

Visual Literature: an essential part of academic learning

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Abstract

Because the world is becoming a planet where speed plays a much bigger role than only one generation ago, information is gained at almost the speed of light. Although it is not seen as a strange phenomenon anymore, the fact remains that technology has developed so drastically that it is almost unthinkable that a person of sixty years old today started her life without television, computer, internet, and perhaps, also without a telephone. In the process literature and language are disciplines that are drastically influenced, apart from the fact that 93% of all language is non-verbal. Images are becoming a most important part of communication and influence us cognitively and emotionally. Images also accelerate and increase our level of comprehension. Therefore visual literature is becoming an integral part of learning.

In this article, the Afrikaans comic *Asterix die Galliër* is investigated, and it is argued that a comic can serve as a subgenre in the main stream of literature. Visual and verbal language are compared and common entities in the syntax, morphology and lexicon are identified. It is concluded that the combined process of reading text and seeing images is essential for learning and rational thinking. Visual literature should therefore not be neglected as a source of academic training.

1. Introduction

Academics often experience frustration because students do not read enough. The activity of reading is then associated with “books of substance” that will take three and more hours of the reader’s time. Studies find that the human brain decodes language in a linear way which takes time in the same way as speech does. Images on the other hand, are decoded simultaneously and the “reader” absorbs more information in a shorter time span. Furthermore these studies demonstrated that 93% of communication is nonverbal (Parkinson, 2010).

The activity of reading in the traditional sense of the word is decreasing and the younger generation cannot be blamed. They actually have no choice. Serious students, who prepare themselves for the professional arena where decision making is of the utmost importance, should realise that there are more effective ways of learning than by reading.

Firstly biological facts about the way the brain deals with images will be raised, followed by an argumentation that visual literature, particularly comic strips such as the *Asterix*-series originally written in French¹ can be studied as part of the mainstream literature. This will be followed by a discussion of the role the morphology and the lexicon plays in the comic strip and lastly, the function of the names of the characters will be focused on. For

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¹ **René Goscinny** is the author of the French *Asterix* series and the first edition *Asterix le Gaulois* was published in 1961. The illustrator is Albert Uderzo.

the purpose of the second year course Afrikaans *Visual Studies* at the University of Namibia the Afrikaans *Asterix die Galliër*² is prescribed, and further discussions in this article will revolve around this Afrikaans edition.

2. Biological arguments

In Parkinson's article (2010) it is stated that words are processed by our short-term memory where we can only store about 7 bits of information, while images go directly into our long-term memory where they are lastingly etched. That explains why it is easier to show a circle than to describe it.

But images also affect us emotionally. The existence of such a tight connection between emotion and cognition is an eye opener. It is said that to think rationally, one has to think with your head and limit emotional input. "Use your head!" is a familiar exclamation in such cases, though these two entities (emotion and cognition) cannot be separated. Emotion is about judging the world and cognition is about understanding it. The one cannot do without the other.

Images accelerate and increase our level of comprehension, recollection and retention. Visual clues help us to decode text and draw attention to information. Images do even more: pictures affect emotions and attitudes and stimulate certain areas of our brain, which in turn, leads to a more profound and accurate understanding of the presented material.

"It seems not such a bad thing to think with your heart, because emotions play an essential part in decision making, perception, learning and more ... they influence the very mechanics of rational thinking." (Parkinson, 2010)

Research proved that pictures are invaluable when it comes to learning. According to John Berger³ (2008), seeing comes before words. This is confirmed in other studies: "... unless our words, concepts, ideas are hooked onto an image, they will go in one ear, sail through the brain, and go out the other ear" (Parkinson, 2010).

When the part of a patient's brain that deals with its ability to feel is impaired, one can still think fully analytically, but is unable to make rational decisions despite the fact that the ability to reason is fully functional. Reasoning appears to be to a certain extent connected to a continual ability to experience feelings.

Communication via pictures is not necessary better than communication via text, but it seems that the combination of pictures and text is more powerful than each of these components on their own.

3. Comics' place in the mainstream of literature

3.1 Old and new perceptions

In the past the comic was considered inferior to the traditional book, and reading comics a second rate experience. Though I want to demonstrate that the *Asterix* series can be studied as a work belonging to the mainstream of literature. Not only does it give insight as far as allusive references are concerned, but it also demonstrates the morphology and lexicon of visual language. Being a literary work (in contrast with a manual for instance) it does not necessarily represent the truth or real facts, but rather an alternative fictional world in which reality and life are displayed in a new unconventional and revealing way.

² Translated in Afrikaans by **S. Van Schalkwyk-Barrois**, the first edition of the *Asterix* series in Afrikaans.

³ A media theorist.

3.2 Historical background of the Asterix series

The Asterix series has a unique historical background. It is enacted 50 B.C.E in the part of Europe that we know today as France. The Roman Empire conquered the whole country and surroundings – except for one small village where a handful of Gauls are holding out quite comfortably. The main reason for their relaxed life style is the druid of the town, Kasterolix who feeds them a magical potion that gives them abnormal physical strength. In *Asterix die Galliër* the story revolves around the Romans that capture the druid to get hold of this secret recipe. Perhaps then they will be able to force the Gauls to submit to Caesar's rule. The hero of the series is Asterix, a small but very clever Gaulish warrior.

3.2.1 Narrator and narrative

By means of the all-knowing narrator's impersonal mode, history and literature in Asterix are used for a completely new purpose. Readers have to do more than simply interpret the pictorial story and enjoy the humorous actions. They also have to absorb the literary implication of the artistic use of puns and word play.

3.2.2 Rewriting history

The narrative structure and the juxtaposition of the pictures form a unity and create a cognitive meaning which is essential for an educational literary work. This mainly non textual representation then makes sense to the reader because he has knowledge of the ongoing theme of the series (Kalita, 2014).

Being a typical postmodern script, history is rewritten in the Asterix series: historical events are re-interpreted and a new meaning is accomplished. By analysing the characters it becomes clear that criticism is directed towards autocratic ambitions of the ruling power which cancel out basic human needs like freedom and democracy (Kalita, 2014). In this way unity between fact and fiction, and the attention of the reader, is maintained.

The characters in the comic strip and the readers are separated by a couple of centuries. Still references made to geographical, historical and political issues provide the allusive support in the reader's act of perception. The Asterix series displays a satirical, subversive (revolutionary) and historical sensitivity.

Literature of the postmodern era often attains themes of social and scientific importance:

By combining caricature and literature it is not only the political issues that come to the fore, but also other contemporary themes like environmentalism. (In *Asterix and the Golden Sickle*, a fisherman is unable to catch fish due to the pollution in the river. Also women's rights come to the table in *Asterix and the Secret Weapon*).

In the comic strip the reader has to understand a more complex picture than what meets the eye: a picture accumulating history, classical culture as well as literature and art.

3.2.3 Structure of the comic narrative

Verbal and visual language have a lot in common. One of these common denominators is the structural elements of a narrative for example the exposition, initiator of the plot with rising action that ends in a climax and after that the denouement. Although the focus in this article is not on these aspects, the typical setting and resolution or denouement of the Asterix comic strip will be illustrated briefly.

The story starts off with the setting, giving information about the space, time and main role players:



The denouement: the Roman soldiers were convincingly dealt with by Asterix and his brave fellow men, the whole town can relax around a fire, eating the one wild boar after the other:



4. The morphology in the Asterix series

As far as the morphology in the Asterix series is concerned, there will be concentrated on the closed class of morphemes, i.e. those classes that cannot easily be added to. It can be compared with the closed classes in verbal language. To these classes belong amongst others, articles (such as *the, a*) and prepositions (*on, under, over, etc*). There are limited numbers of articles in a language and the same can be said of prepositions.

For this discussion the focus will be on the binding morphemes in the visual language of the comic strip as it is displayed in the Asterix series. A binding morpheme combines what is said or illustrated to the source that said it.

Cohn (2013) distinguishes between several binding morphemes in the visual language of comics. The following will be discussed by means of the comic *Asterix die Galliër*:

- carriers
- indexical lines
- impact stars
- up-fixes
- suppletion
- reduplication

4.1 Carriers

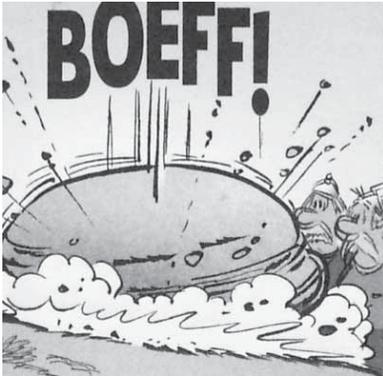
The carriers are the speech bubbles that contain the text of the source. According to Cohn there are several types of carriers, and semantically he distinguishes between the carriers by means of two variables: by *root awareness* and *adjacent awareness* (in which the other carriers, and not the root are aware of the content of the speech bubble). For the purpose of this discussion *Asterix die Galliër* only three types of carriers will be discussed.

4.1.1 Private carrier



The private carrier is the easiest to recognise and is a speech bubble that indicates what a character is saying or thinking. In this case, what is said or thought, is only known to the source (which can be a person or an object).

4.1.2. Non-sentient carrier



In the case of the non-sentient carrier the source that causes the sound is not aware of it, but everybody else.

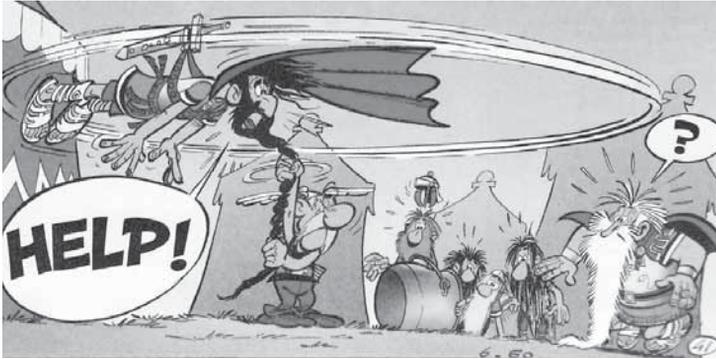
4.1.3 Satellite carrier



The satellite carrier is manifested in captions, titles, etc. In the Asterix series the narrator makes satirical and humouristic comments on the state of affairs.

4.2 Indexical lines as binding morphemes that indicate movement

Indexical lines indicate movement. In the following illustration the reader can see that Asterix is swinging the poor Roman soldier in an anti-clockwise direction.



In the next illustration the indexical lines draw the intention of the reader to something at the end of the line, and is showing towards an object, in this case the druid that is invisible to the reader, but because of the lines it is easy to know where the druid is at that stage. In this case the line has a deictic function.



4.3 Impact stars

Impact stars acting as binding morphemes are stars indicating two objects crashing. If a fist, for example, crashes into a head and the head jerks backwards, the impact stars indicate the place of impact even though the two objects are already separated from each other.



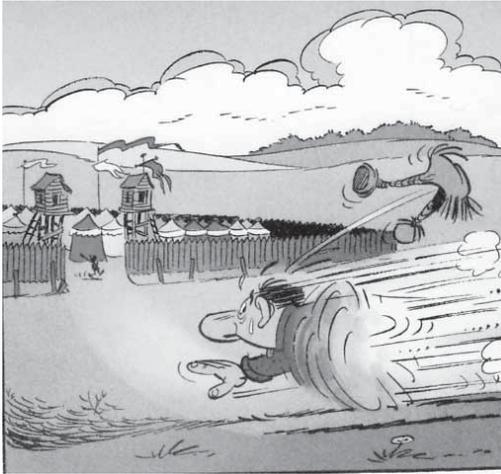
4.3 Up-fixes

Up-fixes are binding morphemes above the character's head that frequently indicate an emotional or cognitive situation. They can, for example, be dollar notes to indicate the intention to make money, or operating gears indicating heavy thinking. In the illustration below Bonus Ambisieus figuratively 'sees the light' in the form of a burning candle.



4.4 Suppletion

Suppletion takes place when a character is replaced with something else. The replacement can be a cloud of dust (instead of fighting characters) or the circle of a tornado. It is also possible that only a part of a character or an object is replaced:



The running legs are replaced by circular lines to accentuate the speed with which the character is running away from the Gauls to the Roman camp.

4.5 Reduplication

In Afrikaans one often hears somebody saying that such and such a person is a *mens-mens*. “My ma is ‘n mens-mens” would then mean that she is a person with a warm personality that cares for people. This *mens-mens* is an example of reduplication. Reduplication also occurs in visual language in the form of binding morphemes.

In the comic strip reduplication, like suppletion, is another valuable tool to indicate movement. The artist draws a character in different positions to simulate repetitive activities that are performed shortly after one another. In the illustration below, the head of the soldier is drawn several times with small variations in position indicating the immense speed and effectiveness in which Asterix is pulling his beard. This is echoed by the typography of the text with its shadow.



5. Visual lexicon

Visual morphology is about small components that carry meaning in a panel. The visual lexicon concerns bigger units, in this case, the panel itself.

In reading *Asterix die Galliër* it becomes clear that there are an average of four rows of panels on a page and that rows have an average of three to four panels each. What the artist has in mind with his panel, determines the size of it.

A panel is a focal point and is part of the mental space of what the artist has in mind and of what the reader can imagine (Cohn, 2013). The attention of the reader is focused on different aspects: it can be a panorama, an individual character or a close-up of - for example - the eyes of a character.

Each panel has an *event structure* which can be interpreted by the reader because he understands the morphology of the visual image. At the end of the story the reader knows that all the different aspects are not merely isolated views or events that happen independently, but that all these components are related. We never see the space as a whole unit, but we still have the story as a complete entity.

In the following panel a lot of information is conveyed:



From the illustration the reader knows that the soldiers cannot see Asterix and Obelix, and that the marching soldiers are in suspense. How does this information become clear without verbal language?

The druid Kasterolix is captured by the Romans and they force him to brew the magic potion that will give them abnormal physical strength. But, of course, instead of brewing the magic potion Kasterolix brewed a concoction that made the Romans' hair grow abnormally fast. Exactly how fast is indicated by the following illustration:



6. The function of the names of the characters

Names in the *Asterix* series have a characterising function: the name puts the focus on one or more characteristics of the figure drawn by the artist. Only a few of these names will be dealt with here.

It is not difficult to understand where the druid's name, *Kasterolix*⁴ comes from. *Kasterolie* (English *castor oil*) is a medicine with a terrible taste that Afrikaans grandmothers forced their children and grandchildren to drink before they have to go back to boarding school after the holidays⁵. The chief in charge of the Roman Legion is named *Bonus Ambisiesus* (English, *Bonus Ambitious*) and it serves him right because he will not think twice to get at somebody for his own scaly purposes⁶.

And then we have the town musician, and he is the only one that thinks he sings and plays the harp beautifully. His name is *Liederlix*. The Afrikaans word *lied* means song, and *liederlik* is an Afrikaans version for *lelik*, meaning *ugly* or *not acceptable*. *Liederlik* is also the Afrikaans form that accentuates *lelik*.

7. Conclusion

While doing research for this article I stood in awe because of the cautiousness and prudence with which the Maker dealt with the human brain during creation. Not only did it start millions of years ago, but He (or She) had the insight to make provision for all the wonders he (or she) wants to reveal to us in the millennia to come.

Graphic communication is universal. The combined process of reading text and seeing images affects us both cognitively and emotionally and is essential for learning and rational thinking. Visual literature should therefore not be neglected as a source of academic training.

Perhaps it is time to make peace with the fact that visual language is progressively playing a more important role in the education of our students.

⁴ In the English version he is called *Getafix*.

⁵ An immensely effective remedy against constipation.

⁶ Other Roman soldiers in other *Asterix* editions (the English versions) are, for example, called *Christmas Bonus* and *Dubious Purpose*.

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