CHAPTER

12

Graphic Fiction

Letters and Pictures

Literature is, literally speaking, made out of letters ("literature," "literally," "literate," and "letters" all come from a Latin word, *littera*, "letter"). A person who can read letters is literate. Yet today we hear a good deal about "visual literacy," which means the ability to understand visual things. In short, in this usage, "literacy" is metaphoric. You cannot literally (again that word!) read a picture; you can look at it and either understand it or not understand it. For the next few minutes, in order to help prepare you to read a story that is partly told by means of pictures, we will be talking about achieving visual literacy—that is, achieving the ability to understand pictures, to "read" pictures, specifically pictures that are used as part of a way of telling stories.

The good news is that if you have spent any time at all looking at comic strips you already know a great deal about how to "read" pictures that tell stories.

- You know, for instance, that you should read the pictures and the words from left to right (if you were brought up in China or Japan, you would begin at the right and read the first column downward, then the next column, again reading downward, unless the book were a Western-style book).
- You also know that in the usual comic strip a box represents a particular scene; the next box may show the same characters, but at a later moment in time.
- You know that human actions can be conveyed by showing figures in certain postures (walking, eating, etc.) making certain gestures (pointing, making a fist).
- You know that emotions can be conveyed by facial expressions (think Smiley Face, where two dots and a curve say it all).
- You know that the setting can easily be established (a tree indicates the outdoors, the Capitol indicates Washington, D.C.).
- You know that if a heavy object is shown on the ground with the word "bang" in large thick letters next to it, a character has just dropped the object.

- You know that words that are enclosed in a circle over the character's head indicate words that the character is speaking.
- You know that a character is cursing or using dirty language when words are represented not by letters but by symbols such as @ and # and !
- You know that if the line that encloses words is scalloped, or looks something like a cloud, the words represent *thoughts* rather than utterances.

In short, you know the conventions that enable you to understand what the cartoonist/storyteller is doing, is saying, so that you can follow the story, the narrative conveyed by words and pictures. All of which says that you are already visually literate.

Nevertheless, because you may not have developed the habit of reading images closely, of taking in all the subtleties that they may offer, we will talk a bit about reading pictures.

The first thing we want to say is that although in some contexts a picture is worth a thousand words, pictures are not very good at telling *stories*. Think of any familiar story—let's say the story of Cain and Abel, or of Cinderella, or (to take an example in our text) the story of King Solomon and the two women who disputed about who was the mother of an infant. Solomon ordered a servant to bring the sword, and to divide the living child so that each woman could have half. A sword was brought, and (here we give the translated text in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible)

> then the woman whose son was alive said to the king, because her heart yearned for her son, "Oh, no my lord, give her [i.e., the other woman] the living child, and by no means slay it." But the other said, "It shall be neither mine nor yours: divide it." Then the king answered and said, "Give the living child to the first woman, and by no means slay it; she is its mother." (I Kings 3.26–27)

Striking images come to mind when reading this story—for instance, an image of two women quarreling over an infant, an image of a servant entering with a massive sword, and an image of the infant being handed over to one woman. But we think it would be impossible by images alone to tell the story, which essentially causes the reader to draw two conclusions:

- A loving mother will give up a child rather than let it die, and
- Solomon was a wise judge.

Tradition says that in the Middle Ages, when most people were illiterate, pictures such as those in stained glass windows were "the Bible of the people," and these windows did tell stories—but the stories could be understood only if the viewers were already familiar with verbal tellings. Similarly, such narratives as those told on Trajan's Column (built 113 CE), adorned with images of the Roman emperor's victories, or the Bayeux Tapestry (late eleventh century, showing the French invasion of England) show us lots of energetic figures, but to *understand* what is going on, we must already know the story.

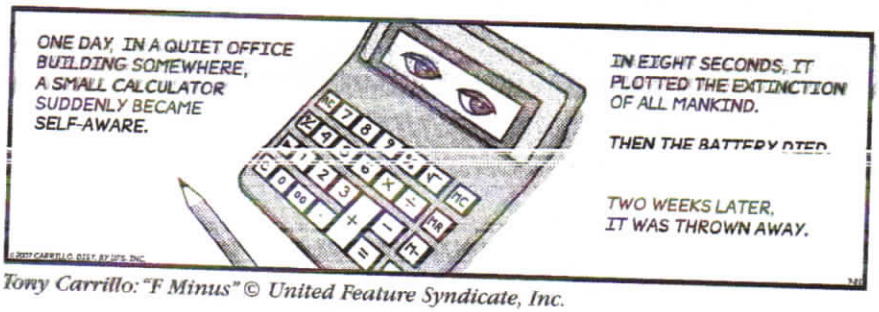
Still, pictures can communicate meanings, and so let's now look at a picture that is accompanied by words.

Reading an Image: A Short Story Told in One Panel

TONY CARRILLO

Tony Carrillo was born and raised in Tempe, Arizona. He conceived F Minus *when he was a sophomore at Arizona State University. The strip is currently syndicated in more than a hundred newspapers.*

F Minus



Tony Carrillo: "F Minus" © *United Feature Syndicate, Inc.*

For the moment, let's pretend that the picture didn't exist, and we were given only some text:

> One day, in a quiet office building somewhere, a small calculator suddenly became self-aware.
> In eight seconds, it plotted the extinction of all mankind.
> Then the battery died.
> Two weeks later, it was thrown away.

We don't want to make extravagant claims, but we think this is pretty good as a mini-sci-fi story. We hear much about the possibility that some day there may be machines that "think," and we hear even more about technology getting out of control and possibly destroying its creators. In the words of Elias Canetti,[1] "The planet's survival has become so uncertain that any effort, any thought that presupposes an assured future amounts to a mad gamble." So the graphic story begins with something fantastic yet something that we hear about and that we can imagine may become real:

> One day, in a quiet office building somewhere, a small calculator suddenly became self-aware.
> In eight seconds, it plotted the extinction of all mankind.

There is an engaging combination of vagueness ("One day," "somewhere") and of the highly specific ("In eight seconds"); that is, things in a leisurely

[1] **Elias Canetti** Bulgarian novelist (1905–1994) who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1981.

once-upon-a-time land suddenly get down to a matter of seconds. The vague fairy-tale world of "one day" has been transformed into real time, and the "small calculator" is now a big threat. Like all good fiction, each sentence of this tiny story stimulates the reader to wonder, "What happens next?"

What does happen after the calculator "plotted the extinction of all mankind"? "Then the battery died." Well, that makes sense. We hadn't anticipated this happening, but, again, the happening that is narrated to us is plausible, and we are relieved, satisfied. In a sense the story is over—the battery is dead, so what more can be said?—but we see additional words:

> Two weeks later, it was thrown away.

We think this ending is masterful. E. M. Forster's comment about a good plot, already quoted on page 110, comes to mind:

> Shock, followed by the feeling, "Oh, that's all right," is a sign that all is well with plot: characters, to be real, ought to run smoothly, but a plot ought to cause surprise.

It is as if we heard a joke, laughed, and therefore thought we heard the end of the matter and then the narrator went on to top the joke, giving us an unexpected joke that builds on the first joke, a line that, after we have heard it, seems inevitable. The calculator, once an enormous menace, fails to be of even the slightest significance because—as is entirely natural, if we can speak of naturalness in connection with a mechanical device—the battery dies. The story seems to be over, there is nothing more to say. But there *is* more to say. The battery-dead calculator for two weeks is not even noticed, and then, when presumably it somehow comes to some unspecified person's attention, it is unceremoniously discarded, "thrown away." The way of all flesh.

What is convincing is not simply that A is followed by B and B is followed by C, but that there is a *logic* to the sequence, even (may we say?) a *truth* to the sequence. Notice, too, that the artist-writer does not moralize; rather, it is the reader-viewer who draws conclusions.

The theme is a great one, the humbling of the ambitious. Shakespeare, of course, often treated it—for instance, in *Richard II,* where the king meditates on his "state" (i.e., high status, exalted rank) and sees death as an "antic" (buffoon, jester) mocking even a king:

> Within the hollow crown
> That rounds the mortal temples of a king
> Keeps Death his court and there the antic sits,
> Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
> Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
> To monarchize, be feared, and kill with looks,
> Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
> As if this flesh which walls about our life,
> Were brass impregnable, and humored thus
> Comes at the last and with a little pin
> Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king!
>
> (3.2.160-70)

Or consider some lines by Shakespeare's later contemporary, James Shirley:

The glories of our blood and state
Are shadows, not substantial things;
There is no armor against fate;
Death lays his icy hand on kings.
Scepter and crown
Must tumble down,
And in the dust be equal made
With the poor crooked scythe and spade.

We are not claiming that the story about the calculator is in the same league, but we do find it memorable. We have indicated that we think the *text* of this graphic story makes a pretty good short-short story, even without the picture. Now let's examine the accompanying picture.

First of all, we think it is clever, sort of cute. The cartoonist might simply have drawn a calculator, but he cleverly—is it too much to say brilliantly?—put two eyes into the liquid crystal display, and thus animated the whole thing. The calculator *does* seem to be a person, doesn't it? So, in our view, the story becomes enriched by the image. We can call this sort of thing "graphic fiction," but, to go back to our earlier point, the truth is that the picture doesn't tell the story. It merely enriches a story that is told in words.

But our last sentence is, we admit, unfair. The image doesn't "merely" enrich the words. The picture is literally (that word again!) central to the story. If the story consisted only of text, or if all of the text were written above or below the story, the story would not be as effective. We admit it: The image is integral.

And that's our point: The best graphic fiction does not merely illustrate the verbal story; rather, the images are inseparable from the words. The story is text-and-image, not just text-adorned-with-image.

A Second Example of Reading Images: A Story Told in Sequential Panels

Let's look now at a somewhat more complex work of graphic fiction, this one consisting of eight panels. The artist-author is Art Spiegelman. See below for a brief biography, and see page 246 for Spiegelman's work, "Nature vs. Nurture."

ART SPIEGELMAN

Born in Sweden in 1948, Art Spiegelman was raised in New York City. His two-part graphic story (part novel, part memoir), Maus *(1986,1991), based on his Polish-Jewish parents' experiences during the Holocaust, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. A highly inventive fellow, Spiegelman not only cofounded several outlets for comic books but he also created Garbage Candy (edible candy in the shape of garbage, packaged in miniature garbage cans). In 2005* Time *magazine included Spiegelman in its list of the top 100 most influential people.*