

«...the only thing left to eat is the truth». Image, Text and Artist Critique in Shaun Tan's *Tales from the Inner City*

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Abstract

Il lavoro dell'artista visivo e scrittore australiano Shaun Tan è caratterizzato dalla fusione creativa di testo e immagine che alimenta la sua arte politicamente attiva -una vera pratica di attivismo che muove ciò che Neumann e Rippl chiamano «configurazioni verbo-visive»¹-. Questo articolo esplora le forme e le funzioni delle configurazioni verbo-visive nel lavoro di Tan. Approfondisce due episodi della sua recente graphic novel *Tales from the Inner City* (2018), con particolare attenzione alle "strategie intermediali" da lui impiegate per raccontare questioni urgenti nell'era del cosiddetto Antropocene: relazioni di potere, antropocentrismo ed eccezionalismo umano. *Tales from the Inner City* introduce argomenti di interesse legati ai repertori della resistenza testuale-visiva; l'autore analizza l'"estetica intermediale" che sta alla base di questo intervento attivista.

The work of Australian visual artist and writer Shaun Tan is characterized by productive fusions of text and image powering his politically charged artistic practice – a practice of activist intervention to mobilize what Neumann and Rippl (2020) call «Verbal-visual configurations». This article explores the forms and functions of verbal-visual configurations in Tan's work. I close-read two episodes from his recent visual narrative *Tales from the Inner City* (2018)², with a particular focus on how «intermedial strategies» are employed to address pressing issues in the so-called Anthropocene: power relations, anthropocentrism, and human exceptionalism. I suggest that *Tales from the Inner City* enables a productive argument about textual-visual resistance repertoires, and I analyze the "intermedial aesthetics" sustaining this activist intervention.

Parole chiave/Key Words

Attivismo; Intermedialità; Antropocene; Narrativa visiva; Attivismo visivo-letterario.

Activism; Intermediality; Anthropocene; Visual Narratives; Visual-Literary Activism.

¹ B. Neumann, G. Rippl, *Verbal-Visual Configurations in Postcolonial Literature: Intermedial Aesthetics*, Routledge, London and New York 2020.

² S. Tan, *Tales From the Inner City*, Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest NSW 2018.

Introduction

*To move an individual makes change possible*³.
S. Nossel

Tales from the Inner City (2018) is a textual-visual meditation, offering in its 25 illustrated stories an intermedial refraction of 21st century grand narratives and their historicity: consumer-capitalism (as an economic model and a social form), economic rationalism, the many shapes of human exceptionalism. On yet a grander scale, it addresses what Sylvia Wynter has termed the «coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom»⁴. In this paper I read two episodes from *Tales from the Inner City* and I argue that they are critical, intermedial interrogations of these aforementioned grand narratives. Doing so, I explore how the two episodes can be read as visual-narrative interventions. My reading of *Tales from the Inner City* as a form of activist critique relies on the conviction that art, as Human Rights lawyer and activist Suzanne Nossel argues «has the ability to change our minds – inspiring us to take on different perspectives and to reimagine our worlds»⁵.

Yet the question remains, of course, *how?* I therefore approach Shaun Tan's work via a close-reading of textual and visual strategies to theorize their effects. If thinking about activism offers a chance to conceptually, «move past the difficulties in separating affect from effect» and to theoretically «acknowledge that affect may translate to effect», I follow Suzanne Nossel's assertion that it is vital for the study of activism «to engage with questions of how and if that occurs»⁶.

This goes to say that this paper explores the thought-provoking inversions, ruptures and contestations co-produced by text and image, and I set out to think about the resistance this may enable to receive orders of reading and seeing in a time of crisis.

³ S. Nossel, *Introduction: On "Activism," or Art's Utility in Activism*, in «Social Research: An International Quarterly», vol. 83, n. 1, Spring 2016, p. 105.

⁴ S. Wynter, *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument*. «The New Centennial Review», vol. 3, no. 3, (Fall) 2003, p. 257.

⁵ S. Nossel, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

⁶ Ivi, p. 105.

Such an exploration contributes, I hope, to an ongoing discussion about forms, functions and characteristics of activism and, as Dagmar Danko puts it, its «persistent ambiguity»⁷.

Understanding and reading, as I do, Tan's work as activist critique, then, means tapping right into a conceptual challenge that seems to haunt activism research as highlighted by Dagmar Danko who argues that while there is no shortage of publications, many «are concerned with either the artistic aspect of Activism or the political one, tending to opt for a discussion either within the realm of art or within the realm of politics»⁸. On a conceptual level, and perhaps not so much on the level of practice as I hope to show, activism is faced with having to reconcile a perceived dualism that originates in binary forms of analysis: «Works of art or political protest? Activism remains ambiguous»⁹. Yet Danko (following Nina Felshin) explicitly rejects the binary, because: «does it matter?»¹⁰. Thus Danko envisions a discussion of activism that would keep «reminding us of the ever-present intricacies of the relationship between art and politics, art and economics, art and ethics, art and... - insert here any sphere that art is supposed to be autonomous from»¹¹.

On this basis I set out to address this sense of ambiguity by offering a close-reading of *Tales edseds Inner City* as a politically charged artwork (without laying any claim to the intentions of the author), that can be transformative and operates beyond the categorical binary. I do so with art critic Holland Cotter's insightful thought in mind who, troubled by debates about the potency of art argues that «Power is the problem, not the solution. Humility is reality»¹². Perhaps the challenge faced by activism is the issue of resisting power without reproducing its patterns.

I read Tan's work as an activist critique because his illustrated narratives generate unsettling questions and provoking speculations. They energize moments of theorization, inviting active intellectual and affective participation in the co-authorship of meaning. This makes this paper all about the collaborative refraction of big questions through

⁷ D. Danko, *Activism and the Spirit of Avant-Garde Art*, in V.D. Alexander et al. (eds.), *Art and the Challenge of Markets Volume 2*, Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke 2018, p. 257.

⁸ Ivi, p. 236.

⁹ Ivi, p. 237.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 258.

¹¹ *Ibidem*

¹² H. Cotter, *On Art, Power, and Humility*, in «Social Research: An International Quarterly», vol. 83, n. 1, Spring 2016, p. 147.

visual storytelling, and the ripple effects of this refraction: which marks are made, and what marks are left? It is the *injection* of questions, the *placement* of speculation, its *intrusion* – not their resolution – the transformation of dominant ways of seeing which characterizes the activism in Tan’s visual storytelling. As Jack Zipes remarks, storytelling that is «so provocative and alienating»¹³. Mobilizing this space of provocation, I follow Paola Zaccaria who speculates that one function of activism is to be «a tool to make visible the invisible»¹⁴. So the question is which possibilities to «make visible» exist in the intermedial space of seeing/reading and the thought-experiments it enables?

I first established a toolbox to ground my understanding of Tan’s intermedial storytelling as activism. Here, Birgit Neumann and Gabriele Rippl thinking about «verbal-visual configurations»¹⁵, and «intermedial strategies»¹⁶ provides a frame of reference. I then read two example Tales from the Inner City, each representing a central theme of the book: interspecies justice- and companionship, and the legacies of colonialism in the so-called Anthropocene. *Tales from the Inner City* enables a productive argument about intermedial resistance repertoires and the role of intermediality as an activist technique, and I analyze the «dynamics of verbal-visual relations as transformative strategies»¹⁷ with focus on text-image interaction and moments of ekphrasis.

Reading at the Contact Zone

I identify and discuss, in this section, a couple of theoretical landmarks. Far from a comprehensive review of positions, this is a head first dive to open up ways and means to theorize the intermedial contact zone of text and image as an activist practice. I draw rather heavily on Birgit Neumann and Gabriele Rippl’s recent and seminal study of *Verbal-Visual Configurations*, and bring this thinking into conversation with other approaches in order to synthesize a useful (albeit avowedly limited) interpretative toolbox.

¹³ J. Zipes, *Tales from the Inner City by Shaun Tan (Review)*, in «Marvels and Tales», vol. 34, n. 1, 2020, p. 134.

¹⁴ P. Zaccaria, *Medi-terranean Borderization*, in «Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society», vol. 37, n. 1, Autumn 2011, p. 13.

¹⁵ B. Neumann, G. Rippl, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Ivi, p.1.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 20.

Engaging the contact zone where «intermedial relations between words and images» are forged¹⁸ to understand the activism of «intermedial aesthetics of word-image configurations»¹⁹, hinges to no small extent on a reading of intermediality as a rhetoric and (counter-)discursive strategy that emphasizes «the formative role of images and visibility in constructions of knowledge»²⁰. If, as a baseline, intermediality refers to what Klaus Bruhn Jensen calls «communication through several discourses at once», my particular interest here is in the activist energy of this multimodal form of communication. What kind of resistance repertoires are enabled through «combinations of different sensory modalities of interaction»?²¹ Intermediality «pays tribute to the fact that media do not exist disconnected from each other», and therefore «refers to the relationship between media and is used to describe phenomena» involving more than one medium²², so the question is which opportunities for transformation and subversion arise in and through this fusion?

Birgit Neumann and Gabriele Rippl argue that the coming together of images and words points «beyond existing orders of the sayable and the visible», and that such verbal-visual configurations can «expand the field of existing epistemic and affective possibilities»²³. Such an expansion, then, generates a space of engagement and negotiation that is not confined to received and culturally determined ways of knowledge production and of being affected. In this way intermediality «makes room for new knowledge, subjectivities and communities»²⁴. According to Neumann and Rippl, therefore, verbal-visual configurations are a challenge to structures and relations of power, as «visual modes of writing (...) engender new, pluralised signifying practices, practices that affect both the orders of the sayable and visible»²⁵. As Stephen Duncombe and Steve Lambert theorize,

¹⁸ B. Neumann, G. Rippl, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*

²⁰ *Ibidem*

²¹ K. Bruhn Jensen, *Intermediality*, in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*, 2016 n.p. (last accessed 15/11/2020).

²² B. Neumann, G. Rippl, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²³ *Ivi*, pp. 5-6.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 19.

²⁵ *Ivi*, p. 2.

this «creates an opportunity to bypass seemingly fixed political ideas and moral ideals and remap cognitive patterns»²⁶.

The interconnectedness of regimes of the sayable and the visible, and the function of the visible in «literally the exercise of power»²⁷ has been registered by theorists of visual cultural studies.²⁸ In his study *Watching Babylon*, Nicholas Mirzoeff for example, examines «what it means to watch images of the exercise of power on a global scale»²⁹ – acknowledging how visual framing but specifically acts of watching can confirm but also undo existing orders and structures of power. Mirzoeff's visual cultural studies thus «calls for an ethical, decentered politics and poetics of everyday life in which the visual is as good *a means to think* as any other, without claiming to tower over other media»³⁰.

In a similar vein, inter- and multimedia artist Paul Chan asserts that «reasoning is discursive and compelling when it is also aesthetical»³¹, arguing that reasoning is «a creative act *par excellence*»³². In this sense, according to Chan, art is a discursive practice and (using Mirzoeff's phrase) a means to think. For Chan, the ultimate conclusion from this argument is that exposure to and engagement with art allows for a deepened understanding of structures of rhetoric, forms of persuasion and, on a political level, the inner workings of power in the social production of norms and consent. As such, activism speaks truth to power precisely because it penetrates and exposes its mechanisms. I elaborate on this argument further below.

Mirzoeff and Chan offer a grounding for what I would like to think of here as the inter-medial activist work of critical «countervisualities»³³ in conjunction with narrative: visual-narrative forms and practices of dissent, involving both the dimensions of image-making (and storytelling) and reception – ways of watching/looking and reading. Mirzoeff's insistence on

²⁶ S. Duncombe, S. Lambert, *Why Artistic Activism: Nine Reasons*, Publications of The Centre for Artistic Activism, April 2018, n.p. <https://c4aa.org/2018/04/why-artistic-activism> n.p. (last accessed 21.11.2020).

²⁷ N. Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture*, Routledge, New York 2005, p.1.

²⁸ Cfr. N. Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, Duke University Press, Durham 2011.

²⁹ N. Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture*, cit., p. 4.

³⁰ Ivi, p. 9, my italics.

³¹ P. Chan, *The Potency of Art*, in «Social Research: An International Quarterly», vol. 83, no. 1, Spring 2016, p. 150.

³² Ivi, p. 151, italics in original.

³³ Cfr. N. Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, cit., and also Ö. Harmanşah, in «Producing Countervisualities in the Anthropocene», 2018.

the visual- and Chan's view on art in general as a means to think through and *with*³⁴, enables a view on the subversive capabilities of intermedial formats as forms of contestation.

The transformative potentials of text and an «epistemology of the visual» – this contact zone of literary- and «visual knowledge and its possibilities»³⁵ is at the heart of intermedial aesthetics, which according to Neumann and Rippl describes «textual practices and writing modes that intertwine visual sense perception, cognition, affect and references to other media, while evoking cultural norms and epistemic systems».³⁶ Intermedial aesthetics offer avenues to challenge and subvert given structures of power precisely in the act of evoking them and rendering them visible in the collaboration of different media. Evocation, it seems, becomes the crucial first step in order to resist the language and operation of power.

Resisting the language of power is, according to Bill Ashcroft, the central function of literature and cultural production. As he argues, «art and literature have the capacity to speak to power by speaking beyond it»³⁷. Intermedial strategies as defined by Neumann and Rippl, thus become legible as tools in the service of speaking truth to power, because besides writing back, «through the use of intermedial devices, literary texts can also "stare back" at implied readers and contest the epistemic privileges of the white, colonial or western gaze»³⁸. Speaking, writing or staring back, however, is not the end of the process of resistance. For Ashcroft, «speaking beyond» power hinges on ongoing and continuous transformation

Resistance – as we can see from the example of postcolonial literatures – is most effective when it is transformative: when it takes the language of power and makes it work in the service of the powerless. Perhaps more importantly, literature, though its capacity to imagine a different world, has a utopian function that conceives a world binsereyond conflict³⁹.

The utopian function of literary expression is central to Ashcroft's argument about text and art as intervention. Against oversimplification, however, Ashcroft cautions that it is indeed «[f]anciful to think that literature will change the world. But while

³⁴ I borrow this term from Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, Duke University Press, Durham 2016.

³⁵ N. Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture*, cit, p. 10.

³⁶ B. Neumann, G. Rippl, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

³⁷ B. Ashcroft, *The Function of Literature: Revolution, Transformation and Utopia*, in «The International Academic Forum» 2015, n.p. <https://think.iafor.org/revolution-transformation-and-utopia-the-function-of-literature/> (last accessed 27.12.2020).

³⁸ B. Neumann. G. Rippl, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

³⁹ B. Ashcroft, *op. cit.*, n.p.

art and literature will not win wars, they can imagine the future,» and it is in this way that he conceives of «a very deep and important connection between creativity and revolution»⁴⁰. Yet how does art speak beyond power and how to further theorize the mentioned connection between creativity and revolution? Here, again Paul Chan's argument about why art matters is illuminating. According to Chan,

the experience of art saves us from being conned. In experiencing how a work tries to convince us...we come to grasp how its aesthetic qualities echo in spirit and inform all the manipulative means by which people use reason to try to convince us of the value of what they are saying, doing, or selling⁴¹.

Understanding art as something that through its formal properties acts «like an argument»⁴² (as seen above, reasoning and creative expression are the same practice for Chan), makes art an opportunity «to learn a little about the tradecraft of taking someone for a ride so that you might realize what is happening the next time someone is taking you for one»⁴³.

Artivism, in this view, as speaking beyond power via the penetration and exposure of its mechanisms may not automatically change the world, but enables transformation in its undoing of power's attempts to mask its presence and hide its own traces. Perhaps art and artivism speak truth to power by both speaking beyond, but also by speaking right *through* it. Artivism is, then, perhaps an invitation to refuse the re-enactment of power as it «integrates the individual in the symbolic construction of reality», moving them «away from the passive positions to which global communication, digital technologies or advertising and political indoctrination lead»⁴⁴.

I thus suggest that artivism is an invitation to refuse the invitation of power, and I further suggest that it is in this sense that what Neumann and Rippl call the «frequently unpredictable interaction between word and image»⁴⁵ is particularly interesting as a vehicle of transformation. For image-text interaction «not only creates new modes of address, directed towards

⁴⁰ B. Ashcroft, *op. cit.*, n.p.

⁴¹ P. Chan, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

⁴² *Ibidem*

⁴³ Ivi, p. 152.

⁴⁴ E. Aladro-Vico et al., *Artivism: A New Educative Language for Transformative Social Action*, in «Comunicar», n. 57, vol. xxxvi, 2018, p. 15.

⁴⁵ B. Neumann and G. Rippl, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

a wider and globally dispersed reading public, but also gives rise to formal innovations of narrative texts»⁴⁶. It is in space of innovation, perhaps, where the speaking beyond happens, via the power of verbal-visual configurations to present themselves as «spaces of connection and exchange and of friction and conflict at a specific time»⁴⁷ geared towards unsettling existing frames of reference. As such, intermediality and verbal-visual configurations become a deep reflection upon the very terms and conditions of normativity and its politics, because by «staging transgressions and fusions, intermediality compels readers to question the historical and cultural conditions under which certain borders are construed and acquire evidence».⁴⁸ I continue, in the next section, precisely on the matter of evidence.

Negotiating Justice: The Implications of *Ursidae vs Homo Sapiens*

The remainder of this paper is dedicated to the crunch-question which haunts this study and arguably the entire field of studies in activism: how does it work? I look at the dy-



Fig. 01. «Bears with Lawyers». Illustration from *Tales From the Inner City*, pp.170-171, Allen and Unwin Publisher (Italian edition: Tunué).

dynamic of image-text interaction and the use of ekphrasis in two examples from *Tales from the Inner City*. And I engage, for starters and just for a moment, a mode of ekphrastic exegesis: a bear is ascending a monumental flight of stairs, accompanied only by her lawyer (Fig.01).

Against the muted, greyish mid-tone background, the grim (by all means serious) atmosphere is challenged, however, by a distinct presence of hope. The scene (in the motion of ascend) resists an imperial architecture's claim to absolute power and invites a peculiar kind of recognition: this is the beginning of something significant, this moment matters,

⁴⁶ B. Neumann and G. Rippl, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 16.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*

something big is just unfolding. The image conveys a sense of urgency that defies transience, an effect interestingly exacerbated, however, by a sense of reflective, deliberative slowness of motion captured in gesture. The image generates questions: who is being sued and why? Which landmark decision is about to be reached? In which ways will the world be a radically different one? It also generates (and plays with) assumptions.

Bears with lawyers offers a thought experiment in staging a grand inversion, reframing the cultural-religious idea of a final reckoning in interspecies- and environmental justice terms. This episode, narrativized a «class action of epic proportions»⁴⁹ – *Ursidae vs Homo sapiens*⁵⁰, inquiring into the material, ethical, and affective implications of the realization that «Human Law is not the only legal system on the planet»⁵¹. As the unnamed intradiegetic narrator makes clear: «Humankind was being sued»⁵². The inversion here is an inversion of scales and an inversion of power relations: the framing of this scene as a class action in combination with deixis (the all-inclusive «we») makes humanity as the defendant in this case. *Ursidae vs Homo Sapiens* thus functions as a grand functional metaphor to expose as crimes of cosmic proportion the many forms of planetary damage that in combination constitute the so-called Anthropocene as the long-term effect of human exceptionalism. This is an intermedial protest against the «instrumental reason that view[s] nature and the animal “other” as being either external to human needs, and thus effectively dispensable, or as being in permanent service to them»⁵³.

Inversion as Subversion

The case is a structuring device to bundle different layers of interspecies- and social justice critique. It is a posthuman and an interspecies interpretation of postcolonial critiques of “centers” and “margins”. For not only is human law «not the only legal system on the planet» in this narrative, human law is not even particularly high-ranking «within

⁴⁹ S. Tan, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, original italics.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*

⁵² *Ibidem*

⁵³ G. Huggan, H. Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, Routledge, London and New York 2010, p.4.

a cosmic hierarchy»⁵⁴. This cosmic hierarchy dethrones a human-centered worldview, subverting entrenched anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism.

Inversion becomes a strategy of *subversion* in this example. Turning human speciesism and its exclusivist regimes of framing on its head, the narrative asserts that «Bear Law actually takes precedence in most cases». The «fact that *we* didn't know any of this only seemed to strengthen the bears' case at the expense of our own»⁵⁵. The intradiegetic narrative configuration exacerbates this by producing a moment of confrontation: where do I – the implied reader – stand on the matter Ursidae vs Homo Sapiens, how would I side? Where (with whom and why) is my emotional and affective loyalty? In this way, this intermedial narrative is highly collaborative in its way of involving through addressing the reader/viewer as both witness and observer.

It is thus that the verbal-visual configuration in this narrative gets to «perform upon and with the reader»⁵⁶, and I would argue that the very gravitas of the scenario is the effect of the verbal-visual configuration and its dynamic of interaction. Transformative and subversive impulses all emerge in the reciprocity of text and image, in the contact zone between the two media which together constitute this narrative. This cross-fertilization enables a decisive recognition: this is not a melancholic elegy or lament for a threatened animal species on their way to extinction. The intermedial aesthetic here hammers home the exact opposite. This is not a disempowered bear's final, submissive plea for mercy on behalf of his species, to be delivered to the imperial courts of law of industrial-capitalist humanity. Much rather, ascending the colossal, Greco-Roman inspired flight of stairs and thus defying anthropocenic claims to industrial, technocratic grandeur is a more-than-human plaintiff who knows exactly how to protest the destruction of the planet for the sake of economic growth. Neither is the human lawyer in the image a benevolent conservationist. Rather, they are allocated the status of a hired associate to assist with «the contents of human filing cabinets and libraries. Which were only every written by humans, it

⁵⁴ S. Tan, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*

⁵⁶ M. Peterson, *The Production of Narrative Through Static Imagery: Examples from a Peculiar Medieval Illustration*, in «Visual Communication», vol. 18, no. 2, 2019, p. 279.

turned out, and meant very little to the rest of the world, it turned out»⁵⁷. The charges are massive and are presented on a deep-time scale, in a language which conceptually and historically links the so-called Anthropocene to legacies, and continuations of imperialism and colonialism:

*Theft. Pillage. Unlawful Occupation. Deportation. Slavery. Murder. Torture. Genocide. Not to mention all the crimes we'd never even heard of. Things like Spiritual Exclusion, Groaking, and Ungungunurumunre*⁵⁸.

Evidence is cited from the entirety of the biosphere, taken from «all the places we never bothered to look: on the tailfins of freshwater trout, under the bark of trees...in the curvilinear coastlines of entire continents...Put a single slice of any rock under the right light and it is all there, literally written in stone»⁵⁹. What Andrew Baldwin and Bruce Erickson call the «impress of European history onto the *geos*»⁶⁰ is here narrativized in a motion to read and view «histories of European imperialism, racial capitalism, and white supremacy back into the Anthropocene concept»⁶¹. In this way, «Bears with Lawyers» participates in the artistic and scholarly project to expose «white [read anthropocentric] epistemology» and «white privilege [read human exceptionalism] as an onto-epistemic structure»⁶².

Critical Ekphrases: Legal Imagery and the Force of Visibility

This intermedial participation in a critical «Anthropocene politics» premised on antiracism (and/or antispeciesism) and anticolonialism⁶³ is supported by the use of ekphrasis, which can be defined as «visual effects in literary texts that are produced by verbal evocations of images»⁶⁴. Ekphrasis powers the presentation of evidence in the narra-

⁵⁷ M. Peterson, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 167, original italics.

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 166

⁶⁰ A. Baldwin, B. Erickson, *Introduction: Whiteness, Coloniality and the Anthropocene*, in «Society and Space», vol. 38, n. 1, 2020, p. 4, original italics.

⁶¹ A. Baldwin, B. Erickson, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁶² Ivi, p. 6.

⁶³ N. Mirzoeff, *It's not the Anthropocene, It's the White Supremacy Scene, or, The Geological Color Line*, in R. Grusin (ed.), *After Extinction*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2018, p. 123.

⁶⁴ B. Neumann, G. Rippl, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

tivized court case: «“For the hungriest of all animals”, said the bears in their typically abstruse legal verse, “the only thing left to eat is the truth.” As if to prove their point, none of our lawyers could view the supporting library of video evidence without losing their lunch»⁶⁵. Ekphrasis as both an intermedial reference (to a video being played) and the resulting allusion to the image of humanity’s defense team throwing up exacerbates the point about the irrefutability of the bears’ case at large.

Neumann and Rippl point out the historical relation of ekphrasis and hierarchical power relations⁶⁶. This acknowledgement is crucial as it enables an understanding of ekphrasis as yet another strategy of reversal and inversion. They argue that, given the «suffusion» of ekphrasis with hierarchical power relations, it is unsurprising «that many post-colonial writers use ekphrasis to renegotiate the kind of visibility that colonial images produce»⁶⁷. The court scene central in this narrative is itself suffused with colonial and imperial tropes: the illustration visualizes imperial claims to power articulated in architectural megalomania – however, a bear plaintiff is ascending these stairs in calm defiance and self-assured resilience. A legal procedure reminiscent of a colonial common-law framework, the power-speak of bureaucracy and its legal apparatus.

But as Neumann and Rippl highlight, in the process of renegotiating visibilities produced by colonial imagery, writers «frequently change the very socio-political implications of ekphrasis, i.e. they strip off its histories of violence and gestures of control to claim it as a poetic form of subversion, exchange and appropriation»⁶⁸. Ekphrasis in precisely this way, is used here to appropriate and subvert human exceptionalism on its own home turf, using its own mechanisms:

Lawyers for the bears now presented us with all the translated paperwork we had requested, stacks of it in huge boxes, boxes that filled shipping containers, shipping containers that sat on the back of trucks, trucks lined up in convoy, as far as the eye could see. The city’s traffic ground to a halt as they backed one by one into the streets of our brightest legal firms, every fluorescent light and mahogany veneer trembling⁶⁹.

⁶⁵ S. Tan, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

⁶⁶ B. Neumann, G. Rippl, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁹ S. Tan, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

The bear plaintiffs are turning the procedural apparatus around, (made and upheld to serve, in this case, an anthropocentric power elite), using their opponents' own bureaucratic strategy of "papering" against them. Additionally, this ekphrastic practice of description generates an image of 'stacking', verbally visualizing the 'stacked' force of evidence behind the case, in which literally the bears «turned our every argument against us», practically «presenting some precedent of Bear Law as old and unbreakable as time» in order to expose «the shallowness of every Human Law as presumption, ignorance and hubris»⁷⁰. Here, postcolonial ekphrasis as «a mode of disruption...halts the narrative flow and produces new temporalities...offering readers a space for reflection»⁷¹.

Reflection is further invited by the intradiegetic narrator's remark: «Deep in our hearts we knew they were right», faced with evidence stored in the strata of the Earth and the planet's geological record:

There they were, God help us, the Ledgers of the Earth, written in clouds and glaciers and sediments, tallied in the colours of the sun and the moon as light passed through the millennial sap of every living thing, and we looked upon it all with dread. Ours was not the only fiscal system in the world, it turned out. And worse, our debt was severe beyond reckoning⁷².

In its staging of a class action against humanity, «Bears with Lawyers» evokes the idea of judgement on an epic scale. Reminiscent of, almost directly evoking a final day of judgement, it uses large-scale reference to this central Judeo-Christian-Muslim intertext – the idea of the end of days. It does so, however, employing a quite literal understanding of apocalypse as Greek for 'revelation' and 'disclosure'. In this sense, the narrative revisits and re-frames the idea of a final reckoning in interspecies- and environmental justice terms.

Negotiating the Extremes

Thus returning to the question of mark making offered at the beginning, «Bears with Lawyers» hones in on the force of visibility and the critical function of mark-making. The force of visibility and thus of visuality, of marks made and disclosed, is negotiated in the narrative's ending, where any chance for reconciliation or redemption is undercut by

⁷⁰ S. Tan, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

⁷¹ B. Neumann, G. Rippl, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁷² S. Tan, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

the very «instrumental reason» (see above) and logics propelling climate change denialism, lobbying for ‘business as usual’ in the midst of a global climate emergency⁷³. Because the disclosure in the apocalypse as revelation triggers the ultimate reaction by the overwhelmed humanity-defendants: «So we shot the bears. All perfectly legal, it turned out, thanks to a bill passed in the dead of night. We took care of the lawyers too, in a manner we are not at liberty to divulge»⁷⁴.

Decidedly, this is *not* a final, tragic return to and/or reaffirmation of human superiority – the narrative rejects such an interpretation in stressing that this scenario is coming around to repeat itself time and again. «“The cattle are here,” a terrified receptionist quavers over the intercom, “with lawyers”»⁷⁵. So readers are left with the image of an endless loop of trials which is *not*, however, uncritically endorsed as an ideal of justice either, seeing how a «fetid cloud descends over the city, the sickening stench of endless torment and persecution»⁷⁶.

The overall dark-tone and gloomy color pallet at work in the image corresponds to this ekphrastic description. So, in the focus of this intermedial thought experiment as activist intervention, I would argue, is the provocation – the intellectual and affective challenge to the reader. Arguably, there is little chance for a reader to *not* position themselves in one way or another to this crucial question: is *this* how ‘we’ are going to respond to the planetary crisis? Is *this* ‘our’ way out – ‘our’ grand narrative of and for the 21st century? *Bears with Lawyers* generates a witness stand, one that demands participation: there can be no silent, unaffected reading; no unaffected watching.

Walking Together Forever

In no less confrontational a way, *Tales from the Inner City* negotiates the issue of human and more-than-human companionship. While *Bears with Lawyers* centers its attention on negotiations of responsibility, grand-scale systemic change and the (im-)possibility of reconcilia-

⁷³ Cfr. W. J. Ripple et al., *World Scientists’ Warning of a Climate Emergency*, in «BioScience», vol. 70, no. 1, January 2020.

⁷⁴ S. Tan, *op. cit.*, p. 186-169.

⁷⁵ Ivi, p. 169.

⁷⁶ S. Tan, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

tion, «I am fox! I go wherever I go!» focuses on the idea of eternal companionship between human and more-than-human entities across space, time, and dimensions. The narrative arch of *Fox* is comparably simple: at night, while human sleeps, fox visits – or maybe emerges from – human, the text (as does the image) remains ambiguous on this. Each night, Fox returns and talks to sleeping human and shares the secrets of their ancient, primordial relationship. It is in this act of storytelling as sharing that *Fox*, like *Bears with Lawyers* (and like all twenty-five stories in the book) destabilizes human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism. Reiterating Paola Zaccaria’s claim that activism is all about making visible the otherwise invisible, *Fox* utilizes and explores the (maybe not so) hidden space of the subconscious to drive home the idea that «After all, dear beloved, I need you as much as you need me» – asking the story’s central question: «where could we live if not in the bottomless den of each other’s shadow?»⁷⁷.

It is «in each other’s shadow» where verbal-visual configuration as «a creative act of intermedial translation...acknowledges the continuing impact of existing regimes» but crucially «subjects them to acts of interrelational exchange, reconfiguration and transformation»⁷⁸. Intermediality sustains, in this narrative, a process of translation across supposedly



Fig. 02. «Fox». Illustration from *Tales From the Inner City*, Allen and Unwin publisher, pp.182-183 (Italian edition: Tunué).

different forms and dimensions of being in order to foreground their eternal entanglements. Relationship is thus at the core of this narrative, which powerfully resists separation and unsettles cultural regimes of difference in a «[B]attle against...Otherness»⁷⁹.

Fox – narrated from Fox’s first person perspective traces the many obvious but curiously un-

noted points of convergence between humans and foxes as the mystical representative

⁷⁷ S. Tan, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

⁷⁸ B. Neumann, G. Rippl, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26.

⁷⁹ Ivi, p. 21.

of the more-than-human world. Indeed, it follows their traces and makes them visible in the process, stressing the significance of visibility in a verbal-visual call to read and behold everyday coexistence, as Fox declares, «Here in your living room, your kitchen and bathroom, right here in your bed»⁸⁰. In *Fox*, proximity and intimacy are the effect of the quasi-intrafigural style of the illustration (it is undetermined if Fox is jumping out of, or rather right back into the human figure), which corresponds to a similar style of narration. Illustration and text collaborate in reciprocal referentiality as, after all, fox is running «All night long, leaping up your low-sheen acrylic walls and plush pile carpets – mushroom mystique, temperate woodland beige, primrose accolade»⁸¹ – a verbal, ekphrastic echo of parts of the illustration’s color pallet. Together they produce a powerful sense of connectedness and interdependence: «I help myself graciously to your fridge; I steal odd socks and keys, move bits and pieces around just to drive you crazy, an itch to the foggy complacency of your life, tiny stones in your shoes. *You need these things!*»⁸².

Arguably, this is an ekphrastic description, an almost film-like recollection of a scene that readers are likely familiar with on a daily basis. Neumann and Rippl (cited above) argue that this can productively function as a retardation device, offering readers a space to pause and reflect. Harnessing the temporally and experientially disruptive effect of the “Deja-vu” experience, I suggest *Fox* here utilizes ekphrasis as a means of retardation to «perform upon and with» the reader (cf. Peterson), in this sense to invite the reader into a moment of immersion, reflection and self-implication saying «this is me, or this was me, many times before».

Across different cultural systems of signification, the figure of the fox has been interpreted in a wide range of ways: cunning, (benevolent) trickery, outstanding intelligence and wit, but also transformation, courage, fidelity and faithfulness. *Tales from the Inner City* does not single out any particular cultural interpretation, but rather explores through this figure – as the visual representation of an idea of both disruption and guidance – eternal bounds between the human and the more-than-human. The rather ambiguous passage of text quoted above in mind, it is in the process of disruption that fox provides a literal, life-giving «itch» of

⁸⁰ S. Tan, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*,

⁸² *Ibidem*, my italics.

change and movement against individual and collective stagnation in «foggy complacency». We direly need, it is made clear, these reconfigurations that Fox provides.

The narrative hinges for its effect on a deep sense of intimacy which establishes interdependence between beings across time, space, and culturally upheld distinctions like reality/fiction, nature/culture, chaos/order: «...your four-digit codes and firewalls and top-of-the-line comprehensive cover, your cunning traps and poisons and electronic tomfoolery. None of it can keep me out!»⁸³. This intimacy (whether or not it is acknowledged or even wanted), the sense of moving in-between each other achieved in the quasi-intrafigural image, is mirrored in and projected on the flow of the text:

Don't you know I am as old as the blood in your veins? I was running along the wintered fibres of your soul before you were even a pup, a cub, a kit, a pulse in your mother's womb. I know your every thought and feeling, more than you do yourself, every craving, every fear and dream and vice and embarrassing secret. *I know them all*⁸⁴.

Crucially, this sense of intimate connectedness across space, time, and stages of existence is extended onto the reader who, as the implied interlocutor *is* made the addressee of fox's conversation and the unnamed human co-protagonist of this story.

It is this potential for immersion which works to unsettle distinctions and which asserts interdependence verbally and visually. This episode therefore performs, I would argue, what Neumann and Rippl (quoted above) theorize as the staging of «transgressions and fusions», giving this intermedial piece (as Paul Chan suggests regarding art in general) the power to compel «to question the historical and cultural conditions under which certain borders are construed and acquire evidence». On the matter of evidence, Fox will do their best to hide the traces of their presence:

All will be just as you expect...night after night, dreaming of unremembered woodlands we tumble together through the past and future, just like always: I will never let the curtain slip! After all, dear beloved, I need you as much as you need me!⁸⁵

⁸³ S. Tan, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, original italics.

⁸⁵ Ivi, p. 181.

In this way, this tale from the Inner *City* erodes the epistemological grounding of differentiations between forms of life. It is in this celebration of companionship that the story's final line unfolds its force as a rhetorical question: where else can, where else do and will we ever live «if not in the bottomless den of each other's shadow»?

Reflection

In this paper, I explored two narratives from Shaun Tan's *Tales from the Inner City*. Building on a (selective) intermediality studies and visual cultural studies toolbox I offered two close readings *as* activist critique in an effort to understand some of the ways in which this intermedial work critically contests anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism. In an effort to explore forms and functions of intermediality as an activist strategy, I looked at how *Tales from the Inner City* mobilizes intermedial strategies to initiate reflection towards change and transformation.

If anything, my exploration and reading in this paper has been selective, yet the analysis foregrounds how this work participates in a growing, creative- and scholarly effort⁸⁶ to dismantle structures of racism, speciesism, (neo-) coloniality, imperialism and related practices at the root of the so-called Anthropocene. Shaun Tan's is a multi-faceted intermedial artwork. Therefore, claiming this brief discussion to be in any way exhaustive would be grossly reductive. What I hope to have provided, though, are two episodes of resistance against an-thropocenic «instrumental reason» (above) and the denial of relationality.

These two episodes employ intermediality to craft thought experiments that unsettle dominant regimes of seeing, reading, and understanding. While «Bears with Lawyers» operates a grand metaphor and plays with the idea of apocalypse in its literal sense of disclosure – based on deep-time, grand-scale evidence – «Fox» almost works in the opposite direction: zooming in on the pace and small(er)-scale of everyday life in exploring the intimacy of companionship. Both mobilize, however, the immersive force and performative strength of the “*what if...*” in engaging speculation as a means of transformation. What if bears were to actually sue ‘us’ in an epic class action – what additional

⁸⁶ See for example Kathryn Yusoff's seminal book which, I would argue, in many ways defines this movement: *A Billion Black Anthropocene or None*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2018.

deep-time evidence will they procure? What if “we” acknowledged, just for a moment that, across species, space and time, we are walking in each other’s shadow?

All this, however, also means to acknowledge a not so small caveat. All of this has been *my* reading, my subjective ekphrasis. Multiple, networked readings of this work – comparative, contrasting, conflicting – are required to mine the always present «surplus of meaning» and to better understand through which means art can generate «Effect» – cognitively and «emotionally resonant experiences that lead to measurable shifts in power» as Duncombe and Lambert suggest⁸⁷. This is another way, perhaps, to acknowledge (and appreciate) the ambiguity of activism as a concept and practice noted by Dagmar Danko (introduction).

Further, a more structurally oriented and more distant reading of *Tales from the Inner City* that is attentive to larger patterns, would help refine the yield of the deliberately small-scale, close reading practice I have offered here. So would a contextualized reading of *Tales from the Inner City* within Tan’s larger body of work. I hope to have provided one part of this conversation.

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