

“Sung Reading”: An Operatic Approach to P. Craig Russell’s Graphic Novel *The Ring of the Nibelung*

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Abstract: In response to Gardner’s indication of the need to “turn to orality and performance” in studying comics, I offer a semiotic foundation towards a performative reading of the graphic novel by drawing analogies to opera as a narrative medium. I will examine the semiotics of the graphic novel, then compare these with corresponding sign systems in opera based on how these systems work to create the story in the mind of the reader/viewer. I will conduct this study via the methodology of the “Reading Drama” approach to theatrical interpretation, which explores the fusion of text and performance in the silent reading of a dramatic work, and apply these methods to the reading of P. Craig Russell’s graphic novel renditions of Wagner’s four-part opera *The Ring of the Nibelung*. I argue that this multi-layered performance and textual awareness leads to the richest experience of the storyworld in reading graphic novels and may be used both to expand our understanding of the genre’s potential both as a narrative medium and to challenge reading strategies tailored to a primarily word-based textual imagination.

Keywords: semiotics, comics, graphic novel, opera, P. Craig Russell, Richard Wagner, *Ring of the Nibelung*

“唱读”：克雷格·拉塞尔漫画小说《尼伯龙根指环》的歌剧式分析

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摘要：加德纳提出漫画研究需向口头表达和演示转向，作为对此要求

的回应,本文提出一种漫画小说演示性阅读的符号学基础,并且将此与歌剧中相应的符号系统进行对比,以期挖掘这些符号系统是如何在读者/观看者的头脑中创造出故事的。笔者将以“戏剧阅读”作为方法论去探究戏剧的阐释,即戏剧作品在安静的阅读过程中所产生的文本与演出融合的过程。本文将综合以上研究方法以探究克雷格·拉塞尔的漫画小说对瓦格纳的四部歌剧《尼伯龙根指环》的演绎。多层次的表演和文本意识丰富了阅读漫画小说时对故事世界的体验,并进一步拓展了我们对体裁潜力——即作为叙述媒介,又作为对用于主要基于词汇的文本想象力的阅读策略的挑战——的认识。

关键词: 符号学 漫画 漫画小说 歌剧 格雷格·拉塞尔 理查德·瓦格纳 《尼伯龙根指环》

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I . Introduction

Comics studies^① is a rapidly expanding field that has particularly attracted the attention of narrative scholars (Chute, Cohn, Gardner, 2012, Groensteen, Postema, Warhol) as a dynamic and versatile storytelling medium, for which they continue to develop a theoretical vocabulary. In his essay “Storylines”, narrative theorist and comics scholar Jared Gardner (2011) calls for a new theoretical framework for comics studies that comes from an unexpected source:

I would suggest that a narrative theory of the comics form requires a turn to orality and performance studies as much as it does a turn to the more obvious traditions of art theory. (p. 67)

In response to Gardner’s indication of the need to “turn to orality and performance” in studying comics, I offer a semiotic foundation towards a performative reading of the graphic novel by drawing analogies to opera as a

① In this essay, I follow Will Eisner in *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* in defining comics as “[a] form of sequential art, often in the form of a strip or a book, in which images and text are arranged to tell a story” (p. xvii). Since this is such a broad genre, incorporating everything from the Sunday funny papers to monthly superhero serials to online comics, this study will focus on one subgenre of comics, the graphic novel, defined here as “an extended narrative geared towards adult readers and incorporating both text and images” (Herman, Jahn and Ryan, 2005, p. 72).

narrative medium. I will examine the semiotics (defined as “the study of signs” [Chandler 1]) of the graphic novel, then compare these with corresponding sign systems in opera based on how these systems work to create the story in the mind of the reader/viewer.^① I will conduct this study via the methodology of the “Reading Drama” approach to theatrical interpretation, which explores the fusion of text and performance in the silent reading of a dramatic work, and apply these methods to the reading of P. Craig Russell’s graphic novel renditions of Wagner’s four-part opera *The Ring of the Nibelung*.^② I argue that this multi-layered performance and textual awareness leads to the richest experience of the storyworld^③ in reading graphic novels and may be used both to expand our understanding of the genre’s potential both as a narrative medium and to challenge reading strategies tailored to a primarily word-based textual imagination.

A. Russell’s *Ring*

My “stage” for illustrating these claims will be P. Craig Russell’s monumental graphic novel renditions of Richard Wagner’s four-opera sequence *The Ring of the Nibelung*. The *Ring* sequence has been called Russell’s “career opus” (Russell, *Ring* Vol. 1, 2002, back cover); conceived and executed over a period of nearly twenty years and totaling over four hundred pages, Russell’s *Ring* is a masterful display of virtuosity in the fusion of art and storytelling.

B. Wagner’s *Ring*

Wagner’s *Ring* itself is an appropriate subject for the development of an

① I am aware that in making these claims, my underlying assumptions fall in favor of literary universals, which may be a point of controversy but is beyond the scope of this essay at the present. In this case I refer to Patrick Colm Hogan’s “Literary Universals” (*Poetics Today*, 18.2), which addresses this issue in depth.

② Philip Craig Russell (b. 1951 in Wellsville, Ohio) has been described by his biographer as one of the unsung geniuses in contemporary sequential art (Dave Sim, Pruett 6 [introduction]). His style is very lyrical (Pruett, 2007, p. 202), with long, flowing lines, rich colors, and often abstract designs. Apart from working in mainstream comics under publishing giants such as Marvel and DC Comics, he is also known for his work in more traditionally “literary” genres, such as his *Fairy-Tales of Oscar Wilde*, several short stories of Neil Gaiman, and a series of graphic novels based on operas (eleven to date, with plans in development for a twelfth).

③ Storyworld: “the world evoked implicitly as well as explicitly by a narrative [...] Storyworlds are global mental representations enabling interpreters to frame inferences about the situations, characters, and occurrences either explicitly mentioned in or implied by a narrative text or discourse.” (Herman, 2009, 106)

interdisciplinary theory of multimedia storytelling. Completed in 1874, the four operas served as the culmination of his theory of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or “total artwork”, as presented in his 1852 essay *Opera and Drama*. The aim of creating a *Gesamtkunstwerk* was to combine all the arts (music, poetry, dance, etc.) to create a “music drama” that engulfed the audience in a total artistic experience. The ideal medium for such an experiential work is the immediacy of live performance: “The very genesis of the *Ring* attests to a longing for presentation, for the physical force of embodiment in performance, over representation and the suspicions attached to the written and silently read word.” (Abbate, 1991, p. 160) However, Abbate goes on to observe that Wagner often broke his own rules of presentation over representation in his tendency towards long narrative passages describing past events, which “lie somewhere between these dualistic extremes; on the one hand, they are narrative representations, while on the other, the act of narrating is live, the voice of the narrator speaks and sings” (p. 160). Perhaps Wagner would accept a graphic novel rendition of his extremely visual operas as the inverse of his own dualistic narrative techniques: though lacking the immediacy of live opera, the graphic novels nonetheless retain Wagner’s preference for visual presentation over purely verbal representation. Furthermore, I suggest that the graphic novel on one level incorporates some of the best characteristics of both live performance and text: the raw immediacy of visual presentation fused with the intimacy of the printed word, which gives the reader the time and mental space she needs to immerse the text in her own imagination.^① As I argue in this essay, within the “crucible of the imagination”^② lies the key to connecting oral performance and the graphic novel.

① There are certainly limitations to the graphic novel form as well: relying solely on word and image, it can in no way compensate for communicative channels such as hearing and motion that are available to live opera. Nor can it express complicated or abstract concepts with the precision of a prose novel. However, each particular medium has a unique combination of expressive possibilities and limitations; I suggest that the particular characteristics of the graphic novel as fusion of word and image make it a strong choice to place at the center of a study of the intersection between performance and text.

② This phrase stems from my analysis of the scene in which Siegfried forges the sword “Nothung” (Russell, 2002b.)

II. Theory

A. Narrative Media

My primary contention in comparing opera and graphic novels is that both are narrative media, which is facilitated by David Herman's definition of narrative in *Basic Elements of Narrative*.^① Assuming a fundamental narrative structure, a story's mediation will rely significantly upon the nature of the respective medium, for which I turn to Marie-Laure Ryan's *Narrative Across Media*. Ryan offers two key characteristics towards the definition of a narrative medium:

(i) [The choice in medium] must make a difference about what kind of narrative messages can be transmitted, how these messages are presented, or how they are experienced.

(ii) [The medium] must present a unique combination of features.
(Ryan, 2004, p. 19)

Ryan designates two such features, "spatio-temporal extension" and "sensory dimension" as "primary taxonomic categories" (p. 19) in comparing narrative media and presents a chart of various narrative media organized according to these categories. The column headings are temporal, spatial, and spatio-temporal, each of which is broken into the number of sensory channels, which include linguistic,

① Herman defines a "narrative" according to the following criteria:

(i) A representation that is situated in—must be interpreted in light of—a specific discourse context or occasion for telling.

(ii) The representation, furthermore, cues interpreters to draw inferences about structured time-course of particular events.

(iii) In turn, these events are such that they introduce some sort of disruption or disequilibrium into a storyworld involving human or human-like agents, whether the world is presented as actual or fictional, realistic or fantastic, remembered or dreamed, etc.

(iv) The representation also conveys the *experience* of living through this storyworld-in-flux, highlighting the pressure of events on real or imagined consciousnesses affected by the occurrences at issue. (Herman, 2005, p. xvi)

These criteria—which Herman abbreviates as (i) situatedness, (ii) event sequencing, (iii) worldmaking/world disruption, and (iv) what's it like (*ibid.*)—apply in theory to all narrative mediations. For the purposes of this essay I assume that these characteristics belong to both opera and graphic novels as two different modes of storytelling.

acoustic, visual, static, and kinetic. Both opera and graphic novels (here under the category “comic strips”) fall under the spatio-temporal, multiple sensory channel column: graphic novels are “linguistic-visual (static)” and opera is “linguistic-acoustic-visual (kinetic)” (p. 21). The discrepancies are significant: static (graphic novel) versus kinetic (opera), not to mention the addition of another sensory channel altogether (acoustic). Even so, there is more common ground (spatio-temporal, multiple channel, linguistic-visual) between these two narrative media than one might originally assume at first glance. I will explore this common ground between opera and graphic novels in their systems of representation, as well as address the points of difference, in order to demonstrate how Russell’s graphic novel *Ring* sequence can be read in the light of its operatic source.

B. Theatrical Narratology: Reading Drama

In “Towards a Theatrical Narratology?” Karel Vanhaesebrouck provides an overview of the major developments in the narrative theory of theater and drama around the turn of the millennium. He observes the movement from literary to visual semiotics, calls for an expansion on the concept of the “text”, and suggests that “an integrated approach which would combine the insights of both narratology and visual semiotics” would be the best method of addressing the tensions between “temporal linearity” and “visual simultaneity” inherent in the semiotic study of theater (Vanhaesebrouck, 2011, n. p.). The tensions between the “simultaneity” of images and the “linearity” of time in oral performance also play a key role in the study of graphic novels as sequential visual/verbal narrative. This essay aims to provide precisely the “integrated approach” of narrative theory and visual semiotics for graphic novels that Vanhaesebrouck suggests would be useful for addressing these related tensions in theater.

One of the approaches Vanhaesebrouck highlights is the Reading Drama model, which he describes as a “happy mean between a purely text-centered approach [...] and an exclusively performance-centered approach” (Vanhaesebrouck, 2011, n. p.). Manfred Jahn identifies the Reading Drama approach in “Narrative Voice and Agency in Drama” as one method of “bringing narratology to bear on the theory and analysis of plays” (Jahn, 2003, p. 662). The ideology of the Reading Drama model assumes that the fullest enjoyment of the drama lies at the junction between text and

performance, as Jahn writes:

Reading Drama [...] envisages an ideal reader who is both a reader and a theatergoer—a reader who appreciates the text with a view to possible or actual performance, and a theatergoer who (re) appreciates a performance through his or her knowledge (and rereading) of the text. (ibid.)

Or, as David Scanlan puts it more succinctly in *Reading Drama*: “The richness of the drama is most fully experienced when the reader is simultaneously aware of the structural and performance dimensions of the play.” (Scanlan, 1998, p. iii) The goals of the Reading Drama model include a new appreciation of the aesthetic value of a dramatic text and “the promotion of a cross-disciplinary exchange between critics, theorists, and theater practitioners” (Jahn, 2003, p. 662)—objectives with which the development of a performance theory of graphic novels is well in line.

Jahn identifies three primary reading strategies of the Reading Drama school:

- (i) performance-oriented textual analysis;
- (ii) focus on the “secondary text” (stage directions);
- (iii) comparing the reading of plays to the reading of novels. (ibid.)

In this study I will employ primarily^① the first reading strategy, which Scanlan identifies as reading by imagining the text in performance (Scanlan, 1998, p. 22).^② This strategy requires viewing the theatrical text (script) according to Issacharoff’s definition as “*the place of inscription of virtual performance*” (Issacharoff, 1989, p. 4; author’s italics). “Virtual performance”—the performance as imagined by the reader, based on the concrete textual elements given in the script—takes place in

① I also implicitly incorporate the second and third strategies. In discussing the visual elements of the graphic novel, I consider these images to explicitly depict what is implied or described in the stage directions, making them analogous to the “secondary text” of a dramatic text—whether the visual texts are indeed the “secondary text” in the graphic novel sign system is beyond the scope of this current discussion. The nature of this study itself is founded on the third strategy, “comparing the reading of plays to the reading of novels”, which I adapt (following the performance/text dichotomy) to “comparing the reading of operas to the reading of graphic novels”. However, my primary method of analysis emphasizes the first reading strategy.

② This strategy allows me to apply the vocabulary of performance studies directly to my analysis of the text, with the understanding that this language applies metaphorically to the physical text of the graphic novel and literally to the story’s representation in the imagination.

the “theatre of the mind” (Grabes, 1991, p. 96), which Scanlan posits as “imagining dramatic space.”: “When we imagine the characters of a play interacting in a particular setting, we are imagining space in a dramatic way. Or, to coin a term, we are imagining *dramatic space*.” (p. 13; author’s italics) Issacharoff defines this space in live theater as “twofold: at once verbal and visual”:

Visual insofar as the Word became flesh: the discourse becomes spectacle in the shape of décor, properties, lighting, and actors’ bodies. It is verbal too, since there is a space or spaces explicitly referred to by characters onstage. (Issacharoff, 1989, p. 68)

In imagining dramatic space, the reader learns to “read with an especially active visual imagination” (Jahn, 2003, p. 662)—to read not just the words, but also the multisensory, “lived” action and physical setting in which and with which the verbal dimension is synthesized. Scolnicov and Holland note the awareness of non-verbal aspects as a growing trend in reading plays and claim that “[t]he spatial and temporal dimensions embedded in the play need to be understood both in scenic and conceptual terms apart from their realization in production” (Scolnicov, Holland, 1991, p. 1); in other words, the existence of the dramatic text itself reminds us that the storyworld of the drama does not exist upon the stage alone. This is a crucial point in developing a transmedial narratology: if the narrative exists solely in a mediated form, then there is little point to comparing two genres as apparently disparate as opera and graphic novels. However, if the narrative exists at least to some degree on a “conceptual” level, it is not only appropriate but indeed necessary^① to examine the sign systems according to which the story is mediated.^②

William Germano’s essay “Reading at the Opera”, which explores the phenomenon of reading in experiencing an opera, “from seventeenth-century printed

① Necessary in the sense that it is otherwise very easy to fall for the “temptation of immediacy” which fosters a misconception of stories as bordering on “magic” (Chauvet, 2001, p. 65; concept applied through analogy). Stories are always mediated, and this mediation itself often plays a crucial role in the creation of its “meaning” (see Chapter 1 “The Medium is the Message” of *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* [McLuhan, 1964/1994, pp. 7–21]).

② For a more detailed exploration of the tensions between these two conflicting conceptions of narrative mediations, see the introduction to *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling* (Ryan, 2004, pp. 1–40).

libretti to electronically delivered titles”(Germano, 2010, p. 881), takes us the final step from drama in general into the world of opera. His summary of his conclusions is exquisite and captures the heart of the Reading Drama approach:

If opera’s semiotics replaces speech with sung speech, perhaps we should consider our cognitive engagements with opera’s text not simply as reading but as “*sung reading*”. In the opera world, bodies take operations we know from the speech world and transform them. *Our operatic reading*—in our balcony or orchestra seats, at home, at the computer screen, in a movie theatre, on a mobile phone while waiting for the box office to open—*draws us into opera’s performative sphere*. The body remembers melody, aria, the shapely drama of a musical climax, but the operatic genre needs reading to make these things meaningful. (ibid., p. 897) [italics mine]

These are the foundations upon which I will conduct a “performance-oriented textual analysis” (Jahn, 2003, p. 662) towards the development of a performance theory of P. Craig Russell’s *The Ring of the Nibelung*^①: like opera, graphic novels present a story through “images of human action” (Scanlan, 1988, p. 2) in a medium that is “at once verbal and visual” (Issacharoff, 1989, p. 68). The story comes to life not on the stage but rather through the imagination of the reader (Scanlan, 1988, p. 13) in the “theatre of the mind”(Grabes, 1991, p. 96). An awareness of the layered “structural and performance dimensions” (Scanlan, 1988, p. iii) in understanding the text as “the place of inscription of virtual performance” (Issacharoff, 1989, p. 4) transcends the text in order to “draw us into opera’s performative sphere” (Germano, 2010, p. 897). This leads to the richest experience of the storyworld in reading the graphic novel: by becoming aware of the way it is

① For the time being, I apply this theory only to P. Craig Russell’s graphic novels which are based on operas, have no diegetic narration, and closely follow the original dialogue and story sequence. This includes his *The Ring of the Nibelung* sequence, *Pagliacci*, *Salome*, *Pelleas and Melisande*, and *The Godfather’s Code* (*Cavalleria Rusticana*). These criteria also exclude Russell’s *The Magic Flute* in that it departs significantly from the original story sequence and text (both spoken and sung) and his *Parsifal*, which includes blocks of prose narrative which do not appear in the original libretto. I was unable to obtain a libretto for *Ariane and Bluebeard* for evaluation. Perhaps with future development this theory could be modified for a more universal application, but for now I limit my scope to these eight works, with the *Ring* as the focal point of my analysis.

constructed through analogy to a medium that has many similar characteristics but also distinct differences, we as readers are forced to “slow down and de-automatize the rapid, apparently effortless interpretive processes involved in experiencing narrative worlds” (Herman, 2009, p. 105). Above all, we learn to appreciate the text for what it is, as a physically mediated narrative, rather than let the magic of the story cast its allure over us so fully that we forget its roots in the nuts and bolts of our own(very human) world.

III. Analysis

In my analysis of the graphic novels, I will focus on the following major points of similarity between the media of theater and graphic novels: (i) representational storytelling through a visual/verbal sign system; (ii) necessity of synthetic/participatory “reading” on the part of the receiver; (ii) framing of time; and (iv) text-conscious communicative display. I will then illustrate how in comics these elements work together to create communication through (virtual) performance.

A. Drama Occurs in Imaginary Space through Visual/Verbal Language



Figure 1 Siegmund Enters the Home of Hunding and Sieglinde (Russell, 2002a)

Both theater and graphic novels are representational. In a drama, the story is not really being lived on the stage—those who “die” onstage get up after the show and go about their business—but is rather suggested to the viewers’ imaginations

verbally by the dialogue, visually by the actors' bodies, faces, and gestures, as well as the setting, lighting, and props, and aurally by voices and music (especially in the case of opera)^①. Driven by the fusion of words and images, graphic novels employ a similar verbal/visual sign-system in representing the story, using signs very similar to those in the language of theatrical semiotics.^② Indeed, even before the artist begins his or her work, the writer or writers often formulate a plan very similar to a script: a chart of the dialogue, accompanied by descriptions of what is going on visually in the scene (similar to stage directions in a theatrical script).

Russell demonstrates this similarity in sign-systems in his depiction of the opening scene of *The Valkyrie*, Wagner's second *Ring* opera.^③ As the opera opens, the exhausted hero Siegmund takes refuge from a thunderstorm in a house he stumbles upon in the woods. He enters from the back left of the panel; we see his exhaustion in his stooped posture, one knee bent almost to the ground, as his left hand rests against the door for support. His clothes speak of duress as well; his cloak is ragged and his shirt, as we see in a later panel, is ripped off at the left shoulder. He speaks: "WHOEVER OWNS THIS HEARTH, I MUST REST HERE." His words, captured in the bubble which is the standard icon indicating spoken words in a graphic novel, serve both to confirm this visual portrayal of exhaustion and also to draw the reader's attention to the space of the room itself.

The dominant feature of the house is a large, gnarled tree directly in the middle of the floor, around which all the other features are arranged. At the base of the tree we see the outline of a sword, covered in shadows despite its proximity to the fireplace, the major source of light in the room; this lighting choice emphasizes the mystery shrouding the sword and sets us up to share in Siegmund's epiphany once he

① The narrativity of music is still under debate (see Herman, Jahn, and Ryan, 2005, pp. 324 – 329; Walsh, 2011; Tarasti, 1979; and Ryan, 2004, pp. 267 – 328), especially since a great deal of music is not representational—that is, it does not refer to anything other than itself. However, Wagner made considerable use of leitmotifs specifically associated with a character or concept, and which could be used to refer to a character even when he or she was not onstage. For example, at the end of *Die Walküre* as Brünnhilde lies asleep encircled by flames, we hear the "Siegfried" motif which foreshadows the hero who will come to awaken her in the next opera.

② As a page-based medium, graphic novels cannot wholly account for the aural elements of a drama, though these can be suggested through altering the text and bubbles; the issue of representing music will be addressed later.

③ No page numbers are given in any of the *Ring* graphic novels.

is “enlightened” as to the sword’s significance. Moving from the door counterclockwise around the room, we see a set of antlers against the wall with a chest of some sort underneath, an adz or pick-axe resting against it. Lying next to it is a horned helmet and a shield with a small hand-axe lying atop it; to the right of this is a table resting atop a wolf pelt, with what appears to be a bear pelt draped over the top, and a bench off to the side. Siegmund has not entered the house of a simple forest-dweller but rather a warrior and a hunter; this choice of item salerts the reader that danger is amiss and foreshadow the conflict to come.

In the foreground of the cut-away “fourth wall” is the bottom of a glowing lantern, hanging from a source which lies somewhere over the uppermost limit of the panel. Continuing around to the rightmost wall, there is a broom, a chopping-axe, and a vessel filled with wood underneath a window and next to the fireplace; this fire and the lantern in the foreground provide the primary sources of light for the scene, which casts a golden glow over the entire space. Finishing the circuit of the room, there are jars atop the hearth, a lantern and coal-shovel to the lower left, and stairs leading up to another, inner door at the rightmost corner of the back wall. The total space is encompassed in a large panel which takes up approximately one-third of the page; like the frame of a theatrical stage, the complete view of the setting is established in one shot in which the “fourth wall” of the house is cut away. The panel itself emphasizes the expansiveness of this space: the left, right, and top edges of the rectangle coincide with the edges of the page, giving a sense of space expanding beyond the limits of the page. (McCloud, 1993, p. 103)

Russell’s love for architecture is seen in the attention he pays to detail in establishing the space of the house. Before undertaking the final drawing, he sketched the house from all angles—outside from a distance, in cross section, at an angle, from the ceiling downward—in order to develop a consistent sense of the space; as the introduction to *Volume 1* comments, accompanied by Russell’s initial sketches, “It was important for the room [in the opening of *The Valkyrie*] to be architecturally consistent, so the reader would grow familiar with the setting and get the impression that it’s a real place” (Russell, 2002a, p. 11). As the perspective shifts in the panels that follow, the readers can hold this single panel in their minds as a frame of reference—like a mental “stage”—in order to keep their “bearings” of the setting. Thus, Siegmund’s words, posture, gestures, and clothing, as well as the

physical setting, presentation of space, choice of items, and lighting all serve as icons in a verbal/visual sign system, setting up the drama to unfold through a variety of communicative “channels”.

B. Active Synthesis Is Required on the Part of the Viewers



Figure 2 Siegfried Reforges His Father's Sword (Russell, 2002b)

Though both theater and graphic novels may have a narrator to synthesize the progression of the story, this element is not essential to these media in the same way that it is in a novel. As we explored above in the previous passage, theater and graphic novels are mimetic media—that is, they tell a story by *showing* or representing it rather than *telling* about it, as would be the case in a diegetic narrative such as a prose short story. This dichotomy has led to the common belief

that reading graphic novels is “easier” or requires less effort because the visual material is already supplied to aid the reader’s imagination.

However, a different reading strategy is required in approaching a graphic novel, an approach more analogous to reading a theatrical performance. In both live theater and graphic novels, there is often a great deal happening in the focal space at a single time. Because there is no narrator, the reader/viewer must synthesize and interpret these numerous elements in their own interior narrative “stream” in order to make sense of and relate to the story. In the case of the theater, all the action happens on the space of the stage amidst all the elements discussed above: dialogue, facial expression, voices, gestures, costumes, setting, props, lighting, music, and so forth. The viewers are constantly bombarded with communicative signals on nearly every sensory channel, and some, such as visual, are superloaded to the point that the viewers cannot take in everything at once; they must choose the messages that they interpret as the most significant and connect them into a coherent storyline. Certain conventions act as guidelines, such as spotlights and distinctive costumes to clearly differentiate each major figure; even so, it takes some degree of active concentration for the viewer to synthesize and appreciate the various story elements.

Likewise, when opening up a graphic novel, the reader is greeted by an assortment of panels of various shapes and sizes, often bright colors and with bursts of text bubbles scattered throughout. Each panel generally contains a different aspect or moment of the story, often from shifting angles or perspectives, which the reader must synthesize into a unified story. As with theater, certain conventions aid the reader, such as the tendency for English speakers to read left to right (versus the Japanese *manga*, which read from right to left); even so, the reading process is multidimensional, rather than the traditionally linear reading of prose.

P. Craig Russell’s storytelling techniques present an excellent illustration of a need for synthetic reading. It is not unusual for one of his page spreads to be broken into anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five separate panels. He pays particular attention to small but significant details and will usually double the allotted number of panels for telling a story in order to emphasize a significant moment or visually emphasize a certain phrase in the dialogue (Pruett, 2007, p. 196). This is demonstrated very clearly at the end of the first part of *Siegfried*, Wagner’s third *Ring* opera. The hero

Siegfried has just received the shards of his deceased father's sword, Nothung ("Needful")^①, and plans to forge them together so he can fight the dragon Fafnir. He files the shards into shreds, melts the shreds in a crucible, and pours the molten metal into a mold, to be hammered out on the anvil once it cools. In writing this scene, Wagner meticulously researched the process of forging a sword and included detailed stage directions for the performance in the score, coordinated with specific sections of the music. Russell pays tribute to this realism in his own meticulous portrayal: the forging scene occupies nearly 75 panels and includes multiple images of every step of the process, along with Siegfried's running commentary of his actions (stemming from Wagner's original libretto). In approaching this scene the reader must, like Siegfried, take the various "shreds" of detail and melt them together in the "crucible" of the mind in order to produce a single, coherent narrative trajectory of his actions. For example, in panels 14 through 19 of the forging scene, we see first an apparently short, thin panel on the right edge of the page in which a pair of hands grasp a rope, along with the text bubble "A SONG WILL MAKE THE WORK GO FASTER". On closer inspection, this panel (occupied by the rope) extends all the way to the top edge of the page; as with the indefinite edges of the house in *The Valkyrie*, we get the sense that the rope extends into space somewhere beyond us—certainly over Siegfried's head, and perhaps over our heads as well, if we hold our books upright. In the strip of panels below, we see a full shot of Siegfried pulling on the rope, which is attached to a bellows; the frame is tipped backwards slightly, and yellow smoke rises from the crucible sitting amidst the coals. The next panel is very thin and focuses on the deflated air chamber; it is about one-third the height of the panel, with very thin brown and gray lines indicating the layers of flexible material and supportive framework, and we can see the apparatus it is hooked to on top. Following this are two small panels stacked on top of each other, both with Siegfried holding the rope; in the upper panel, his arms are above his head, and in the panel below, he has lowered his grasp to below waist level. The final panel in this sequence focuses on the air chamber yet again; this time the gray and brown layers occupy nearly the entire panel and are stretched to their fullest extent. Over

① We have encountered both his father (Sigmund) and the sword Nothung (stuck in the base of the tree) in the previous analysis of the opening of *The Valkyrie*.

these images are layered the following words:

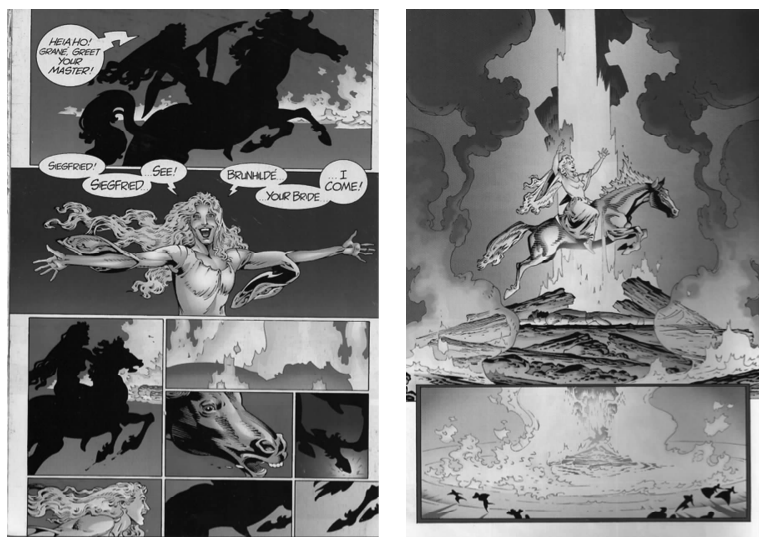
HO HO, HO HO! THE BELLOWS BLOW!
 COOKING THE METAL, NOTHUNG THE BROKEN.
 ONCE HELD IN HERO'S HAND...
 HUSBAND TO SIEGLINDE...
 ...BACK TO THE FLAMES AGAIN...
 ...THERE TO BE MENDED. ①

There is quite a bit of information packed into these six small panels. Visually, we as readers integrate the fragments of action and machinery into a mentally unbroken sequence of Siegfried pumping the bellows, a process which may be largely unfamiliar during modern times. His brows are furrowed and his eyes are closed; even with his strength and well-defined muscles, this task still requires most of his exertion, which adds a dimension of kinesthetic imagination. We as readers may not be familiar with a bellows, but we know how our own muscles flex and strain and burn when we exert ourselves physically. Moreover, the indication that Siegfried's words are a song to "make the work go faster" hints at an auditory dimension that cannot be portrayed either visually or verbally but may rather be suggested to the imagination—so we add Siegfried's singing to the mix, and most likely the hiss and creak of the bellows as it pumps air to fan the flames. Finally, we get a glimpse into his interior state. As he sings, he thinks of his father, who once held this sword, and his mother Sieglinde, whose name he just learned that very day when he received the shards of the sword. Now he, their son, mends the sword to use it as his own. This reminds us that in forging this sword, Siegfried is doing more than craftwork—he is simultaneously bringing together the bits and pieces he knows of his history in order to forge his own identity as an individual and, in fighting the dragon Fafnir, as a hero. This layering of exterior and interior synthesis provides the driving narrative force for this scene, which the readers emulate in piecing together

① The text in Russell's *Ring* (translated by Patrick Mason) generally follows Wagner's libretto very closely; Russell marked his panel divisions on a copy of the original German text. The forging scene departs from the libretto in precise vocabulary and inclusion of repeated phrases such as "*Hoho! Hoho! Hohei! Hohei! Hoho! / Blase, Balg! Blase die Glut!*" (Hoho etc./Blow, bellows! Blow the embers!) which corresponds to the first (italicized) sentence. The following lines regarding Siegfried's parents are not part of the original libretto; they stem from an emphasis on Siegfried's coming-of-age as a hero that Russell weaves throughout the third segment.

the various images into a coherent whole.

C. Framed/Symphonic Time



Figures 3 The Death of Brunhilde (Russell, 2002b)

Sound can be suggested graphically and verbally to the reader's imagination; however, it cannot be directly represented. In viewing graphic novels through the lens of theatrical performance, this is a loss but not a major one, since both theater and graphic novels signify primarily through visual and verbal channels. The main complication lies in connection to representations of another theatrical genre: opera. What happens to the dimension of meaning in opera expressed through music in a translation of a story from the stage to the page? Visual portrayal cannot make up for the dynamic effects of music to the listener's aural imagination—nothing on the silent page can make up for the experience of lived sound.

One possible answer to this conundrum may be to approach it from another direction, one that takes the other functions of music into account. Though mediated through sound, music is measured through the vocabulary of time and pacing: beats per minute, common time, cut time, *accelerando*, quarter notes, whole notes, time signatures, *allegretto*. Time in opera is defined by the music, which runs entirely detached from the “clock time” of the audience. An exchange of romantic dialogue, which in real life takes a few minutes may last up to a quarter of an hour in an

opera. The composer uses that time to explore emotional dimensions of the characters that could not be expressed via purely verbal or even verbal/kinesthetic means, such as giving the two voices individual lines before bringing them together to sing in unison, as a sign of their developing romantic bond. The musical expression *tempo rubato*, or “robbed time”, captures this concept well. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music* defines *tempo rubato* as: “[a] feature of performance in which strict time is for a while disregarded [...] When this is done with genuine artistry and instinctive musical sensibility, the effect is to impart an admirable sense of freedom and spontaneity.” *Encyclopedia Britannica* further notes that this is a characteristic of certain types of “orally transmitted music”, such as folksongs (“Rubato [music]”), a key point of connection in approaching graphic novels through the framework of oral performance.

Graphic novels have their own distinct system of literally framing time: through the paneling itself. There is no one-to-one ratio that a certain unit of space equals a certain unit of time, but generally each new panel is taken as a distinct segment of time, with the amount of time between each segment inferred by the reader. A panel cannot be said to automatically represent a “snapshot” or cross-section of time, particularly if it contains speech bubbles because the spoken word represented is spoken in sound and therefore in space and diachronic time (at least in the storyworld). Neither is it a particularly linear time but rather closer to the aesthetics of the “robbed time” of music, in which some moments may be “stretched” more than others. This metaphor for stretching is especially appropriate to the manipulation of time in graphic novels: large or wide panels tend to suggest a greater amount of time, while small or thin panels designate a shorter period of time. The concentration of panels in a space, too, changes, the sense of time; the “pacing” of a page with twenty-five panels will seem much faster and more hectic than that of a page with ten panels.

In discussing his paneling and “rhythms” of storytelling, P. Craig Russell often uses the metaphor of music. He designates paneling as “one of the most effective tools we have; that’s the most unique to this form. It’s like tension and release, and forte and piano, in music” (qtd. Pruett, 2007, p. 202). He acknowledges a debt to “classical music, especially the romantic era” (Wagner’s era of composition) in his fluid transitions between images and, like romantic composers stretching certain

moments to musically explore interior development, uses the panel size to “reflect the emotions of the characters” (ibid.). Joe Pruett describes his style as “lyrical” in its use of time:

Russell modulates panel sizes much as a musician relies on phrasing to accentuate notes. Panel arrangements that are not merely formulaic can be symphonic to the eyes [...] He possesses graceful linework and his panel arrangements have a melodic quality. Some moments are sustained while others are subdivided. (ibid.)

Of particular interest is Pruett’s observation that aesthetically arranged panels can be “symphonic to the eyes”. Like an orchestra composed of different sections of instruments playing various lines, a graphic novel page has a number of paneled “moments” presented simultaneously. Whatever is established in one panel in terms of size, shape, color scheme, content, level of detail, etc., needs to be taken into account with all the other panels on the page so that everything “harmonizes”, or, in Russell’s terms, has a “storytelling rhythm” (p. 196) from every angle of the page.^①

The scene of Brunhilde’s immolation at the end of the fourth opera, *The Twilight of the Gods*, exemplifies both Russell’s symphonic panel arrangement and his use of paneling to establish story-time and emotion. Siegfried is dead, and Brunhilde, his lover, prepares to join him in death by riding her horse onto his funeral pyre. The panels on the first page have the same color scheme: red, black, yellow, orange, and white. The figure qualities balance between silhouettes (top panel, lower middle left, and right corner) and filled-in figures (center, lower center, and lower left). The paneling, too, is well-balanced: two large rectangles occupy the upper half (one with edges that extend all the way to the edge of the page; the lower half consists of seven panels that decrease in size moving from the upper left to the lower right. This size arrangement suits well the storytelling flow and aesthetic arrangement of time. The first panel establishes the dramatic shot of Brunhilde’s horse rearing in silhouette as she points towards the flames; the second, of approximately equal size (but greater weight due to its greater detail) shows Brunhilde in a moment of frenzied joy as she cries aloud, “SIEGFRIED! SIEGFRIED... SEE! BRUNHILDE... YOUR

① This simultaneity of presentation is more in keeping with the totality of the theatrical and operatic stage than with film, which shows each shot in isolated succession.

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BRIDE...I COME!” Her arms are wide open, and her hair and sleeves whip wildly in the wind. The pacing and emotion increases dramatically in the lower half; as mentioned, the panels decrease in size from upper left to lower right, which heightens the pace, similar to a musical *accelerando*. We see less and less of the scene with each shot, giving the sense of a frenzied jumble of rushing images: Brunhilde on her horse, Siegfried’s outline on the funeral pyre, Brunhilde’s joyful face, the horse foaming at the mouth, pounding hooves striking sparks—then a leaping torso, two back hooves and the tip of a tail—then the reader turns the page to two large panels. The largest one takes up three-quarters of the page and portrays the moment when Brunhilde leaps into the flames, arms raised in exultation; the lower quarter-page panel depicts, from a distance, the burst of flame as she and the horse are engulfed, with tiny figures running away at the edge of the flame. Musically speaking, this would be the moment when the orchestra accelerates into a resounding epiphanic chord, perhaps with a high C in the soprano voice lasting for several measures of whole notes. In any case, the paneling here serves to enhance the dramatic flow of the story and raise it to new emotional heights.

D. Text-Conscious Communicative Display



Figure 4 Alberich Steals the Rhinemaiden’s Gold (Russell, 2002a)



Figure 5 Siegfried Forges His Father's Sword (Russell, 2002b)



Figure 6 Siegmund Holds His Sword Aloft in Triumph (*The Valkyrie*, Russell, 2002a)



Figure 7 The Rhinemaidens Reclaim Their Gold in Ring Form (Russell, 2002b)

A graphic novel is very clearly not a live performance of an opera in any sense. Is there a manner, then, in which a text may be considered performative? In

attempting to answer this, I will draw from the definition of performance from a narrative theory standpoint:

Performance is a mode of communicative display, in which the performer assumes responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative *virtuosity*, highlighting the way in which the act of discursive production is accomplished, above and beyond the additional multiple functions the communicative act may serve. *In narrative performance, the act of narration is itself framed as a display*; objectified, lifted out to a degree from its contextual—including cotextual—surroundings, and opened up to interpretive and evaluative scrutiny by an audience both in terms of its intrinsic qualities and its associational resonances. (Herman, Jahn & Ryan, 2005, pp. 419 – 420)

Through this framework, a text need not be presented live and spontaneously in order to be a narrative performance; rather, it is a “mode of communicative display”, a manner of presenting a message that draws attention to “the way in which the discursive production is accomplished”—in other words, that consciously draws attention to its nature as text. In framing “the act of narration [...] as a display”, there is an implicit assumption of an audience, or another party to witness the display.

Both oral performance, especially opera, and graphic novels are acts of “communicative display”, the act of narrating of which is itself on display. The graphic novel defies smooth story transitions through panel breaks and other extra-contextual elements, such as word bubbles, changing typefaces, speed lines, and bursts of light, that the reader is aware of but that the character within the story generally does not recognize—and indeed, it would be considered ridiculous if they did. This is similar to opera, which continually draws attention to its nature as sung dialogue through the virtuosic display of the performers, which again is only perceivable from “outside” the story—we would consider it ridiculous if the characters were to realize that they were singing, though this double consciousness is often used to humorous effect in parodies.

P. Craig Russell’s *Ring* is full of elements that draw attention to the nature of the graphic novel as textual display of word and image. His word bubbles and

typefaces change to reflect the mood of the speaker; tiny details draw attention to particular moments; highly symbolic passages exit the text and draw the reader into abstract space; the sketched nature of flashback scenes is clearly discerned beyond digital retouching; and, once, a character looks out of the panel and addresses the audience directly.

Some of Russell's most performative panels occur in a scene where a character asserts his or her identity, or makes a particular discovery about him—or herself—these are perhaps moments of epiphany, analogous to an operatic aria. A recurring image in these moments is that of a circle with rays shooting from it, with its center either on the individual or on the object that represents the speaker's identity at the moment. Upon further investigation, these circles hold connotations of the assertion of selfhood, as complementary to the moment of revelation; they carry associations with the mandala, a symbol in psychoanalysis representing the “self [...] as the totality of conscious and unconscious psyche” (Burgoyne, 2003, p. 95).

Whether or not this was a conscious choice or merely an aesthetic association, Russell tends to use these circles in key moments in a character's development. At the moment when Alberich steals the gold from the Rhinemaidens, holding it aloft triumphantly as he curses love while the Rhinemaidens look on in horror, the gold is surrounded by beams of yellow and green light barred by concentric circles. When Siegmund pulls the sword from the tree, planted there for him by his father, thus gaining a weapon and winning for himself his sister-bride, he holds it aloft, gazing up at it while Sieglinde clings to his shoulder; beams of white, blue, and gold light radiate from the sword, once again divided into concentric circles. As Siegfried forges the shards of the sword of his father, thus making an identity for himself as a hero, these concentric circles appear in the sparks that fly as he hammers the sword on the anvil. Finally, when the Rhinemaidens receive the ring once again at the end, thus ending the cycle of its curse, they raise it aloft as it emanates a circular golden glow. These are decisive moments of communicative display both within the storyworld and to the audience—in the storyworld, the focal character displays himself/herself or a prized object to the other characters within the story; Russell's imagery heightens the visual impact of the key moment on the reader through the mandala-like imagery which acts as a narrative-conscious display from the addresser (artist) to the addressee (reader)—the other characters in the graphic novel can't

see these heightened images, but the reader can, and he or she can then interpret them in the light of the moment and the character to come to a deeper understanding of the story as an act of communicative display highlighting the textuality of the medium—as a performance.

IV. Conclusion

A. Summary of Main Points

These are the four points of comparison between opera/theater and graphic novels explored in apply the values of “Reading Drama” theory to P. Craig Russell’s graphic novel representations of operas:

(i) graphic novels and opera are both representational media utilizing visual/verbal channels and signs drawn from common human experience (i. e. the body, architectural space, properties, lighting);

(ii) both graphic novels and opera are mimetic media that do not necessarily require a fixed narrator, which requires synthetic reading on the part of the viewer/reader;

(iii) both graphic novels and opera employ a flexible temporal framework and the “symphonic” composition of juxtaposed temporal “streams”;

(vi) both graphic novels and opera are performative in that they are communicative presentations in which the act of narration itself is on display.

I have broken these points down and separated them out for the purpose of analysis; however, in a typical reading of the graphic novels, all these elements will be working together simultaneously to create the experience. As Scanlan observes with reference to the reading of a dramatic script, “[i]n the actual reading experience, of course, all script elements work together to create an ongoing sense of dramatic life” (Scanlan, 1988, p. 9). It is the synergy of these numerous textual elements, fueled by the imaginative energy of both artist and reader, that ultimately brings a story to life.

B. Implications for Narrative Theory

There are a number of directions in which a performative reading of graphic novels could continue to be developed in the field of narrative theory. As posed in the introduction, the primary impetus behind this project was Jared Gardner's call for an oral performance-based approach to the narrative theory of graphic novels. However, another manner in which I hope to develop it would be towards a more dynamic understanding of the concept "text", a need for development noted by Vanhaesebrouck:

Lehmann's notion of postdramatic theatre is a necessary comment on the traditional, limited interpretation of the "text": it shows us the necessity to expand the textual notion and the field of application of narratology, as the interpretation of a whole series of hybrid theatre and dance forms, in which disciplines and media are intermingled, is no longer possible with the traditional tools of dramaturgy and narratology. (Vanhaesebrouck, 2004, p. 3)

By approaching the graphic novel through the framework of performance studies, perhaps this unlikely juxtaposition of page and stage could help us as readers both to simultaneously appreciate the nature of the text for what it is and transcend it to see how that intellectually apprehended text connects back to the sensory world of the body and spontaneous live performance—and to see, perhaps, how our conception of the "real world" is itself based on the extent of our textual imagination. Such a word/image approach may prove a healthy "challenge for critics habituated to text-based narrative" (Herman, Jahn & Ryan, 2005, p. 72) by actively drawing attention to the medium being used. This heightened media-awareness provides an answer to Lehmann's call for a new understanding of reading: he "stresses the need to replace a traditional linear reading, based on the logic of cause and event—by a multiperspective structure of which the analysis is focused on a rhizomatic non-hierarchic structure" (Vanhaesebrouck, 2004, p. 4). He expands upon this idea further:

The traditional bias between a linguistic analysis mainly emphasizing the temporal linearity on the one hand and visual semiotics with its

traditional stress on spatial simultaneity on the other hand would be thus counterbalanced by an integrated approach which would combine the insights of both narratology and visual semiotics. (ibid.)

This is by no means a foreign skill but rather one that is deeply a part of our lives: “[W]hen we experience a dramatic performance on stage [...] we are essentially doing what we are trained to do in everyday life: namely, to synthesize complexes of verbal and non-verbal communication.” (Grabes, 1991, p. 96) One rarely finds the narrative continuity of a novel in daily life; perhaps learning to read the verbal-visual synthesis of graphic novels may further serve as a step towards bridging the gap between textual imagination and lived experience.

Finally, this study may be seen as another step towards a transmedial narratology stemming from the study of dramatic narratology as applied to another, very different medium: Sommer suggests that a “narratology of drama” could “prepare the ground for a systematic transgeneric and transmedial narrative theory”. (2010, p. 122). He posits that “[a] narratology of drama is one important building block of a genuinely transgeneric and intermedial theory of narrative” and suggests that the perceived gap “between mimetic and diegetic narrative needs to be replaced by an integrative model which allows for an analysis of diegesis in plays, movies, cartoons, etc.” (p. 123). This study, in seeking to bridge the gap between page and stage, between the abstractions of the written text and the immediacy of live performance, contributes to a transmedial narratology which more fully embraces—and make more accessible—all the diverse means by which individuals communicate through the construction of storyworlds in seeking to make sense of and narrate the stories which are their lives.

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