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Looking beyond the Scenes: Spatial Storytelling and Masking in Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*

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From the moment readers pick up Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, they are invited to step into an immersive and subversive visual narrative. The cover has the appearance of a worn leather scrapbook onto which a black and white photograph is affixed. This photograph depicts a man carrying a suitcase, stooping to inspect a white, four-legged creature with a long tail. The man resembles someone captured in an early twentieth-century photograph, complete with suit and hat and suitcase secured by a strap. The white creature, however, with its unshelled-pistachio-shaped body and cartoonish appearance, seems out of place when set within the book cover's otherwise photorealistic art. This juxtaposition is the first hint that the reader is entering a visual world in which the familiar and the surprising coexist.

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Throughout the book, the reader's eye is invited to look beyond the characters that populate the story in order to explore the subtle, yet significant, peripheries and settings in which these characters are placed. Tan's settings offer readers of all ages some of the most compelling sites of interpretation in the visual narrative.

Masking and Spatial Storytelling Devices in *The Arrival*

In addition to the story's content, *The Arrival*'s composition is important. Panels in the text come in a multitude of sizes and contain an equally diverse range of subject matter. Many of the smaller panels feature extreme close-ups of hands and faces (see pages 28–29) or specific repeated images (such as the clouds on pages 16–17). Meanwhile, many of the larger panels comprise intricate compositions with vanishing points and a clear sense of foreground, middle ground and background, and they showcase cityscapes, seascapes, countrysides, and vast interiors. There are certain patterns of detail, especially within the larger panels (such as the vacuum-wielding giants on pages 66–67) that are not clearly understood and, in our experience, invite the most attention.

Our study of backgrounds and spatial storytelling devices in *The Arrival* began in English 2367, a second-level honors composition course at The Ohio State University, piqued our scholarly curiosity. The course theme was immigration and newcomer identity. Early in the semester, we read Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* as context to study of Tan's *The Arrival*. During class discussions, we noticed how students were frequently drawn to investigate the settings in the graphic narrative. One section that particularly drew students' interest depicts a man and a woman fleeing from a city that is in flames and being attacked by what look like vacuum-wielding giants. The escapees pay a man with a piece of jewelry to show them an escape route through a sewer. They emerge from the underground into a landscape that is planar and vast, all sharp corners and tall walls.

Students were so intrigued by this section that we spent a majority of class time analyzing it. They offered many interpretations of these images, but the most frequent analysis was that this mini-narrative depicted the Holocaust. One student suggested that the giants represented the Nazis. Another student considered the almost cubist escape route the couple follows to be a reference

to the art of the 1930s and 1940s. Still other students suggested science-fiction-inspired readings in which aliens arrive and destroy the planet save for a few lucky survivors. The debate swirled and each student was able to point to textual details that underpinned a grounded argument of "what this story is *really* about." Most revealing was the level of detail students were willing to parse to build their readings. Toward the end of our discussion, one student, Hayley Kick, synthesized what had just happened. She suggested, rightly, that it was important that we were not as concerned with the *people* in the story as we were in the *backgrounds*.

In this study we propose a new application of the comics term "masked" to backgrounds rather than to characters. The traditional usage of the concept of masking is explained by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics*. He suggests that one method by which readers intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically connect with a graphic narrative is by being able to imagine themselves within the world on the page. McCloud explains that graphic narratives are welcoming spaces in part because characters, especially in cartoons, are often masked, or rendered abstractly enough to avoid easy classification. These characters can then serve as "an empty shell that we inhabit that enables us to travel to another realm" (36). McCloud describes a style of masking in which simplistically drawn characters are placed against "unusually realistic backgrounds." He argues that "this combination allows readers to mask themselves in a character and safely enter a sensually stimulating world" (43).

Something different is happening in Tan's mode of graphic storytelling.³ Whereas one could argue that creatures in *The Arrival* might be considered masked (such as the animal on the cover, which seems not unlike a character from Jeff Smith's *Bone* series), Tan's people are rendered in photorealistic detail. These human characters are so clearly unique that the reader is not encouraged to easily mask him-or herself in them. Instead, the characters' highly realistic appearance helps readers gain purchase and a sense of the familiar in a world that is often strange, intriguing, and unfamiliar. This is a new application of the principle of comics masking, wherein Tan's graphic narrative invites "arrivees" to explore the way hyper-realistic characters are incorporated within attention-grabbing, masked spatial contexts.

If, according to McCloud, the characters in comics can become vessels through which multiple readers might imagine themselves in a clearly delineated world, we propose that *The Arrival*'s clearly delineated characters act more like guides to the book's unfamiliar, often fantastical settings. Caitlin McGurk, Associate Curator, Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum, explains one precedent for how comics artists direct the reader's gaze. In a talk about the museum's collections, she uses an example of Ernie Bushmiller's *Nancy* (a comic strip originating in the 1930s) to show how the placement of

spot-blacks and angle of a character's gaze and gestures pull a reader's eyes from panel to panel. Tan's characters likewise direct through their gaze and expressions, as well as through body language. In so doing, these characters encourage readers to travel with them through settings that are just familiar enough to be accessible, but just fantastical enough to seem foreign—settings that become sites of the most complex interpretation in the narrative.

John Berger, in *Ways of Seeing*, suggests, "When we 'see' a landscape, we situate ourselves in it" (11). This act of situating the self with respect to the visual landscape of the story is especially important in *The Arrival*. Berger suggests that when we perceive art, "we never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relations between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are" (9). This dynamic interplay between details in the visual narrative and the reader's perception of them is central to our theory.

For the purposes of this study, we use the term "setting" to denote several contexts into which Tan's characters are placed. The first of these contexts includes the detailed worlds in the book's larger panels (such as the one that features vacuum-wielding giants). The second context is the visual space on the page that surrounds (or frames) each panel—these spaces sometimes have the appearance of crumpled paper and at different points in the narrative the page colors alternate from white to gray or black. We also consider the narrative context that surrounds the character in the larger story.
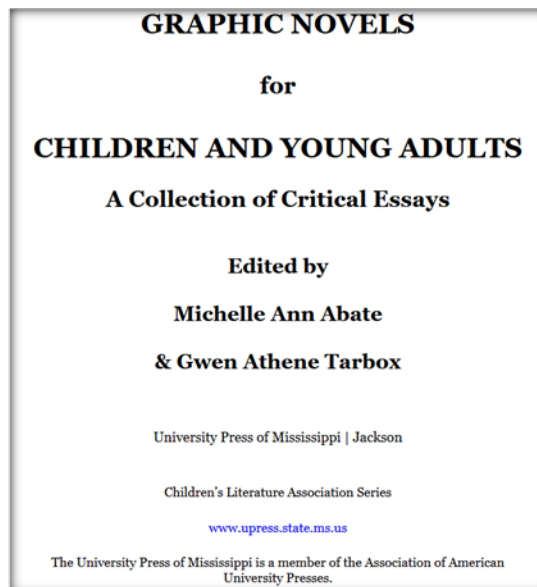
Tan's use of photorealism for his illustration style in *The Arrival* merits some commentary. His visual narratives sometimes include collage (*Distant Rain*), occasionally incorporate found objects (*The Lost Thing, Eric*), and most often feature text embedded within illustrations (*The Red Tree*). In *The Arrival*, however, the use of collage is minimal. Readers find, for example, a variety of small tickets, official stamps, and inspection cards in the title pages.[4] Another example of collage-esque illustration appears in the back of the book where the "Artist's Note" appears to be printed directly on crumpled paper that features a child's drawing of a house. Even when used minimally, these collages highlight Tan's formula of mixing the familiar (birth certificate) and strange (title lettering) to surprise and unsettle the reader in his graphic narratives. The majority of such visual cues in *The Arrival*, however, are more subtle, and appear at the margins of the panels themselves.

In his foreword to Evelyn Arizpe, Teresa Colomer, and Carmen Martinez-Roldán's *Visual Journeys through Wordless Narratives*, Shaun Tan speaks of a process he describes as "open reading." He explains that "any good act of creativity is fundamentally an act of sharing and co-creation" and, in terms of scene, writes, "As a creator, you provide a little architecture, build some

imaginary walls, add a few furnishings, then wait for an anonymous visitor to arrive." The titular "arrival," then, offers an invitation to the reader, whom Tan likens to the "conversationalist" who arrives via his or her engagement in co-producing what Tan calls "free-roaming interpretations." One of *The Arrival*'s chief pleasures for readers of any age is this continual navigation between the identity of the individual who is encountering the text and the world that is being presented on the page.

Book available for purchase on Kindle, hardcover, and paperback.