

**Grennan, S. (2015) 'Dispossession': uses of encumbrance and constraint in visualising Trollope's style, in a new graphic adaptation of his 1878-79 novel 'John Caldigate', Trollope Bicentennial Conference, KU Leuven**

## **SLIDE\_01**

*Title*

Simon Grennan etc

## **SLIDE\_02: Cover**

*Dispossession* (2015) is a 96 page colour graphic adaptation of Anthony Trollope's 1879 novel *John Caldigate* that I was commissioned to develop, rationalise and draw by the University of Leuven in 2012. *Dispossession* has been published in an English edition, and as *Courir deux lièvres* (To run two hares) in a French edition, in contribution to this conference. The commission encompassed theorisations of adaptation, the habits and limitations of research and practice, narrative drawing and Victorianism. An academic partner volume, *Transforming Anthony Trollope: 'Dispossession', Victorianism and 19<sup>th</sup> century word and image* (2015), published at the same time, will include new writing on the graphic adaptation of 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, Victorian illustration and Victorianism.

Two questions guided the creation of *Dispossession*: what results when the existing formal and discursive constraints of comics are self-consciously reformed in the process of adaptation, the protocol for a new book deriving from an analysis of Trollope's text relative to the its time and ours and; how might a new book visualise equivocation in its facture, distinct from the depiction of a plot? The approach to adaptation underwritten by these questions assumed particular types of knowledge on the part of readers of the new book, of its relationship to Trollope's text and aspects of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and its relationships with a range of conventions of comic strips. On one hand, these types of knowledge suggest that the formal characteristics of a new book will be meaningful and, on the other hand, that the relationships between different habits of reading (of a 19<sup>th</sup> century novel and a 21<sup>st</sup> century graphic novel) will also be significant. Both anticipate a 'knowing' reader, to use Linda Hutcheon's term, whose habits of reading and formal knowledge are self-conscious, that is, located within a wider field of known alternative behaviour and experiences.

Because of the framing of these questions, the plotting of *Dispossession* was the least complex task facing the adaptation. Although creating a new plot relative to the plot of *John Caldigate* offered a rich terrain for comparative critique and historiography, in this paper I want to focus on the less familiar activity of producing and rationalising a visual regime articulating points of view relative to Trollope's particular narrative voice: his style of writing.

More complex than rationalising changes to the plot, in visioning the world of *Dispossession*, was my development of a number of rules to govern the graphic novel's storyboard, that is, the prefiguring, at planning stage, of the ways in which the reader relates to the action in each panel and the way in which panels relate to each other.

## **SLIDE\_03: Rules**

These rules constrained the storyboarding of action by dictating: a limited range of distances between viewer and scene; views of discrete actions, not divisions of actions; rhythmic changes of scene and episode on the page; consistent rhythmic changes of point of view in a visible 1-2-3 rhythm; no extra-diegetic narrative; as small an amount of verbalisation in the plot as possible; generalisation: this treatment applied in all circumstances.

#### **SLIDE\_04: Page 31**

This regime responded to the challenge of replacing Trollope's literary voice, his *John Caldigate* style of writing, and facilitated the further task of being able to theorise this replacement. More than his plots, Trollope's writing style, his techniques of understatement, create the overwhelming sense of the world in which he lived, his novels being set in the very recent past of the mid and late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Virginia Woolf said of Trollope's style that the reader believes in it '...as we believe in the reality of our own weekly bills.' However, although written at great speed, scrutiny of *John Caldigate* reveals that this effect is as much to do with the careful structuring of juxtapositions and omissions as with description. Trollope is both accurate and equivocal.

The first word of *John Caldigate* is 'Perhaps'. 'Perhaps it was more the fault of Daniel Caldigate the father than of... And yet,..', the narrator continues: '... of whom his neighbours said' and: 'It was rumoured of him, too, that...' Producing this sense of equivocation through the visual style of the graphic novel was key in showing, rather than telling, the plot: how does one draw 'perhaps'? I made a distinction between storyboarding and mark making. It was useful to maintain this distinction, because it allowed me to consider the partitioning of plot in terms of the structuring of reader points of view, relative to the panel, the page, the spread and the book. Of course, there are other ways in which the mark itself positions the reader relative to each scenario, in terms of their facture, but this is a topic for another paper.

#### **SLIDE\_05: page 53**

The rules governing the storyboard were intended to replace Trollope's equivocation with a set of consistent visual effects. As a result of the rules, the reader never views the action from a distance closer than 15 or 20 feet. There are single encompassing, locating panels, the equivalent of which would be 'establishing shots' in movie, but there are no close-ups and no middling views. The major characters in each panel are always seen full figure and the reader invariably keeps their own feet on the diegetic ground. Rather, the reader moves around the action from panel to panel, even as the characters move in diegetic space, in a regular, repetitive round between three points of view: a sort of reader waltz with the diegesis.

The visual world of *Dispossession* is not vague. It is vivid and distinct, but readers can only experience it from beyond the threshold of a small distance that they can never cross, that renders certain details unimportant. These details might, under other visual regimes, prove definitive. Keeping their feet on the ground, the reader is moved in a consistent rhythmic round of changes of point of view. Together, these effects both allow the visual world of *Dispossession* to appear materially robust and historically verisimilar and, at the same time, to deny the reader any single conclusive adjudication of views. This rationale prompted my approach to the partitioning of action in each scenario, in the

sense that entire types of partitioning became unavailable, if the storyboard was to maintain its rhythm and distance.

### **SLIDE\_06: Watchmen**

For example, the type of close scrutiny of the perfume bottle thrown by Laurie on page 195 of Moore and Gibbon's *Watchmen* was both impossible and undesirable within the regime of *Dispossession*.<sup>13</sup> The short trajectory of the bottle takes place over three panels according to the time it takes to read the overlying text, that is, 'in slow motion'. The way in which the action is fragmented and delayed by voiceover, and the close proximity to the reader that it creates, renders it privileged and unequivocal, exactly the kind of effect that the rules of *Dispossession* were established to avoid.

Rather, the divisions of action in *Dispossession* were pushed by the regime into tableaux, with more historic theatrical than movie roots. The distance and invariable mobility of the reader suggested gesture rather than facial expression as a meaningful expressive instance, for example. Similarly, I approached the actions comprising the plot as iconic rather than sensational.

### **SLIDE\_07: Page 2**

Hence, we can see on page two of *Dispossession* that distance and regularised mobility tend to produce a series of divisions of action along the lines: 'John climbs a tree', 'John fights his father', rather than 'John feels the bark beneath his hand', 'Sweat beads John's brow'. In theatrical terms, this distinction might be described as the distinction between different performance practices: 19<sup>th</sup> century melodrama, later theorised in the work of Vsevolod Meyerhold for example, and 20<sup>th</sup> century psychological realism, represented by the work of, say, Constantin Stanislavski.

### **SLIDE\_08: Shilly-Shally in London Illustrated News**

Although contemporary use of the word 'melodrama' has taken on the sense 'empty exaggeration', the practice of melodrama in the 19<sup>th</sup> century constituted a sophisticated system of gestures and groups of gestures recognised by contemporaneous audiences as communicating a comprehensive range of physical conditions and emotions, as Martin Meisel points out. Both practices are codified regimes that utilise expressive resources and audience expectations in very different ways and, I suspect, the compelling strength of those expectations tends to universalise one regime at the expense of the other.

I was aware that the storyboard rules in *Dispossession*, including this partitioning of action, would generate a book that 21<sup>st</sup> century readers might find unusual to read. However, the adoption of an older theatrical tradition of action grouping and partitioning in the storyboarding of *Dispossession* also acts to place the plot in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is a cue for 21<sup>st</sup> century readers. The visual style underwrites the relationships that *Dispossession* establishes with Trollope's text and with ideas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that contemporary readers bring to the novel. I mention that I think that audience expectations tend to universalise one visual story-telling regime at the expense of others. Both formally and discursively, readers have expectations of the types of stories that particular styles of production habitually show. Habituation itself gives one form of comic strip status relative to another, even formalising a definition of the register itself.

### **SLIDE\_09: Batman Neal Adams 1972**

The importing of conventional movie divisions of time into a graphic storyboard, as in this Batman page by Neal Adams from 1972, is only one type of possible formalisation. All images and sequences of images produce a temporal order of some sort. The association of 'divided motion' with movie storyboarding conventions is only one type of many possible temporal orders. I am only referring to the storyboarding and editing conventions of movie, but these conventions rely, to a great extent, both upon the type images produced by a lens as an ordering principle and upon the idea of visual illusion and the possibility of the occasional deployment of visual illusions.

### **SLIDE\_10: Ivan the Terrible and Gilda**

For example, within movie itself, consider the different effects produced by the adoption of different storyboarding rules. A comparison of two movies made in 1945 illustrates this: Vidor's *Gilda* and Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible Part 1*. The first exemplifies the omniscient 'long, middle, close, cutaway' conventions that Hollywood continues to employ today. The latter constrains the lens in the way a character in the drama itself might be constrained, drawing on 19<sup>th</sup> century performance regimes.

### **SLIDE\_11: Tatami Shot 1 and 2**

The differences in convention, and the expectations and effects they produce, are overwhelming. Similarly, Yasujiro Ozu's pervasive use of the so-called 'tatami shot' in which the lens is positioned at the eye level of a character sitting on a tatami mat, and of ellipses in which the major events in a story remain un-shown, generates a range of dramatic effects categorically unavailable to stories shown under other regimes.<sup>16</sup>

Because each panel in *Dispossession* presents an icon of action rather than the sensation of action, what I will rather recklessly call the 'anaphoras' of the plot are categorically different from the anaphoras in a graphic novel structured by a movie-type regime. I should explain that I mean that anaphoras constitute what the reader can know about the diegesis that is not shown in the plot. I use the word in its linguistic sense, but also to mean both every occurrence that has brought about the plot (it's antecedents) and every occurrence that must proceed causally from the plot (its postcedents), sometimes termed 'anaphoras' and 'cataphoras'. With a movie-type comics storyboard, knowledge of the trajectory of a body moving in space might form a crucial aspect of the anaphoras, as with Adam's Batman page, as a present-time sensation for the reader. The storyboard rules in *Dispossession* make this type of knowledge largely unimportant.

### **SLIDE\_12: Caillebotte AND Holman Hunt**

Arguably, a change in the relative importance accorded to different categories of anaphoras by viewers took place with the advent of movie and photography. If we compare two paintings from the period in which modern photography, then movie appeared, *La Place de l'Europe, temps de pluie* of 1877, a painting by Gustave Caillebotte with *The Children's Holiday* of 1864, a painting by William Holman Hunt, we can see the differences between these categories of 'unshown' knowledge, in which the images become meaningful. In Caillebotte's painting, it is the sense that we know that the image depicts a

moment almost identical to the preceding and successive ones that is significant. In Holman Hunt's painting, the identification of the moment of depiction, relative to surrounding moments, is unimportant. Rather, it is knowledge of the histories of each element in the image, and the juxtaposition of these histories, that is significant. To 21<sup>st</sup> century viewers immersed in lens-based media, Holman Hunt's image highlights the loss of the habit of significantly relating the histories of elements to each other, whereas Caillebotte's extraction of a moment from a continuity of moments exploits the now-expected significance of a type of knowledge of before and after similar to that which makes the 'snapshot', the phone movie or the 'selfie' comprehensible.

### **SLIDE\_13: Marie Duval Judy 1874**

In seeking to replace Trollope's literary voice, then, the regime abandoned many of the conventions of western comics storyboarding expected by contemporary comics readers. I intended the unfamiliarity or dis-habituation of the experience of reading *Dispossession*, compared with habitual expectations of reading a new graphic novel in English or French, to inculcate the strangeness of the diegetic world of the 1870s. In a sense, this unfamiliarity aims to place the reader in an affecting relationship with a vision of the period that is both coherent and comprehensively dis-habituating. *Dispossession* is meant to be dis-habituating to read, in the way that reading some comics of the mid- and late 19<sup>th</sup> century is dis-habituating. I'm thinking particularly of Marie Duval's Ally Sloper pages from the 1870s, the period in which the plot of *Dispossession* takes place. *Dispossession* purposefully shares some of its storyboard regime with these comics in order to create a specific sense of proximity to the past for the reader.

### **SLIDE\_14: Double page spread page 80 and 81**

A corollary of Trollope's consistent use of round after round of accumulated equivocal commentary is the emergence of a specific reading rhythm in *John Caldigate*, to the point where we might claim that this rhythm is a key characteristic of his writing style. It derives entirely from the repetition of equivocal voices to present the plot. Although never mechanical, Trollope's continual round of 'perhaps', 'and yet' and 'it was said of', as it were, creates the pace of the storyboard, more than any event in the plot itself, dictating both a specific diegetic time and the pace of reading. In *Dispossession*, the regularity produces a single pace of reading, modulated only by the time it takes to read different amounts of text or take in or scrutinise drawings for shorter or longer times. Comics layout impacts on the diegesis through speeding or slowing reading, an effect that can be utilised to create sensations of heightened drama or intimacy, or quickly push forward diegetic action. In *Dispossession*, the invariable grid aims to produce an evenness of reading speed as part of the visual replacement of Trollope's style of writing, which is also invariably paced.

The regular rhythm of the page layout influenced the way in which I thought about diegetic space beyond point of view. In particular, establishing this page rhythm alongside the lateral waltz of the storyboard regime achieved the task of creating the sense of a grounded world that is often achieved by the adoption of geometric perspective or the structure of a lens. Rather than the definitive diegetic 'floor' assured by these geometries, *Dispossession* substitutes 'beat', the assurance of equally paced, regular transitions. I thought of this depicted 'floor' as a stage on which scenes regularly come and go, on reflection,

the floor of the stage is quite unlike the 'floor' of a drawing fixed by a geometric projection, that locates points precisely in a closed, systematic representation of space, of which the position of a single eye is absolute arbiter.

### **SLIDE\_15: stage *Next to Normal* Booth Theatre, Broadway 2009**

Alternatively, the floor of the stage is a generalised ground that continually shifts in relation to both viewers and actors. Sometimes, the audience shares the stage and, by extension, shares the diegetic space with characters. Sometime, the stage removes the action from the audience.

### **SLIDE\_16: Chinese landscape painting**

A close visual analogy exists in the regimes for representing space in the Chinese painting tradition. In these regimes, either the top or right of a hand-held or hanging scroll forms a nominal 'most distant' area and the bottom or left forms a nominal 'least distant' area or, elements that are darkest are 'least distant' and elements that are lightest are 'most distant'. In proscenium theatre, stage scenery, flats and drops, stage left/stage right and front can all occupy 'most distant' or 'least distant' positions. Even 'up' and 'down' are mobile concepts, relative to both spectator and action.

In *Dispossession*, the diegetic 'floor' is certainly depicted as something on which the reader might stand, because the reader's eye level most often lies at a similar level to those of the characters. However, this 'floor' is geometrically incoherent, due to the accumulation of depicted elements that bring vestiges of their own, diverse spatial regimes with them into each panel. In particular, rather than utilising geometric projection to unify the view in each panel, I often made characters, props and locations spatially distinct, in order to refer the reader to the idea of 'the stage'. Paradoxically, this process was much aided by the use of collaged photographic elements in constructing each diegetic location and the action taking place within it. These elements finally succumbed to the specific motivation of the drawings, and were erased.

### **SLIDE\_17: page 36**

But they contributed some of the local details and internal proximities that produce the historic verisimilitude in the drawings and left a residue of contrasting special regimes deriving from the process of collage itself. This is most obvious in panels where I have used the extreme changes of scale in close proximity, or a type of 'discordia concors' (union of opposites) associated with both Mannerism and, in theatrical terms, the early performance traditions of the *Commedia dell'Arte*.

This range of scopic regimes constitute the robust temporal bones of *Dispossession*, introducing and then making profound the physical character of the diegesis. About the ways in which the facture of its drawings also contributes to this character, I will have to leave for another paper.

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### Illustrations

Fig. 1. Simon Grennan, *Dispossession* (London: Jonathan Cape 2015); front cover

Fig. 2. Simon Grennan, *Dispossession* (London: Jonathan Cape 2015); 81

Fig. 3. Simon Grennan, *Dispossession* (London: Jonathan Cape 2015); 27

Fig. 4. Simon Grennan, *Dispossession* (London: Jonathan Cape 2015); 45

Fig. 5. Simon Grennan, *Dispossession* (London: Jonathan Cape 2015); 8

Fig. 6. Simon Grennan, *Dispossession* (London: Jonathan Cape 2015); 21

Fig. 7. Simon Grennan, *Dispossession* (London: Jonathan Cape 2015); 48