate, even more so in the context of the flourishing contemporary comics industry in Britain. The

---

<sup>10</sup> Accessed 01/11/2017 <<http://www.sunderlandecho.com/news/news-focus-alice-in-pictureland-1-1132348>>

<sup>11</sup> 15 Oct. 2017. <<http://www.comicsbulletin.com/reviews/118174511492919.htm>>.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Steve Flanagan's review of *Alice in Sunderland* presented as a mashup of Scott McCloud's styled commentary for pages from Talbot's graphic novel, and which also features Rowson's *Tristram Shandy* to illustrate the notion of rambling narratives. 10 Nov. 2017. <<http://gadsircomics.blogspot.fr/2007/04/review-alice-in-sunderland-part-1.html>>

latter, self-consciously or not, remains imbued with a long cultural tradition of heterogeneity, and forms part of a shapeshifting canon in the visual arts as well as in literature. Following that lineage as artists in their own right and not mere adapters, Rowson and Talbot indulge in postmodernist games but equally look back (and up) to graphic mentors as diverse as Hogarth, Gillray, Tenniel, Leo Baxendale or Ralph Steadman. By doing so they continuously and consistently reference their own graphic history and locate it within a larger trend of current shifts in the history of comics in Britain. A case in point is Bryan Talbot's highly condensed three-page *History of British Comics*.<sup>13</sup> Stylistically the layout of the first page looks like one of the pages of his *Alice in Sunderland*. It is eclectic, multi-layered and densely informed. Conversely, Martin Rowson published three volumes entitled *Limerickiad* in which he collects literary landmarks ranging from Shakespeare to Sterne and Woolf. He illustrates each page with a witty cartoon and writes parodic limericks by way of mini biographical blurbs. Artists like Talbot and Rowson are frequently self-referential but they never fail to pay tribute and to encapsulate in their work their own long-lasting graphic culture, one that is steeped in hybridity and praises eccentricity.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ackroyd, Peter. *Albion. The Origins of the British Imagination*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2002.
- Aymes-Stokes, Sophie and Laurent Mellet, eds. *In and Out. Eccentricity in Britain*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012.
- Baetens Jan and Hugo Frey. *The Graphic Novel. An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015.
- Baetens Jan and Hugo Frey. "The Graphic Novel and Literary Fiction: Exchanges, Interplays, and Fusions." *The Graphic Novel. An Introduction*. Eds. Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015. 191-216.
- Bendit Saltzman, Esther. "Novel to Graphic Novel." *The Cambridge Companion to the Graphic Novel*. Ed. Stephen E. Tabachnick. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017. 144-59.
- Boswell, James. *Life of Johnson* [1776]. R. W. Chapman, ed. Oxford: Oxford's World Classics, OUP, 2008.
- Burton, Robert. *The Anatomy of Melancholy* [1621]. Vol. 1. Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicolas K. Kiessling & Rhonda L. Blair, eds. Oxford: Clarendon, 1994.
- Crylen, Jon. "The Importance of Being Excursive: Confronting Adaptation in Martin Rowson's *TristramShandy*." 10 Oct. 2017.  
<[http://departments.knox.edu/engdept/commonroom/Volume\\_Ten/number\\_one/Crylen/index.html](http://departments.knox.edu/engdept/commonroom/Volume_Ten/number_one/Crylen/index.html)>

---

<sup>13</sup> See Talbot's website. 11/11/17. <<http://www.bryan-talbot.com/art/index.php>>.

- DeVoogd, Peter. "Tristram Shandy as Aesthetic Object." *Word and Image* 4. Issue 1 (1988): 383-92.
- Dillard, Leigh. "Drawing Outside the Book: Parallel Illustration and the Building of a Visual Culture." *Book Illustration in the Long Eighteenth Century: Reconfiguring the Visual Periphery of the Text*. Ed. Christina Ionesc. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011. 196-241.
- Fred. *Philémon*. Tome 6. *Simbabbad de Batdad*. Paris : Dargaud, 1974.
- Friant-Kessler, Brigitte. "Visual Sterneana: Graphic Afterlives and a Sense of Infinite Mobility." Special issue "Picturing the Eighteenth-Century Novel Through Time: Illustration, Intermediality, and Adaptation." Eds. Christina Ionescu and Ann Lewis. *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39-4 (2016): 643-62.
- and Lasne Sandra. "La Lettre, l'esprit et l'image : *Tristram Shandy* de Martin Rowson entre texte(s), contexte(s) et hors-texte(s)." *XVII-XVIII. Revue de la société d'études anglo-américaines des XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*. N°62, 2006. Âges de la vie et rites de passage: 241-260. Web. 10 Nov. 2017.
- <[http://www.persee.fr/doc/xvii\\_0291-3798\\_2006\\_num\\_62\\_1\\_2422](http://www.persee.fr/doc/xvii_0291-3798_2006_num_62_1_2422)>
- Green, Matthew. "I don't see what good a book is without pictures or conversations: Imaginary Worlds and Intertextuality in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice in Sunderland*." *Drawn from the Classics. Essays on Graphic Adaptations of Literary Works*. Eds. Stephen Tabachnick and Esther Bendit Saltzman. Jefferson: McFarland, 2015. 110-26.
- Grennan, Simon. *A Theory of Narrative Drawing*. New York: Palgrave, 2017.
- Groensteen, Thierry. *Parodies. La Bande dessinée au second degré*. Paris: Flammarion, 2010.
- , *The Expanding Art of Comics. Ten Modern Masterpieces*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015.
- , *Un objet culturel non identifié*. Angoulême: Editions de l'An 2, 2006.
- Hatchuel, Sarah and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, eds. *Shakespeare on Screen. Richard III*. Rouen: Presses Universitaires de Rouen et du Havre, 2005.
- Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2005.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- , *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Labarre, Nicolas. "Masterpiece Comics, la parodie, le genre et l'adaptation." *Picturing it!*, 05/05/2015. Web. 05 Nov. 2017. <<https://picturing.hypotheses.org/191>>
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art*. New York : Harper & Collins, 1994.
- Murphy, P. J. and Nick Pawliuk, eds. *Beckett in Popular Culture: Essays on a Postmodern Icon*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2016.

- Pier, John. "Metalepsis." *Handbook of Narratology*. Eds. Peter Hühn et al. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009. 190-203.
- . "Metalepsis." *Handbook of Narratology*. vol. 1, 2nd edition. Eds. Peter Hühn et al. Berlin: De Gruyter , 2014. 326-43.
- Pizzino, Christopher. *Arresting Development. Comics at the Boundaries of Literature*. Austin: Texas UP, 2016.
- Richter, David. "Narrativity and Stasis in Martin Rowson's *Tristram Shandy*." *The Shandean* 11 (1999-2000): 70-90.
- Rowson, Martin. "Hyperboling Gravity's Ravelin." *The Shandean* 7 (1995): 62-86.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. New York: Overlook, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Re: Richter." *The Shandean* 11 (1999-2000): 90-91.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "A Comic Book Version of *Tristram Shandy*." *The Shandean* 14 (2003): 105-21.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Giving Offence*. London: Seagull Books, 2009.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Gulliver' Travels, Adapted and Updated*. London : Atlanta Books, 2012.
- Sikoryak, Robert. *Masterpiece Comics*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2009.
- Interview with R. Sikoryak about his *Masterpiece Mini-Comics*. 05 Nov. 2017. <<http://comicsalternative.com/interview-sikoryak/>>
- Stein, Daniel and Jan-Noël Thon, eds. *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels. Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013.
- Tabachnick, Stephen E. and Esther Bendit Saltzman, eds. *Drawn from the Classics. Essays on Graphic Adaptations of Literary Works*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2015.
- Tabachnick, Stephen E., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Graphic Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017
- Talbot, Bryan. *Alice in Sunderland. An Entertainment*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2007.
- The New York Comics & Picture-Story Symposium. Interview with R. Sikoryak and K. Willbert by Andrea Tsurumi on 2nd Aug. 2013. Web. 05 Nov. 2017. <<http://therumpus.net/2013/08/the-new-york-comics-symposium-interview-with-r-sikoryak-kriota-willberg/>>