Suus Agnes Claessen

VISUAL NARRATIVES AND THE POSTHUMAN: MAKING INTERSPECIES CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CRYPTIC CREATURES AND HUMANS TANGIBLE

ABSTRACT

Prompted by species extinctions, exclusions of ‘unloved’ others from ethical considerations, and mutual vulnerabilities of humans and nonhumans on a changing planet, I explore visual narrative as a method to (re)situate humans ecologically, and nonhumans ethically (Plumwood 2002), and imagine better relationships with biological kin that often go unnoticed. Visual narratives provide a range of possibilities for making interspecies connectivity more tangible, from the macro to the micro. Making sense of other beings happens in more than only linguistic ways. Visual narratives provide ways to attune to nonverbal sense-making. I highlight three interrelated themes – communications, patterns, and hybridity – in relation to narrative techniques like scale, perspective, and possible reader engagements. I explore how they make visible and (de)familiarise repeating forms, processes and multi-sensory experiences across scales. Drawing from my own practice* and others, even the most cryptic creatures can become less alien.

*A selection of visual narratives on everyday microcommunities of fungi, invertebrates, and moss was on display during the Performing Ecologies Conference under the exhibition title *Loving the Unloved*. As such, this paper partly functions as exhibition catalogue.

Keywords: Posthuman; Visual Language; Comics; Multispecies Storyworlds; Multi-Sensory

INTRODUCTION

The separation between humans and other life forms is not as significant as is often believed (Smith 2013, Braidotti 2013). While it might be relatively easy to notice similarities and exchanges with companion animals like dogs, what about an earwig? A mushroom? A patch of moss? While an all too familiar sight, could they be any more alien?

Starting from a concern about the possibility of life for humans and other beings, I follow environmental philosophers Rose and Van Dooren (2011), who are concerned with ethical questions about the exclusion of living beings from consideration and protection in times of extinction on a climate-changing planet.

While big and beautiful tigers and pandas are used to represent the extinction crisis, they highlight countless of unloved others are silently disappearing into extinction. If we already struggle to find room in the world for the ones we love, what hope remains for the underdogs, the small and cryptic creatures who nevertheless contribute to earth’s ecosystems and biodiversity richness? In reference to insects specifically, Loo and Sellbach highlight how a failure to acknowledge our entanglement with the rest of the earth has consequences for human possibilities for life:

[...] we can no longer afford to think about ethics in separation from insects, and the big and small edges of sentience they evoke. Insects are

reminders that we are ecologically entangled in ways we often only dimly perceive and are impacting the environment and other species in damaging ways we frequently ignore. At the same time, through our failure to acknowledge these co-affecting relations, we live in a world where we are increasingly vulnerable to unpredictable forces of nature that are indifferent to us, to our gestures of sentiment and feeling. (2015, pp.80-81)

In posthuman dreams, humans (especially western societies) stop seeing themselves as unique and isolated entities removed from the rest of the world, but as fully “integrated with the world in all its manifestations, including nature, technology and other beings” (Pepperell 2003, p.100). The posthuman ethics that I’m concerned with here involves, ideally, the following components to draw together humans and nonhumans, even the cryptic ones. Firstly, an animate recognition of “earth others as fellow agents and narrative subjects” (Plumwood 2002, p.176) who are “bound up in relationships of nourishment, care, meaning making” (Van Dooren and Rose 2016, p.91). Secondly, an awareness of the hybridity of existence where beings always live with, within and from one another (Smith 2013). Thirdly, a bodily attentiveness to ourselves and our surroundings, including nonhumans, and finally, an openness to being transformed by them (Braidotti 2013; Plumwood 2002). Notably, these components are not new, as they overlap with animist discourses of many indigenous, oral peoples of the world (Abram 1996). The perspective of affect is helpful here (Singh 2018). As Hustak and Myers (2012) highlight, the term “affective ecologies” calls us to see that nonhumans are not automatons, but responsive and sensing bodies that involve themselves creatively, improvisational, fleetingly in affectively charged, sensory relations – that a bee is not just a victim of trickery by the bee-mimicking orchid, but an agent attracted to colours, smells and beyond. Affect also points to human emotion or empathy (Von Mossner 2017), and opens up what it might mean to care: not just to shelter others, but to be curious and open to others (Hinchliffe 2008).

Yet where to start? As Smith (2011) points out, while attending to our interconnections with the rest of the world opens up ethical possibilities, they are complex, often intangible, not entirely comprehensible, and often unnoticed: we take part in communities with “myriad beings which appear to each other in all kinds of ways, as commensual, as mutualistic, as parasite, as prey, as resources, as co-evolved and evolving beings; [some] rare, some common; some specialized, some generalist; some crucial to the whole community’s survival, some hardly at all” (p.41). Importantly, “what appears to human beings is not all that appears, that what affects human beings directly is not all that has effects, that what has significance in its appearance to and effects on human beings has different significance for other beings” (Smith 2013, p.24; 2011). As such, all tools for getting a better grasp on connectivity, and for creating settings where new possibilities can emerge, are much needed to enable an ethics that looks further than the charismatic megafauna and that respects a wide range of beings (see also Weston 2004). Here, I turn to visual narrative as a method to (re)situate humans ecologically and nonhumans ethically (Plumwood 2002), and provide possibilities for making even the most cryptic creatures less alien.

SENSE AND STORY: LINKING CRYPTIC CREATURES AND VISUAL NARRATIVES

Visual narratives, sense and story. Through stories, readers can be invited into a curiosity about other ways of experiencing the world. Van Dooren and Rose (2012, 2016) even propose ‘storying’ as something that nonhumans do too, as they interpret their surroundings and make sense of them in meaningful sequences. Moreover, Taylor (2014) highlights the role of visual depictions in helping to increase our valuing and understanding of cryptic creatures through inventive and documentary components. What opportunities emerge in their combination? Visual narratives are here considered broadly as expressions that tell a story through images (with or without words). These can manifest in a variety of ways, as part of an historical continuum (e.g. as discussed by McLoud 1994). I mention examples of historical books that blend image

and text, art and science, and also draw from visual language and art more broadly, while paying particular attention to comics and graphic novels (longer narratives in comics format). These are often characterised by sequences of separate, unmoving images or units referred to as panels, yet also manifest in experimental formats like abstract comics and poetry.

Visual narratives provide particular possibilities for making interspecies connections more tangible, from the macro to the micro. Sense and story feed into one another, for both creators and readers/viewers. To start with, sensory participation and observation can fuel narrative processes, while narratives can also serve as a starting point for noticing them in the first place. As I will show, visual narratives involve hybrid, multi-scalar, patterned and embodied practices that make them suitable for posthuman concerns. Through three interrelated themes – communications, patterns, and hybridity – in relation to narrative techniques and possible engagements with them, I highlight how visual narratives can make visible and (de)familiarise repeating forms, processes and multi-sensory experiences across scales, which can draw human and nonhuman worlds closer together.

I give examples from various artists, and my own narratives exhibited during the *Performing Ecologies* conference. The latter were sensory experiments in noticing and responding to everyday microcommunities of invertebrates, moss, and fungi. Titled *Loving the Unloved*, the exhibit presented a range of ‘micro’ comics and explored the processes involved in noticing and taking part in nonhuman life stories, through observations of movements (moulting, pollinating, the dispersal of tiny bodies that cling to human boots); revealing patterned shapes under a microscope; providing food and shelter in the nooks and crannies of homes, gardens and insect hotels; and imagining nonverbal interspecies communications that include humans.

(NON)HUMAN COMMUNICATIONS

Heidegger’s claim is compelling: “We – mankind

– are a conversation. The being of men is founded in language” (1965, p.277). Understandings of the sensory components of language can help us to move beyond the human-nature divide, and visual narratives provide possibilities to tease them out. In challenging the idea that humans are separate from the rest of the world through their linguistic abilities, Kohn (2013) offers a way to think about human language as one of many ways in which living beings engage in meaning-making and interacting with surroundings. Both humans and nonhumans have the ability to create, interpret and respond to each other’s signs,¹ and such forms of communication happen in embodied, multi-sensory ways. For example, when looking for a mate, slugs can give their slime trails a special taste that other slugs can ‘read’, and if the other slug feels the same way, they can try to find them via the trail (Attenborough 2005), and mosses can emit chemicals that attract springtails (Rosenstiel et al. 2012).

Humans, in turn, make sense of their surroundings beyond linguistic structures, like through spatial orientation (“up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, central-peripheral”; Johnson and Lakoff 1981, p.14), and senses like sounds, smells, and tastes. Such engagements have a wider range of applications than initially apparent: from making sense of other beings, to reading and creating comics (see Hague 2014 for a detailed overview on comics and the senses). Johnson (2008) writes that “[m]eaning traffics in patterns, images, qualities, feelings, and eventually concepts and propositions” (p.9), thereby challenging the priority of language in shaping our thoughts. Moreover, even words can bear traces of our surroundings, as sound can be suggestive of meaning. Onomatopoeia and other expressive words mimic environmental sounds: bang, splash, whoosh, crack, smack, rush, gush, roar, howl, grumble – and are often used in comics. These words remind us of expressive, rhythmical and gestural entities beyond the human, and that our language did not develop in isolation (Abram 1996). As such, possibilities exist for building bridges between human and nonhuman worlds in processes of embodied attentiveness.

¹ Understood (bio)semiotically as “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (Kohn 2013, p.31).

Fig. 1. Smell wafts and visual cues between humans and insects. Excerpt from *Wordless Conversations with Cryptic Creatures*, Suus Agnes (2018)

Nonverbal communications are crucial for gaining knowledge and new perspectives to build ethical relationships upon (Plumwood 2002).

The senses are directly relevant to visual narratives. Looking at conventions in visual language broadly, we can notice how visual expressions combine dynamic and sensory experiences by calling upon a synaesthetic elements. For example, cartoons may visualise off-smells through yellow-greenish waft shapes; sounds may be expressed through wave lines, electricity through zigzags; touch and movement can be suggested through straight or curved lines (e.g. conveying the motion of a finger pressing against a surface). On menus, a spicy taste can be symbolised through a flame; and we associate hot and cold water taps with red and blue colours. Since comics often combine these techniques with expressive words and/or close-up techniques, even invisible things can appear. The wind can become visible through written 'whoosh' sounds and movement lines, while close-ups may reveal minute entities in a glance, like imperceptible spores carried on the breeze.

Such techniques have familiarising implications. As Mahmutovic and Nunes (2017) highlight, through juxtaposition and a play with scale – zooming in and out on individual insects and the swarm, in side by side panels – small creatures can be made more visible while readers/viewers

can take on several perceptual positions. This happens in Miyazaki's manga series *Nausicaä* where we are reminded that humans can experience intimacy through an encounter with an insect, while not losing sight of the bigger picture.

The wider shot gives the viewers a sense of a swarm of indistinguishable copies of the [insect-like] Ohmu. When the Ohmu are drawn as hardly different from the sand, a character says that the entire seaside is buried in the insects. This perspective is contrasted to *Nausicaä's* micro encounter with the individual larvae. She is trying to communicate with the baby insect as the means of saving the swarm. We see that the big picture, that is saving the swarm and understanding the larger issue with their behavior, begins with the intimate moment with the small creature. (n.p.)

These oscillations between macro and micro enable different kinds of charisma. Suddenly, the swarm entity becomes an assemblage of individuals whose 'face' becomes visible. Drawing from Lorimer (2007), they can appeal to feral charisma (appeal of the 'yuck' factor), ecological charisma (a link with more familiar animals), and aesthetic charisma (visually appealing frames). Together they form an encouragement to see connections with organisms that may otherwise seem completely unrelatable (Fern, Nash, and

Leane 2014).

Nonverbal sense-making is open to ongoing exploration as our knowledge expands, yet there is simplicity in it, too. In the pictured works (Fig. 1 and 2), I visualise silent conversations between humans, insects, and flowers. The smell that ladybugs emit when threatened deters birds and also smells bad to humans, urging us to move away. Similarly, pincers of earwigs likely function to impress predators and competitors, but can also be effective in intimidating humans (Kleinpaste 2005). Alternatively, we send invitations to them, whether unintended (an uncovered crack in the wall), or intended, by planting flowers which we can appreciate in our own ways. Even the most disparate entities can have shared sensory

Fig. 2: A smell travels from a flower to insect antennae. Excerpt from *Wordless Conversations* (2018)

preferences. In sum, visualising the senses means making nonhuman less silent, and can show that, while there is always more going on than we can grasp, we might already know more than we thought we did.

REPEATING PATTERNS AND FRACTALS

Recognising repeating patterns across scales provides another way to move towards post-anthropocentric thought (Kohn 2013). Patterns in the world can be recognised as forms or shapes like fractals (self-similar patterns repeated across scales), branching patterns, waves, grids,

networks, and spirals. They allow us to see connections between otherwise disparate entities, making at once the unfamiliar more familiar, while defamiliarising the things we knew, including humans and cryptic creatures. Yet, noticing patterns is not always obvious. Design, architecture and art all have valuable roles to play here. Visual media can reveal how a magnified body of a small organism such as mould (Fig. 3), can resemble larger phenomena in form, like a flower meadow. Such perceptions have aesthetic

Fig. 3: Mould seen through the microscope. Excerpt from *Micrographia, Nova*, by Johann Frantz Grienel von Ach (1687, p.88)

implications, as they enable a sense of wonder, curiosity, and beauty; their recognition can bind human and nonhuman worlds together, from branching shapes of tree branches and leaf veins to the paintings of Jackson Pollock (Taylor et al. 2011), or the curvy shapes of larvae, mushrooms and Kandinsky's biomorphic paintings (Tiernan 2013).

Moreover, patterns involve movements, rhythms, and transformations that happen over various spatial and temporal scales: from seasonal cycles, (insect) metamorphoses, and self-organising processes like whirlpool formations, to unfolding human lives and stories (Kohn 2013; Abram 1996). As Peirce (1931) describes in his semiotic theories, the world can be characterised by "the tendency of all things to take habits" (p.101). Patterns can unite human and biological domains practically, as Kohn (2013) describes for Amazonian communities: the branching river, the route of

Fig. 4: Moss and liverwort art. Excerpt from *Micro Abstractions*, Suus Agnes, 2018

the fish that swim in it, the dispersion of rubber trees that grow along the course of the river, and the rubber merchants situated alongside the river, all follow the same branching pattern across different scales. As such, Kohn argues that “form need not stem from the structures we humans impose on the world” and can instead “emerge in the world beyond the human” (p.183), as “a product of constraints of possibility” (pp.159-60). In turn, rhythmic patterns, like seasonal changes, affect humans and nonhumans in their own ways – like our moods and activities (Abram 2010). An awareness of and desire to involve oneself in life’s patterns is common among indigenous people; for example, the presence of certain insects can indicate the right time of year for harvesting a particular food source (Rose 2005).

Stories and visual language provide further ways to make patterns appear and participate in them. As soon as lines and dots appear on a blank page, it is hard *not* to see some kind of structure, pattern or figurative representation. Visual symbols like the spiral can make the line between abstract thought, literal representation, and observation, thin: an understanding of a spiral as the unfolding of new life (like the Māori *koru*) can be directly drawn from vegetative spiral shapes, like the unrolling fern frond (O’Connell and Airey 2005). Similarly, stories provide a way to become involved in patterns, rhythms and dynamisms: they unfold, can be repeatedly read/told, and are open to dynamic and varied versions and understandings. After all, many patterns are ever-shifting and can affect shifts in our perceptions, too (Abram 1996, p.64). Comics

provide further possibilities for revealing patterns through representation and arrangement across panels and pages. Experiments in form occur especially in contemporary comics. Perhaps this is no coincidence: might traditional narrative forms, with a clear flow of beginning, middle, and end, Baetens (2018) asks, not always be so suitable for conveying the complexity of multispecies storyworlds?

In the Chilean graphic novel *Informe Tunguska* (Figueroa and Romo 2009), repeated motifs make similarities in form visible, like branching patterns in the anatomy of a human hand, plant veins, roads, trees or patterns of rock erosion. In their analysis, King and Page (2017) highlight that through juxtaposition within and across panels, and a play with scale that lays side by side successive zoom-outs and zoom-ins, the reader/viewer is constantly ‘tricked’: what first appeared to be a close up of an invertebrate, turns out to be a detail of a pattern on a chair. As such, there are “continual confusion[s]” (p.167) between organisms and representations in design, art, and beyond. In turn, a play with the convention of ‘suspension of disbelief’ (by revealing the artificiality of constructs), can be read as a way of grounding “the visual within the material, and thus to embed culture and the media within the natural, material world and not in any transcendent position above or beyond it” (pp.167-169).

Visual narratives can be understood on multiple levels. For example, while semiotic readings pay attention to visible repeating forms (and their

Fig. 5: Mites on a beetle leg and skin mites on a human face. Excerpt from *Micro Abstractions*, Suus Agnes (2018)

which can be understood on multiple levels: from the suggestion of an unfolding narrative rhythm, to unfolding ecological processes (Tabulo 2014; Badman 2006). In *Bleu* (Trondheim 2003) we see a number of blobs and stars against a blue background. At once, we can appreciate the image as a whole and the individual parts it consists of: a(n ecological) system in which larger units are always made up of smaller parts (Sousanis 2015), whether they involve microorganisms, beehives, comics, or human societies. At the same time, we can also read the page as a series of dynamic sequences of events or interacting entities. In Badman's (2006) reading, the green blob opens its mouth and swallows the star, spits out the star – one absorbs the other. These interactions remind of ecological processes of attraction, repulsion, ingestion, digestion, and transformation, including interactions of humans and stories.

possible 'tricks', comics require cognitive efforts from readers/viewers beyond linguistic forms of meaning-making. These efforts can be understood as embodied processes (King and Page 2017). On a basic level, this already starts by understanding time as movement within space on the page. Since pages are often split up into separate, adjacent units, it "often involves a heightened awareness of space, together with our position within it relative to other objects" (p.176). The white space in between the panels (the gutter) is equally meaningful, requiring readers/viewers to interpret silences to make connections. Possible ambiguities in scale and perspective call for extended ways of embodied reasoning, for example by noticing that movement in space can also mean zooming in/out. The reader/viewer can take their time to make connections between scenes and patterns, go back and forth, compare, notice new things, assess and reassess, which

may also involve small actions (flicking pages back and forth, turning the book on an angle, moving the head closer and further away in search for interpretations, scanning the page as one unit, followed by individual readings of the panels, and searching for ways to connect them). Such processes of bodily attentiveness, in turn, are also relevant for grasping our wider surroundings.

HYBRIDITY

Individuals are always plural. The more you zoom in, the more life reveals itself, from the micro species that live inside humans to the fungal networks that support trees. In parallel, visual narratives can be understood as hybrid expressions. Diedrich (2017) proposes that comics are an assemblage or mixture of panels, frames, lines, borders, and gutters (the space in between) that link and separate.

Hybridity is revealed and compared by successive panels that zoom in (Fig. 5), and can be thought of in imaginative ways. There is a rich tradition of fantastical hybrid creatures, like those in illuminated manuscripts. Rather than disregarding these as utter fantasies, they can be interpreted as visualisations of experienced entanglements. For example, the medicinal use of plants is expressed through plant/human/animal hybrids in the *Palatino* herbal manuscript – the plants are ingested by humans and animals.

Such experiments continue today, albeit often differently motivated. As Taylor (2014) highlights with examples of her own art and that of other artists, depictions of cryptic creatures in contemporary art are often hybrid through a complex “interplay of mythology, science, ethics and aesthetics”, and respond to environmental and social concerns. For example, this can be teased out through creatures and shapes that blur species lines, where it is not clear where one entity begins and the other ends, or where “improbable animals and enhanced humans” (p.132) interact. Baetens (2018) highlights how hybridity in multispecies (story)worlds in comics can be conveyed through artistic styles where the line between figure and background is blurred. Such visual expressions don’t seek to simply document lives, but engage in a “metamorphic

interlinking” (Taylor 2014, p.146) and make empathetic connections between humans and nonhumans that are open for audiences to give meaning to.

Alternatively, hybridity can be explored by using assemblage as method (Diedrich 2017), understood here as a heterogeneous visual design (e.g. using diverse drawing styles, and incorporating other types of texts and images, like reports, citations, photographs), with collage or archive-like results (King and Page 2017). This can be understood as yet another way of enacting the multitude of stories that take place all around us. Moreover, Diedrich argues that this can convey transformations and affective experiences. In her analysis of *Becoming Bone Sheep*, she highlights this graphic narrative as a collage of words, drawings and photographs. At the centre, the reader/viewer is confronted with a hybrid sheep head, partly made from text, and partly a sheep who seemingly looks you in the eye. It gives ‘face’ to a creature otherwise used instrumentally in a farm/clinic/lab for generating knowledge (2017, p.105). At once, the portrayal allows the reader/viewer to be affected, while the experimental, hybrid narrative form enacts the open experiment of the farm/clinic/lab (2017, p.106).

Finally, assemblage was the overall method of my exhibit *Loving the Unloved*. The exhibition space, originally a storage room, was transformed into a multispecies archive. Illustrations of moulting invertebrates were safely organised and stored away in an old cabinet, a handmade wooden insect hotel was illuminated by a light built into the display table, and other display tables were arranged across the room for small printed comics and original paintings created from a range of textures, including types of paper, card, paints and ink, and a fluid use of colours, lines and blank space. Some works were brightly lit, others hung on the edge of obscurity and required a slow and careful look. Some works included larger-than-life depictions of mosses, insects and mushrooms, others only implied their presence. The eclectic play with display conventions and participations with the world reflected on processes of noticing and creating. They invited a glimpse into the diversity of stories

among humans and microcommunities, while reminding that there is always more to notice.

CONCLUSIONS

Just like the world's living beings and processes are never final nor fully revealing themselves to our senses, so are narrative interpretations never final; what one person sees, stays hidden to another. Still, in combinations of words, images, panels, and spaces in between, visual narratives can be understood as hybrid practices that draw us into sensory engagements, and reveal that sometimes we already know more than we thought we did, including possibilities for nonverbal communications with nonhumans. Like the workings of an ecological system, comics can reveal the bigger picture and the details all at once. They can make visible the repeating and ever-shapeshifting forms, shapes, and structures of our world and our imaginations. They can lay side by side different perspectives and scales by zooming in and out, allowing readers and viewers to take on several perceptual positions in processes of comparing, contrasting, and reassessing.

Through such combinations of embodied attentiveness, interlinking, and oscillations between perspectives – between one encounter with an insect, and the bigger picture of earthly rhythms and cycles – visual narratives can contribute in processes of familiarisation and making sense of our surroundings, including the beings that usually escape our notice. Just like we need to interpret the white space in between the pictures, we need to attune to silences in nonhuman languages, while leaving space for the untranslatable (Marder 2017). Not only would this open up possibilities for life, but also broaden horizons for intellectual and creative development (Taylor 2014). After all, encounters with visual narratives and nonhumans both are their own kind of 'micro encounters' with the world: small, humble, yet bursting with transformative potential.

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