

Mary Lihong Peng

May 5, 2019

Dear reader,

The project of this essay is genre extension, through which I aim to extend our conversation about life writing as a way to explore and make sense of one's identity and expand our understanding of how life writing can be represented. Contextualizing the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis and Fairclough's three-dimensional model in Jarrett J. Krosoczka's award winning graphic memoir *Hey, Kiddo*, I systematically dissect the use of multimodal representation and explore its effectiveness in enhancing the power of life writing. Through contextualized analysis of visual techniques and rhetorical strategies, I hope I can promote visual rhetoric as a powerful method to achieve appealing identity representation and effective social work. For improvement in the future, I would love to conduct a comparative analysis of two memoirs with similar social work but different modes of representation to present a more balanced examination of both literary and visual rhetorics, including their strengths and limitations. With that said, I hope you enjoy reading my humble take on this fascinating topic.

Yours sincerely,

Mary

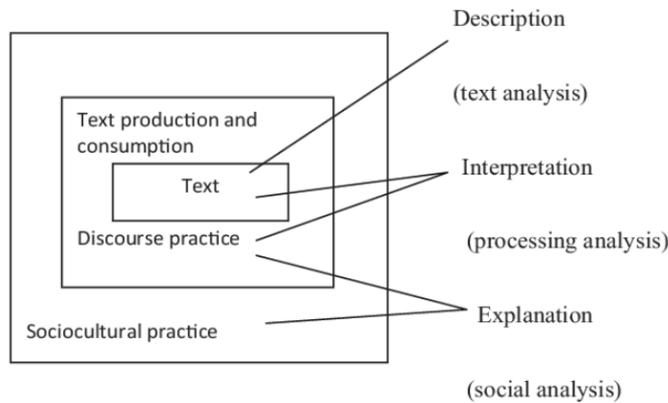
The Power of Multimodal Representation in Life Writing

1. Introduction

While the concept of comics first emerged as far back as the Middle Ages (Sabin, 1996), it has only been within the last 20 years that graphic memoirs have been more widely accepted as legitimate literature (Connors, 2007; McTaggart, 2008; Versaci, 2008). Graphic memoir blends the literal essence of life writing with the power of multimodal expressions. Multimodality, the combination of two or more modes of communication, underlies the effectiveness of visual rhetoric in graphic memoirs, where both texts and images are utilized to convey appealing narratives. The power of graphic memoirs is thus deeply embedded in how multimodality creates and enhances readers' resonance with writers' stories. As argued by Kress in *Literacy In The New Media Age*, "we can no longer treat language as the sole, the main, let alone the major means for representation and communication. Other modes are there as well, and in many environments where writing occurs, these other modes may be more prominent and more significant" (35). Given the increasing prevalence of visual communication in this age of high technology and information, where complex literacy skills to decode both textual information and multimodal media are urgently needed, visual rhetoric should be brought to the fore of literary studies. Hence, by discussing life writing in light of the compelling pertinence of visual literacy, this essay seeks to present an in-depth study of the rhetorical strategies in Jarrett J. Krosoczka's graphic memoir *Hey, Kiddo*, illustrating how visual representation facilitates characterization, construction of identity, and the social work of empowerment, and ultimately aiming to promote multimodal autobiographical writing as a powerful means for writers to establish connections with readers so as to catalyze their intended social work. Critical Discourse Analysis and Fairclough's three-dimensional model will be used as the theoretical framework of this paper to bring to light how literary discourse and social practice interconnect.

2. Contextualization

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks: Critical Discourse Analysis and Fairclough's three-dimensional model



Fairclough's (1995, 2001, 2003) three-dimensional model used in critical discourse analysis (CDA) is adopted as the main analytical framework in this paper. The multimodality of graphic memoirs dictates its intrinsically interdisciplinary nature, tapping into social, literary, and visual theories as basis of analysis. Fairclough's three-dimensional model can systematically untangle the interplay between rhetorical strategies and social practice as it encompasses a three-pronged analysis of texts, namely "micro-analysis of textual practice", "meso-analysis of discursive practice", and "macro-analysis of social practices" (Fairclough 135, 789). "Texts" in this case entail both words and visuals. Micro-analysis provides the descriptive foundation on which discourse and social practices are built, where specific visual techniques and characterization are examined. Meso-analysis of discursive practice functions as a bridge between text and social practices, focusing on the interpretation of the visual techniques, where the description in micro-analysis is given significance behind writer's choices. Finally, macro-analysis explains the writer's task, namely the purpose of discourse practice, elucidating the overarching social work of the text. Fairclough's three-dimensional model thus provides strong theoretical support for the use of visual techniques in autobiographical writing and the overall investigation into the social impact of the memoir. When contextualized in my selected memoir, *Hey, Kiddo*, the three steps of discourse analysis methodologically address the questions this paper sets out to answer---what are the rhetorical strategies in *Hey, Kiddo*, what are their significance, and how and how effectively does the social

work manifest through them? Ultimately, the theoretic model assists me to present to future autobiographical writers a powerful argument on why multimodality is an effective means of delivery and persuasion.

2.2 *Hey, Kiddo*

Jarrett J. Krosoczka's National Book Award-nominated graphic memoir *Hey, Kiddo* tells the heart-wrenching story of his tumultuous upbringing. *Hey, Kiddo* traces Krosoczka's search for his father, his difficult interactions with his heroin addict mother, his day-to-day life with his grandparents, and his path to becoming an artist. "It took a long time for me to gain that courage to make this book," says Krosoczka, "I share that for those young readers out there who are dealing with heavy issues at home. ... I feel like I owe it to these readers to put myself out there" (National Public Radio). Therefore, the graphic representation of identities and life experience in *Hey, Kiddo* is engineered to convey the very specific message of social empowerment. Visual techniques are thus expected to amplify the emotional appeal of the memoir through the construction of vivid characterization, which ultimately paves the way for emotional engagement and connection between Krosoczka and his readers whereby empowerment organically occurs. In the following few sections, visual techniques will be analyzed in association with both their literary and social significance, systematically demonstrating the steps from writer's choices to writer's task.

3. Micro-analysis of Text and Meso-analysis of Discourse Practice

The first and second dimensions of Fairclough's framework focus on description and interpretation, essentially dealing with the decoding of visual elements in *Hey, Kiddo*. The examination of visual elements such as appearance, color symbolism, and multiple compositional techniques (micro-analysis of text) contributes to the understanding of characterization, emotional toning, and mood juxtaposition (meso-analysis of discourse practice).

3.1 Appearance and Characterization

In *Hey, Kiddo*, Krosoczka portrays himself as an innocent and vulnerable young boy. The accent on big round eyes and curly brown hair highlights the adorable features of baby Krosoczka and thus

accentuating the appeal of childlike innocence. Young Krosoczka often appears as shoeless. The lack of physical protection symbolizes a lack of emotional protection, heightening the sense of insecurity and vulnerability Krosoczka experiences as a child. Such characterization in turn evokes strong feelings of sympathy and empathy in readers, underlying the emotional appeal of Krosoczka's story of rising above and empowerment.

3.2 Color Symbolism and Emotional Toning

According to McCloud (1994), colors are both "expressionistic" and "iconic" (188). Colors create meaning by stimulating automatic associations with certain emotions in readers. In *Hey, Kiddo*, soft pastel orange is used to establish a light-hearted mood of Krosoczka's pleasant memories since lighter mixtures of colors may help project a "tender and leisurely" mood (Odbert et al., 165). For example, when baby Krosoczka "came home in an oversized stocking on Christmas Day" (40) and when his mother "brought him (me) a teddy bear as Christmas present" (82), light orange dominates the panels' backgrounds, creating a unified pleasant mood. Krosoczka's shirt is orange throughout the memoir regardless the shift in background color, which hints at Krosoczka's unyielding survivor spirit and undying hope through every moment of dark and light. Research further indicates that colors can be used for "gender role socialization" (Panchanathan et al., 517). For example, pastel colors are commonly associated with baby colors. Thus, the pastel orange in *Hey, Kiddo* also serves to reinforce the childlike innocence that young Krosoczka projects, which, when juxtaposed with his childhood ordeal, further evokes emotional responses from the reader. Moreover, bright colors rarely appear in the memoir except in the paintings exchanged between Krosoczka and his mother. The extremely low occurrence of bright colors in the memoir not only suggests Krosoczka's intense longing for his mother, but also emphasizes the absence of maternal affection in Krosoczka's childhood. In contrast to the uplifting color of orange, grey and black dominate most of the panels' backgrounds, especially the panels that portray Krosoczka's painful memory. For example, in the panel that depicts the scene where Krosoczka witnesses his mother's crime (60), the entire background turns black, which suggests an overwhelming feeling of dread, accentuating Krosoczka's horrifying experience of childhood trauma. The utilization of grey, which resembles the ash color of

cigarette smoke, might further symbolize Krosoczka's mother's lingering impact over his entire life just as how different shades of grey stretch across the entire memoir. To sum up, color symbolism is consistent with the emotional toning of the memoir, effectively setting the mood for every scene and enhancing emotional response from the reader.

3.3 Composition and Emotional Juxtaposition

The composition of panels in *Hey, Kiddo* often utilizes the technique of juxtaposition. Through the juxtaposition between brush strokes, speech bubbles, and spatial arrangement, stark contrasts are often created to convey tension, emotional turbulence, and conflicts. For example, in the panel that depicts Krosoczka's reoccurring nightmares (124), where the young Krosoczka is situated in the middle with a teddy bear on his left and blurry monsters on his right, the juxtaposition in composition is symbolic of how Krosoczka is trapped between his longing for love and suffering from emotional insecurity. The smooth outline of the white teddy bear is further juxtaposed to the rugged brush strokes of the deformed orange monsters, presenting a stark contrast between a child's innocence and emotional struggle, which powerfully elicits sympathy and emotional resonance from the reader. Krosoczka utilizes a wide variety of speech bubbles in his book, ranging from round-edged ones for casual conversations to spiky-edged for exclaimed cries, which communicates characters' varying degrees of emotional intensity as well as the shift of mood through scenes. In many panels that depict Krosoczka's painful memory, such as family fights and imaginary monster attacks, speech bubbles disappear into the dark background, which, coupled with the stark contrast of white words, highlights the captions and thus Krosoczka's deep-rooted trauma and overwhelming feeling of fear in his subconscious mind.

4. Macro-analysis of Social Practice

Growing up, Krosoczka was always within range of a tremendous amount of fighting, which led to his inevitable anxiety as he tried to cope with his family turmoil. As argued by Smith and Watson in *Getting a Life: The Everyday Uses of Autobiography*, autobiography writing is situational and influential (180). As individuals exercise the freedom to decide what, when, where, and how they

present their stories, they become active agents of the formation and representation of identities, which is powerfully manifested in the plurality of identity representation in my different life writings. What makes *Hey, Kiddo* significant is how the graphic autobiographical writing can reflect an emotionally potent construction of the trauma survivor identity and thus convey the message of empowerment in a multimodal manner. As suggested by Lundberg and Keith in their book *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, adaptation in rhetoric allows “a speaker and an audience to have a relationship whereby each understands what the other is doing” (19). Since the primary social work that Krosoczka seeks to achieve is to empower young people dealing with similar situations so that they would feel less alone, a sense of relatability and emotional empathy are key to communicating Krosoczka’s message to his target audience. Krosoczka effectively creates emotional connection with his readers through visual techniques, as discussed in the micro and meso analysis sections, which in turn drives readers’ automatic internalization of his social work through emotional understanding. Hence, the power of multimodal representation in promoting social work largely lies in the power of pathos, which appeals to the emotions and beliefs of the audience and elicits strong feelings that will in turn move people to action. Considering that the major social work of *Hey, Kiddo* is to empower through emotional resonance, the employment of pathos through visual engagement maximizes the effectiveness of such a mode of representation as all the visual techniques ultimately serve to appeal to the heart through appealing to different senses. Critics might argue that for more elaborate and complicated social work, such as to reverse social stigma, to expose social injustice, to challenge religious status quo, and to educate the public about social issues, pathos alone cannot achieve effective persuasion, which would undermine one of the greatest strengths of multimodal life writing. Thus, I’d caution any future writers interested in exploring visual rhetoric to consciously maintain a balance between the art of emotional appeal and the delivery of concrete meaningful ideas through a combination of purposeful textual representation and engaging visual representation.

5. Conclusion

With reference to various visual theories and Fairclough’s three-dimensional analytical framework, this paper has explored the power of visual representation in life writing by

systematically showing the steps from micro-analysis to macro-analysis of *Hey, Kiddo*, from multiple visual techniques to the social work of empowerment, and ultimately from writer's choice to writer's task. Hopefully this paper could serve to promote multimodality as a powerful tool of life writing and identity representation and provide helpful reference for future life writers who would be interested in engaging in visual rhetoric.

Bibliography

- Connors, S. Graphic young adult novels: Deconstructing and reinterpreting *Persepolis* from a cultural critical perspective. In A. Soter & M. Faust (Eds.), *Interpretive play: Using critical perspectives to teach young adult literature*. Norwood MA: Christopher-Gordon, 2007. 179–190.
- Fairclough, Norman. *Critical discourse analysis*. London: Longman, 1995.
- Fairclough, Norman. *The discourse of New Labour: Critical discourse analysis*. London: Sage 2001.
- Fairclough, Norman. (2003). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- “Graphic Memoirist Grapples With Family Addiction In 'Hey, Kiddo'.” NPR, NPR, 16 Oct. 2018, www.npr.org/2018/10/16/657884918/graphic-memoirist-grapples-with-family-addiction-in-hey-kiddo.
- Kress, Gunther R. *Literacy in the New Media Age*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Krosoczka, Jarrett J. *Hey, Kiddo*. Scholastic, Incorporated, 2018.
- Lundberg, Christian O., and William M. Keith. *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2018.
- McCloud, Scot. *Understanding Comics: The invisible art*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994.
- McTaggart, J. *Graphic novels: The good, the bad, and the ugly*. In N. Frey & D. Fisher (Eds.), *Teaching visual literacy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008. 27–46.
- Odbert, Henry S.; Karwoski, Theodore F. & Eckerson, A. B. *Studies in Synesthetic thinking: I. Musical and verbal associations of color and mood*. *The Journal of General Psychology*, 1942, 26(1), 153-173.
- Panchanathan, Sethuraman; Park, Y. C.; Kim, K. S.; Kim, P. & Golshani, F. (2000). *The Role of Colour in Content-based Image Retrieval*. *Image Processing. Proceedings. International Conference, 2000, 1*, 517-520.
- Sabin, Roger. *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels*. London: Phaidon Press, 1996. Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. "Introduction to *Getting a Life: The Everyday Uses of Autobiography* (1996)". *Life Writing in the Long Run*. Maize Publishers, 2016. 180.
- Versaci, R. *Literary literacy and the role of the comic book*. In N. Frey & D. Fisher (Eds.), *Teaching visual literacy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008. 91–111.