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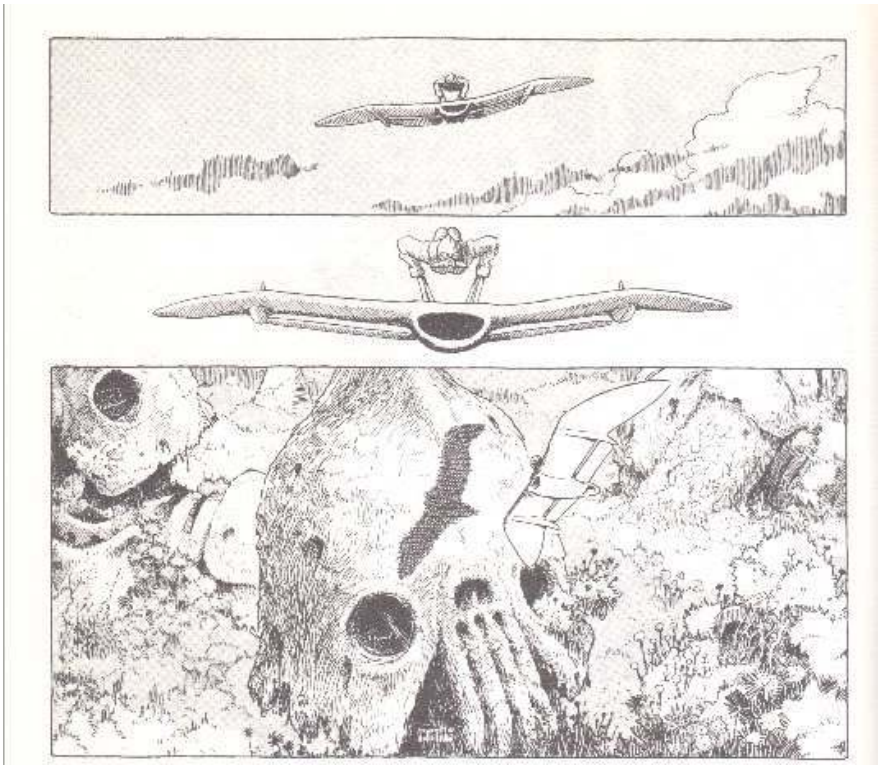
1 Wordless comic books, like the bas-relief decorations in Catholic churches, use a fundamental mode of graphic representation to trigger a primitive, instinctive deciphering. In the days before compulsory education, any illiterate peasant would have been able to grasp why the naked bodies of sinners were held, powerless and grimacing, under the spell of Jesus' left hand. Their meandering gaze only had to compare them with what was depicted on the other side of the bas-relief, under the Saviour's right hand, to grasp the general, symmetrical yet contrasting intent.

2 Within a social group sharing cultural and visual references, the interplay of symbolism and body language requires no linguistic help, no translation, or exterior interpretation. As a result this purely visual communication is thought to be accessible, or best adapted, to children, illiterates and foreigners. The deciphering of this peculiar form of communication – translating images into a verbal narrative – is similarly associated with a guessing game: a classroom exercise or a gratuitous entertainment. That might be why wordless comics are condescendingly associated with children's literature, and often thematically linked to emigration and travelling.

3 Wordless graphic narration in comics is therefore the object of this study, which aims to dispel any belittling claims that it exclusively belongs in the nursery or the classroom – that a graphic novel is not a picture book. When the narrative thread is yielded to the reader, the mute graphic story enables a process of appropriation – a simultaneous creation and translation – that opens up the reader's imagination to the extent that several levels of interpretation may coexist. To better allow this process to be analysed, two wordless graphic novels will be discussed – Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*[1] and Winschluss aka Vincent Paronnaud's *Pinocchio*[2]. Both works display a similar concern for travelling and translation, with differing techniques of representation and highly contrasted moral aims. The first might be said to represent heaven, and the second, hell, in the all-powerful hands of the reader.

Wordless narration

4 It might be useful to start this study with an overview of wordless narration in traditional (or mainstream) forms of graphic novel wherein the reader will encounter linguistics signs. Within this context, wordless passages may be said to serve as expositions – narrative descriptions establishing a setting for the hero to step into; bringing about a contemplative pause in the otherwise fast-paced narration. The opening page of *Nausicaa*[3] is a case in point – Miyazaki introduces the protagonists, the heroine silently gliding in the air over a luxuriant post-apocalyptic forest. Such an opening scene is highly proleptic and fraught with symbolism: Nausicaa spends most of the seven volumes aboard a variety of flying contraptions attempting to protect and pacify the strange ecosystem beneath her that is resisting the destruction wrought by her fellow humans.



[Illustration 1: opening page of Miyazaki's, *Nausicä*, Paris, Glénat, 2000. first volume, p. 1]

5 If graphic novels are not silent but speaking, as it were, their pages may represent an attempt to express precisely the opposite, *i.e.* the unspeakable – what lies beyond words or understanding. One could quote the many wordless pages of Hokusai's imagined biography by Shôtarô Ishonomori, whereby the author strives to materialize the moments when the painter and engraver experiences sudden inspiration.

6 Pictures devoid of speech bubbles on a page may also serve to convey the emotional power of body language, thanks to which linguistic signs may be dispensed with. The eloquence and economy of expression, when a clear message is condensed within a telltale look, turn of the hand or tilt of the head, may already be found in earlier, and hence more classical forms of artistic representation. The interplay of glances or ogles cast from one character to another in Georges de La Tour's paintings may be said to anticipate Sergio Leone's famous ocular duels – those increasingly close shots of frowning

actors' eyes. Needless to say, graphic novelists naturally exploit this type of body language, just as they discard any superfluous comment or dialogue during highly kinetic passages – combat scenes, chases, travels, the use of vehicles and all means of displacement. They thus exploit a set of semantic tools that pertain to a pre-linguistic form of communication (body language, mime, onomatopoeia) and revel in the expressivity of motion – which here may call to mind the above-mentioned target audience of children, illiterates and foreigners.

7 Whenever the interior monologue of the narrator blanks out, this appears to signal that something – a semantic content deprived of linguistic signifier – takes precedence, either because it can be considered to be more important, or because words prove to be inadequate to express it; too slow, too clumsy or plainly helpless. Wordless comics can therefore be said to highlight the vapidity or uselessness of what they do without, as well as the narrative and signifying power of visual language.

8 In what is considered to be the first ever graphic novel, either because it used a new form of visual expression or because it came about as a natural evolution of comics, the reader faces a total absence of linguistic signs: Lynd Ward, who published a series of engravings between 1929 and 1937, presented to his readers a series of connected pictures, in a starkly contrasted style, harking back to the visual fables or allegories of eighteenth-century engravings.



[Illustration 2: Lynd Ward's *Madman's Drum*, London, Cape & Smith, 1930]

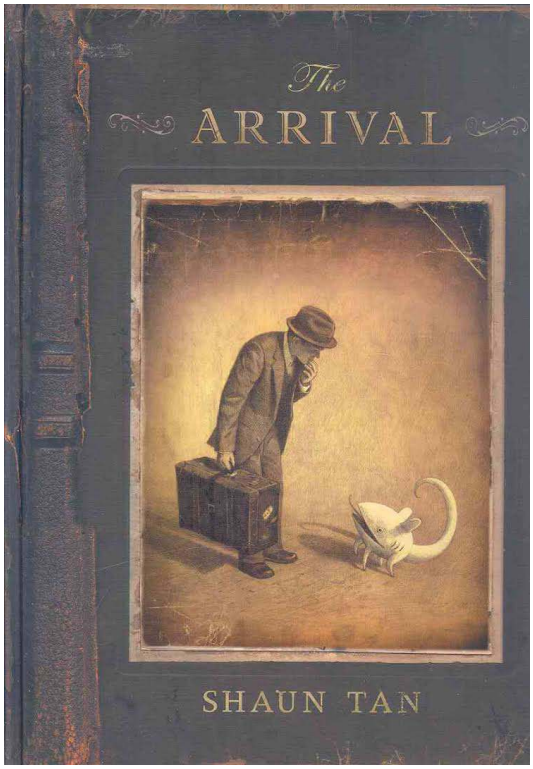
9 In the *Madman's Drum*[4], Lynd Ward plays on a set of visual references including other famous engravers before him – the solemn figures of Blake's allegories; the stark, deliberate contrasts of Hogarthian progresses which highlight a moral and narrative circularity. Lynd Ward's wordless narratives are not as minutely paced as modern comics are, and his images resemble more a series of illustrations for a lost or yet unpublished story; however the author might be considered as a forerunner of wordless graphic novels since he already delegates the responsibility of narrating the story to the reader. Such a fact radically alters the nature of reading – the reader's pleasure is fundamentally different from the gratification provided by a more orthodox comic book as it derives from a personal elaboration or phantasm of what the graphic novel means. The reader, as it were, appropriates the work he or she is reading, uprooting and resettling it in the personal realm of his or her fantasy.

Visualising displacement – Shaun Tan's short cuts

10 A case in point of such a process of transposition is Shaun Tan's 2006 graphic novel *The Arrival.* The author set himself the paradoxical task of representing (mis)communication, displacement and translation in a way that entirely dispenses with words. The forceful eloquence of his work attests to his success. The only part of *The Arrival* that requires translation is its title. The rest may be read by anyone regardless of his or her nationality. The plot, interestingly, centres on a father-of-one who is forced to leave his native land, mother tongue and wife to obtain employment, friends and freedom in a strange new land before finally being allowed to re-form, or re-found, his family, thus severing his ties with his homeland forever. Shaun Tan's decision to discard words, cut all linguistic ties so as to circumvent verbal narration opens up a new narrative frame wherein no narrator, external or internal focalisation can be perceived; no dialogue or authoritative voiceover can be heard. A new land, as it were, in which the resounding silence of an absent narrator leaves room for the story to thrive in the reader's imagination.

11 Shaun Tan himself, as he reminded the audience of the 33rd IBBY Congress in London, on August 2012[5], is the product of similar cultural and geographic displacements – his father, a Chinese student whose family had emigrated to Malaysia, settled in Australia after his marriage to the great-grand-daughter of an immigrant who had arrived in Australia as an orphan child with no recorded background – the influence of which he acknowledges in the genesis of what he calls a "universal migration story" (20:33).

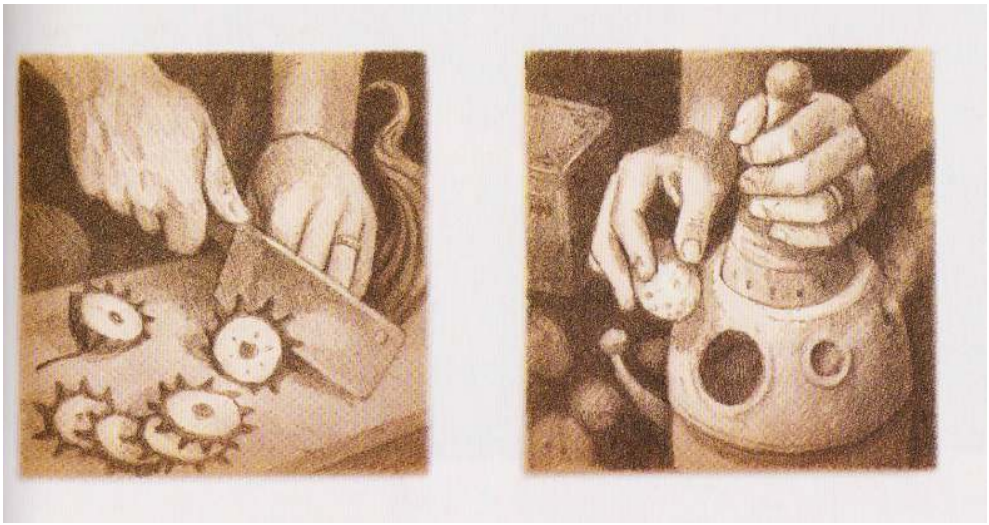
12 Shaun Tan's intention is therefore to tell a story, from the point of view of an everyman hero, without conveying any national, spatial or temporal references, but without drifting towards utter abstraction and allegory either. He lists as probable and unconscious influences the lack of genealogy in his family, the history of Australia (with the erasure of Aboriginal past, culture and language, several generations of children lost to orphanages and foster homes), and the Australian climate itself, that causes an evaporation of "language under the sun."(8:29) From this context, it is understandable that Shaun Tan should define the crossing of boundaries as a universal condition and the nexus of any fiction. He thus quotes the key concept of "bewilderment" (24:33), which he defines as the achievement of a process wherein, he, as an author, deliberately perplexes his readers.



[Illustration 3: *The Arrival*, New York, Arthur A. Levine Books, 2007; Shaun Tan's cover picture, with the immigrant everyman staring at his new pet in bewilderment]

13 Shaun Tan has deliberately structured his work as a question mark, providing no lead and no interpretation. If bewilderment functions as a positive motivation for wordless narration, a second, negative incitement might be said to reside in his distrust of language. The rather reserved (by his own admission) author thus explains that "this is one thing that attracted me to painting and drawing as a child, the fact that you can represent things without words, it sometimes feels like a more accurate way of showing things." (9:23)? He even feels reluctant to attribute titles to his works, for fear of suggesting, and hence imposing, a semantic frontier on the reader. Shaun Tan's bewildering visuals stem from a surrealist inspiration and depict an interior,

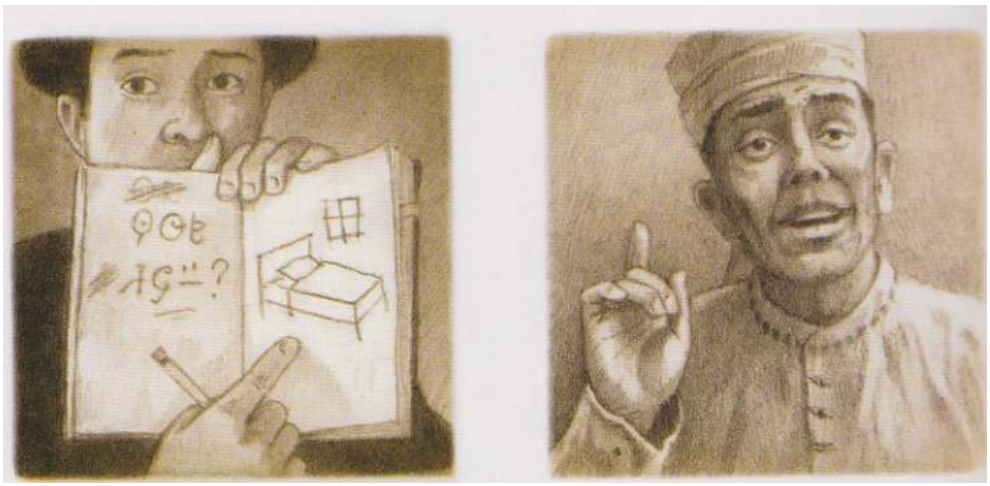
idiosyncratic world where architecture, food, language, nature and family are "flexible realities" (16:43).



[Illustration 4: *The Arrival*, New York, Arthur A. Levine Books, 2007]

14 Since what is here chopped, heated, and, who knows, ground, may be animal or vegetable, dead or alive, edible or poisonous, the reader's initial and instinctive response to such a representation – and the close-up allows no cool, distant viewing – must be distrust or at the very least caution, rather than hungry curiosity. To place the reader in the shoes of a recently arrived emigrant, Shaun Tan thus stages an exotic, unexpected, and at times violently alien environment, inducing an impression of uprooting or displacement, akin to the moment when a translation takes place. When an idea migrates from one system of linguistic signs to another, it provides a pivotal opening of the mind to new semantic delineations, to novel ways of perceiving and conceptualizing a single reality.

15 Without the medium of words, communication is depicted from an external point of view – as an outsider might see it. Body language and hand signs convey primordial messages. The deixis of objects and body parts (counting on fingers, hand resting on the heart, holding one's chin, rubbing one's forehead and so on) may here remind the reader of the exaggerated acting in silent films. And, if all else fails, Shaun Tan playfully suggests drawing as the most efficient means of communication.



[Illustration 5: *The Arrival*, New York, Arthur A. Levine Books, 2007]

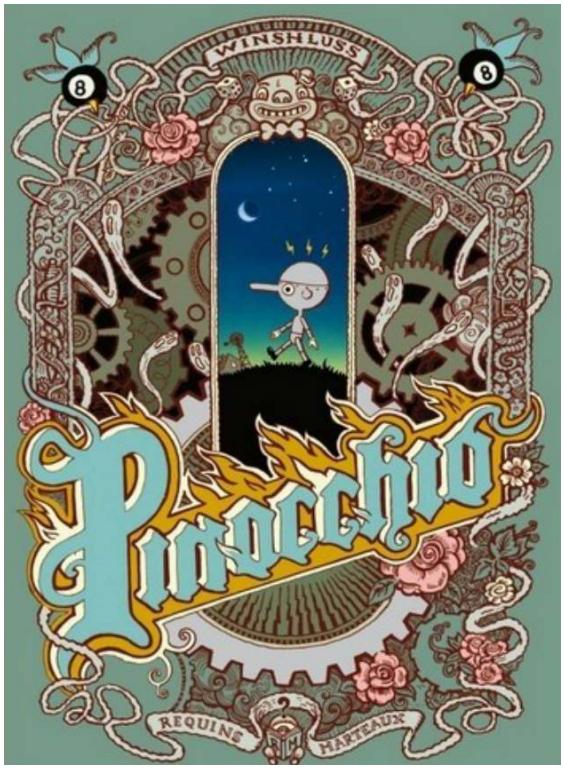
16 *The Arrival* may be said to unite exertion and gratification, like a visual crossword to be deciphered, strip by strip. In the above-quoted conference, Shaun Tan mentions that he devoted several years to the study of the history of art and that he has reached a conclusion, or theory of æsthetic perception : "Meaning comes primarily from feeling : the real answers are not in the work, [...] but in the reader's contemplation of their own reactions"(34:51). According to this liberating principle which Tan naturally applies to his work, the creator offers his work to the public eye and stands aside, relieved of the responsibility of establishing meaning; like a psychotherapist holding out a particularly beautiful Rorschach test.

17 Readers will then, according to their age, experience and the extent of their visual culture, analyse and interpret Tan's images, recognize patterns, identify references or feel the peculiar hold of *déjà-vu* – photographs of immigrants, queuing or sitting before the camera on Ellis Island, or looking expectantly from the boat at the Statue of Liberty towering over a welcoming city. When Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* is visually invoked to depict the hero's first employment, the quotation remains unobtrusive, accessible yet understated, to be grasped or not noticed.

18 Shaun Tan's silence conjures up a self-effacing narrator, effortlessly mixing internal focalization – the everyman hero's intimate thoughts materialising like hallucinations – with the gaze of an omniscient eye hovering above the city. The absolute freedom with which *The Arrival* may be read allows for as many interpretations and emotional translations as there are individuals comparing their own experience of migration to the story they are reading – a dizzying multiplicity of semantic levels, each containing the other, in an infinite *mise en abyme.*

Silent circularity – Winschluss' *Pinocchio*

19 In a world far removed from the fundamentally optimistic narrative of *The Arrival*, a hero wanders through land and ocean in a quest for meaning and stability. *Pinocchio*, published in 2008 by Winschluss (Vincent Paronnaud), pitches Pinocchio, a diminutive, mute yet resilient robot, against the perils and temptations of a disquieting wheel of Fortune. In this wordless, circular progress, whatever quest the hero and the rest of the characters have embarked on – seeking truth, identity, love or fame – will reach a deceptive, disappointing, or transient outcome. Everything and everyone come to no good. Satisfaction is thwarted, domestic bliss marred, and evils, though temporarily unbalanced, remain unchanged. Pinocchio wades through this morass of a world like a blissfully ignorant harbinger of doom, and, like the seed of doubt that he is, wreaks havoc in the (at least eight) concentric circles of the narrative. This wordless graphic novel may be read as a narrative feat, a paradoxically raucous theatre of shadows and distorting mirrors. Rather than a translation or horizontal journey from one world to another enacted by an eager traveller, this is a vertical dislocation of reality, whereby the world and its inhabitants are cast into dystopia, into the underworld of hell.



[Illustration 6: Winschluss, *Pinocchio*, Paris, Les Requins Marteaux, 2007 ; the circular cover of *Pinocchio*, where the progress of the machine-hero appears as unstoppable as clockwork]

20 The strategy of representation elected by the author is here precisely the opposite of Shaun Tan's. Pinocchio's journey is not enacted in a dimension that aspires to be exotic or universal. The reality that is drawn does not intend to bewilder the reader by its strangeness. Instead, the author uses and subverts the ordinary: the visual codes, cultural figures, literary references or historical facts we are accustomed to. This subversion places the reader in a situation where familiarity no longer implies knowledge or truth. This unspoken distance between our reality and Pinocchio's nightmare may be said to produce a purely visual form of irony.

21 And the author has faithfully kept track of the original fable. The primary source is clearly echoed in ironic, deceptive faithfulness. Geppetto creates Pinocchio in the form of a child, who meets with variously nefarious and amusing protagonists, some of whom hang him from a tree. Pinocchio's nose appears to be magic and potently endowed with the ability to reveal the truth. Pinocchio travels to Toyland where he is mistreated, then thrown into the sea. Swallowed by a giant whale, he meets his maker again. After his escape and return home, he is transformed into a real boy, by dint of his now honest endeavours.

22 This summary of the original fable is also that of Winschluss' book, except that any possible semantic twist is enacted to subvert the moral message of the primary source. Geppetto's creativity is not motivated by a desire for progeny, nor is he eager to save Pinocchio when he sets out to find him again. As his name implies – Geppetto being a derivation of Joseph, another problematic father figure – he cannot entirely own Pinocchio as his own creation, since by a stroke of fate and the help of an obnoxious, drunkard, talking cockroach (rather than a cricket), Pinocchio suddenly acquires a consciousness and the urge to travel, thus thwarting his creator's dream of selling him to

the army for a sizeable profit, or, if possible, mass-producing him for the same purpose. Pinocchio's nose does not change in size according to what he utters, since he is not shown to speak; but his nose nevertheless points to the bleak, straightforward truth of death and desire, when, on one occasion, arousing lust, it is mistaken for a sex toy, and simultaneously becomes a fire-engulfing weapon of mass destruction, or flame-thrower. Likewise, Toyland is turned into a decomposing dictatorship, rotten to the core, like the pastries and sweets ornamenting the city. Similarly, when Pinocchio finds an employment, he is the kidnapped victim of an exploitative toy-making factory owner. As a result, Winschluss' Pinocchio does not achieve humanity – only in his creator's nightmares and the delusional mind of his adopted mother is he turned into rosy flesh and blood. Pinocchio remains until the end a materialization of the other characters' desperate desires. Forever objectified, he never quite achieves the status and identity of an individual.

23 The traditional archetypes of the fable are preserved in the eight quests pursued in the eight different narratives. The search for family ties makes up most of the dynamics of the plot, that is, Pinocchio's hankering after a father figure or Geppetto's obsession with his creation or mechanical son. The other characters yearn for truth (the suicidal detective investigating the gruesome demise of Gepetto's wife), perfection and love – even the seven dwarfs obey this rule, in their own warped way, with their morbid fixation on Snow White that leads them to perform the most un-fairy-tales-like acts. Thus in this impressive, polyphonic subversion of at least eight tales (taken from popular fiction, folklore, or even the Bible), the author exploits the symbolic and kinetic potential of travelling – a train, a dirigible, a boat, a giant aquatic yet inhabitable monster, and a missile-turned-aircraft whisk the hero about, fulfilling the circular promise of the album cover, highlighting the unstoppable progress of an indestructible automaton.

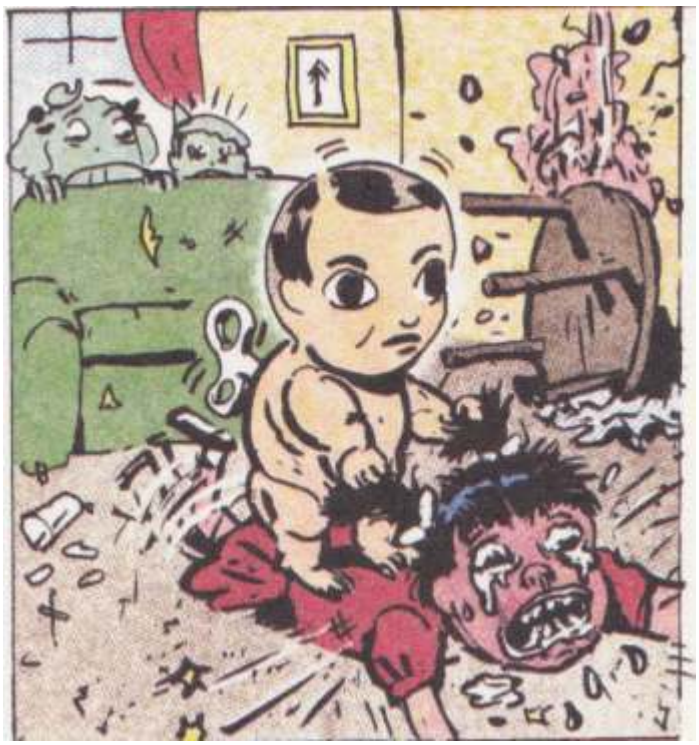
24 Such progress is therefore not just a transformation of the myth, but its adaptation, from a source text to an entirely visual medium. When analysing the visual translation of books into films, critics have devised interesting concepts so as to avoid the fundamentally barren debate of faithfulness. Needless to say, Winschluss has no desire to reflect the story of Pinocchio to the letter, but rather aims to provide an entirely subverted, appropriated version peopled by his own phantasms and obsessions. John Wiltshire, writing on the adaptation of Jane Austen's novels to the screen, offers the comfortably neutral and comprehensive notion of "transcoding[6]" which allows a narrative content to move from one system of sign to another.

25 Thus the transcoding of Pinocchio is achieved through subversion, but also thanks to an added translation – the author depicts his characters in time, as they undergo a natural process of ageing or decay, inching towards or collapsing into degeneration or putrescence. The giant whale of the original tale is not only monstrous in this version, but also the product of a process of radioactive mutation, triggered when, as a small, unexceptionable fish, it nibbled on a leaking, glowing tub. An alcoholic avatar of Chandler's private investigator Marlowe slowly sinks into a suicidal monologue; Geppetto loses his dapper suit and ambition in the cavernous intestinal tracts of a mutant fish only to crawl back to civilisation a bearded, broken man in rags. Even innocent Snow White is divested of her well-known garb, her sternum marred by the scar of a heart transplant: all organic characters evolve, decay and die. Only unalterable Pinocchio stems the tide of this organic mutation, thus evolving into a somewhat disquieting hero – unblinking, unchanging, and emotionless.

26 Robert Stam and Alessandra Raego argue the case for the mutation of stories into new forms of mediation, using the scientific sense of the word "adaptation" to support this optimistic interpretation:

> We can see filmic adaptations as "mutations" that help their source novel "survive." Do not adaptations "adapt to changing environments and changing tastes, as well as to a new medium, with its distinct industrial demands, commercial pressures, censorship taboos, and aesthetic norms? And are not adaptations a hybrid form[7] [...]?"

27 The reader may react in disgust or paradoxical joy to such hybridity, or such eccentric mutation, yet even these at times squalid metamorphoses enable Pinocchio to echo the issues and debates of our current environment – political corruption and authoritarianism, pollution, child labour and other authentically distasteful realities. The healthy energy of destruction is instilled in the depiction of our social codes and hypocritical façades – the neatness of suburban life, the brutal jollity of a theme park, the deceptively simple joy of opening expensive presents on your birthday – all are shattered to painful pieces, without a word printed. One may even wonder if the purpose of mechanical toys, such as Pinocchio and his ilk, be not that of a corrective scourge, the punisher of corrupted men and spoilt children.



[Illustration 7: Winschluss, *Pinocchio*, Paris, Les Requins Marteaux, 2007]

28 The freedom to interpret and word this chaos thus belongs to the reader, and, as foretold by Shaun Tan's theory, the reader is responsible for the meaning of the story. Whether he or she will decipher the transcoded archetypes, the humorous nods to classical painting, or the visual references to other graphic novels and films (Tezuka's *Astroboy*, or the impassive robot of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*) is entirely up to the audience. Winschluss made Pinocchio an expressionless, almost hollow shell, as if to warn that the search for meaning is, like the other quests in his work, doomed to failure, as nothing but cogs and

machinery lie hidden under Pinocchio's metallic chest-plate, or behind his round, eternally waking eyes.

29 Very much like the source text, Winschluss' visual fable does not bring Pinocchio back to his original, oblivious innocence. The reader may entertain doubts as to the perfection of the happy end in his case – coddled and treated like a son by the deluded wife of an indulgent farmer. Pinocchio's sleeplessness attests to the narrative restlessness depicted throughout the graphic novel. Rather than a circle, this narrative is shaped like a perpetually moving spiral, rife with unsolved contradictions, open to interpretation.

30 Wordless graphic novels are fundamentally and purposely incomplete. They thwart their readers' desire for meaning and stimulate their creativity. To convey a narrative they resort to the same visual language that may be experienced in dreams: an interplay of body language, symbolism, unexpected mutations and subversions, unimpeded by a narrator's monologue, or stage directions. Therein lies their narrative impact, their enduring and wide-reaching appeal.

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Filmography

https://youtu.be/kUJlNRAnnUI Shaun Tan speaking at the 33rd IBBY Congress in London, August 2012.

NOTES

1. Shaun Tan, *The Arrival*, New York, Arthur A. Levine Books, 2007.
2. Winschluss, *Pinocchio*, Paris, Les Requins Marteaux, 2008.
3. Hayao Miyazaki, *Nausicaä*, vol. I, p. 1, Paris, Glénat, [1983] 2000.
4. Lynd Ward, *The Madman's Drum*, London, Cape & Smith, 1930.
5. https://youtu.be/kUJlNRAnnUI video last accessed on November 19, 2015.
6. The very obvious points that films and television serials are predominantly visual media, that they must largely therefore signify emotion by symbols, by expression and action, that the interiority of their characters is represented through such signs rather than the immersed

reader's imagination, are all factors that have cultural and ideological implications [...]. **Transcoding** from one to the other system of signs may involve effects that, in some instances, are incommensurate [my emphasis]. John Wiltshire, *Recreating Jane Austen,* Cambridge, CUP, 2001, p. 4

7. *Literature and Film,* eds. Robert Stam, Alessandra Raengo, Oxford, Blackwell, 1979, p. 3.

ABSTRACTS

The potential expressiveness of a type of wordless comics is paradoxical. Having relinquished the medium of language, only the image, divided into narrative units on the page, is allowed to convey a semantic content to the readers, a content that may be greater than that of traditional comics, since the space cleared up by the absence of dialogue or narratorial comments allows the reader to find a foothold in the visual universes of Shaun Tan and Winschluss. The reader may thus appropriate both the image and the narrative, all the more relevantly as both works represent the process of transcoding experienced during migration and adaptation.

La potentialité expressive d'un type de bande dessinée dite « muette » ou sans parole relève du paradoxe. Sans le medium du mot, le dessin seul et les découpages des cases transmettent un contenu sémantique aux lecteurs que l'on peut qualifier de supérieur à celui de la bande dessinée dite traditionnelle ou « parlante ». L'espace libéré par l'absence de bulles ou des interventions du narrateur permet au lecteur de trouver sa place dans les univers visuels de Shaun Tan ou Winschluss, dont les deux œuvres représentent le transfert sémantique né de l'expérience de la migration et de l'adaptation.

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Mots-clés: migration, adaptation, traduction, narration, bande dessinée muette
Keywords: migration, adaptation, transcoding, narrative, wordless comics

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