Introduction

In the spring of 2010, I had the pleasure of working with four fifth graders, exploring reading engagement with graphic novels. During my research study, I became inspired by the connections these fifth graders made between the graphic novels we discussed and the film medium and ultimately concluded that this connection contributed to the engagement the readers experienced. In the year since this data collection concluded I have not been able to stop thinking about the connection between graphic novels and film. Scott McCloud, in Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, outlines the basics to comics and briefly references their connection to film. In a similar manner John Golden, in his book Reading in the Dark: Using Film as a Tool in the English Classroom, outlines the basics to using film in an academic setting and briefly references film and storyboarding’s strong connection to comics. Both of these books are highly regarded and similar in content with regard to describing terminology, visual cues, structure, and reading of that particular medium. Each book references the other medium, but neither develops the connection. It is my hope, here, to explore that connection further. Additionally, I will illustrate the value these visual modes of literacy have as classroom tools for language arts educators. Using the voices of my students intertwined with current literature and research, I will show the connections drawn between graphic novels and film during our book discussions. These connections lead to academic implications, including a similar fight for legitimacy, what image-based storytelling offers for a classroom, and real-world applications.

Fifth Graders Connect Graphic Novels and Film

During my research study in 2010, I examined the question, In what ways do readers engage while reading a graphic novel? Four fifth graders took part in book discussions and one-on-one interviews after reading two preselected graphic novels. These discussions took place in my classroom, after regular school hours. All of these meetings were videotaped, and then later I transcribed them. The four students read The Arrival, written by Shaun Tan, and Gene Luen Yang’s American Born Chinese. Tan’s wordless story filled with whimsical and at times eerie illustrations takes readers through one man’s journey to a fictional, foreign land. He leaves his wife and daughter behind and travels to find shelter, food, and work. On his journey he meets people who share their stories and help him along his way. Once he has arrived, the main character is joined by his family in this new world. Yang’s American Born Chinese is a set of three stories, including the old Chinese Fable of the Monkey King who no longer wants to be a monkey; the story of young Jin Wang, a Chinese American; and the story of Chin-Kee, a negative caricature of a Chinese teenager. All of these characters suffer from stereotyping and struggle with being comfortable with their identities. Near the end of the book, the stories overlap and merge, forcing the characters to face themselves, their culture, and their identities.
These students already had some experience reading and discussing graphic novels from our class. We read Jeff Smith’s graphic novel Bone: Out from Boneville, the first of nine books in the 1,300-page graphic novel. The series follows three cousins from their initial banishment from Boneville through an epic adventure in a faraway land. The cousins face danger, dragons, and the Lord of Locusts, who is hunting for them. Along the way, the Bone brothers befriend Thorn, Grandma Ben, Dragon, and the creatures of the forest, who work together to defeat the Lord of the Locusts and his rat creatures, and Thorn eventually takes her true place as queen. This graphic novel, with vivid imagery and strong allusions, tells a fictional and fanciful tale that any reader could connect to. We discussed the graphic novel format, as well as several literary devices that could be identified within. This gave the participants background knowledge and vocabulary that allowed for comfortable and fluid discussions. I noticed much of the students’ discussion focused around the connection between the graphic novel and film. They discussed images, lenses of perspective, movement, and action as things they particularly enjoyed about reading graphic novels. These characteristics closely relate graphic novels to film, and this connection contributed to the students’ engagement in the reading.

For the study, I chose four students from the 70 in the class. These students were avid readers and strong communicators. These four also actively shared their reading materials with me. Based on these criteria, I felt the students would be willing and comfortable discussing their reading and process in front of me, their peers, and a camera. After receiving parental consent and the participants’ assent, I began the study. Participants were Shannon, Jason, Laura, and Gina. (For an article on literary devices I have written based on this study, see Dallacqua.)

We were only about 20 minutes into our first book discussion when the group brought up the fact that they didn’t feel like they were always reading as they read a graphic novel. Instead, the four agreed that reading a graphic novel often felt like watching a movie. Yang, the author of American Born Chinese, acknowledges this phenomenon, writing, “By combining image and text, graphic novels bridge the gap between media we watch and media we read” (“Graphic Novels” 187). We spent a good deal of time discussing this idea as a reading group and during one-on-one interviews as well. During her interview, Laura put it simply: “You can actually see the pictures, . . . in a text book you can’t see the pictures, then in movies you can. This [a graphic novel] is more like a movie.” This connection has been made by others, too. Both Garyn Roberts and Matthew McAllister, Ian Gordon, and Mark Jancovich have noted the influence that comics and graphic novels have had on the film industry. McAllister, Gordon, and Jancovich write, “Comic art—especially comic books—has played a key role in this evolution of the Hollywood blockbuster” (110). The authors write that in the 1930s and 1940s, films mirrored the episodic nature of comic books, showing chapters at a time and ending with cliffhangers in films. They suggest that this eventually “indirectly influenced the episodic and cliffhanger nature of the action film genre” (110). Roberts agrees, pointing out the many graphic novels that have been made into films, such as Spider-Man, The Road to Perdition, and The Hulk. He also notes their strong influence on current media. With their influence in the past and present, graphic novels have a strong connection to film. This connection is something the reading group picked up on.

Connecting through Images

One connection the readers made between graphic novels and films is the use of images. Both media fit the description of sequential art, showing a progression of action through the images. The reader is able to watch action unfold, see what a character looks like, and experience the setting illustrated in the background while reading a graphic novel. And in a graphic novel, these images are not additions to the story; they are part of the story. Each image in a graphic novel gives important information to the reader and pushes the plot forward. Shannon digs deeply into several images and discusses color and shading as they contribute to the mood of the story.
Exploring the Connection between Graphic Novel and Film

as she compares a dinner scene from *The Arrival* from the beginning and end of the book:

**Shannon**: . . . if you look at them, there is one big difference that I think I can see. If you look at this, and then you look at this, [flips between two pages] what do you see that’s really different?

**Laura**: The color.

**Shannon**: Yeah! It’s a lot more happier and brighter [see fig. 1], and here it’s dark and gloomy [see fig. 2].

**Ashley**: So what kind of information is the author giving us with that color?

**Laura**: They’re sad that he’s leaving.

**Jason**: Or that they had a, they had a rough time with like, economy, and all the other hardships, probably war.

It is clear that Shannon was reading closely, noticing the subtle yet very powerful nuances of shading and color in these two images from *The Arrival*. The first image is “happier,” with a brighter, almost yellow, tint to it, while the second uses darker shading, giving it that “gloomy” quality. McCloud notes that color within a graphic novel can help shape a mood of a story and that shading can add depth to a work (190–92). Golden discusses lighting of a film in a similar manner as “the essential role lighting can play in creating a particular effect desired by the director” (15). By noting the importance of color, shading, and lighting to a visual story, one can see the skill involved in reading images. The group acknowledged the skill to reading such images. Jason put it this way:

If this is your first graphic novel, you really won’t understand it . . . because if you don’t know that

**FIGURE 1.** An Image Full of Light and Light of Mood

**FIGURE 2.** The Darkness Mirrors the Characters’ Somber Expressions

a graphic novel is pictures and panels, um, showing you the story, while telling you the plot at the same time. If you haven’t read a graphic novel before, you won’t, you won’t understand it as much as everyone else, because some of the pictures show action, and like, um, it shows emotions . . . they wouldn’t know to look at the facial expression or what they are doing or what he’s surprised about or what he’s thinking. (Dallacqua 376)

Jason’s insightful observations show how complicated and challenging he believed a graphic novel can be. But at the same time, he knew the “rules” to reading a graphic novel, so he understands the story (Dallacqua 376). Reading images in graphic novels and reading film require similar skills. Alan Teasley and Ann Wilder highlight these skills needed for reading film: “The strategies we’ve developed call for students to attend carefully while they’re viewing, to notice details of visual and auditory images, to discover patterns in these images. . . . And when they engage with film and video in these active ways, they continue to develop many of the same skills we value in our literature curriculum” (2). While it may seem obvious, that they are image-based is one major way graphic novels and film are connected. It is important that teachers remember that interpreting and reading these images requires skill and attention to detail. Coincidently, these skills also enhance reading engagement and for the group I studied, they enhanced their enjoyment of the novel as well.

Connecting through Perspective

How these images were drawn within their panels was also discussed in our book discussions. Gretchen Schwarz writes that the “visual point of view or ‘camera shot’ is significant in a story told by pictures.” Angles, perspectives, and distances are all characteristics that the reading group noted during discussion and related to things one could do with a video camera. They are also all terms one would find in Golden’s first chapter of Reading in the Dark. In “Film Terminology and Cinematic Effects,” Golden explains a number of terms necessary for discussing film comfortably and correctly. Terms such as framing, angles, camera movement, even lighting (or coloring for our purposes) were all easily applied to our graphic novels during our discussions.

In The Arrival, for instance, Tan uses close-ups on characters’ faces to show changes in perspectives or points-of-view. In American Born Chinese a character may be drawn as small, as if a camera has backed up to show how alone the character is. Laura pointed this out when we discussed the images within the frames saying, “[S]ince some of them are . . . bigger than others it sort of reminds you of a movie because some scenes are farther back.”

Often, during our discussions, students would hold up their own invisible video camera, imitating this camera zoom or angle that Laura described, as we discussed a particular set of actions such as these. Shannon noted, while holding an imaginary video camera on her shoulder, that the repetition of an image as it zooms in not only imitates a camera moving in for a close-up but also creates intensity within the story. She continued by saying, “You can also tell because they close up on his eye. . . . Actually, in a TV show I just watched yesterday, like whenever something’s getting really tense [Shannon puts her hands up like she is holding a video camera] they start to close up on someone’s face.”

The readers enjoyed the variety that the “camera lens” could give them and the sense of action and movement it created. It also clued them in to changes in mood or point of view. For instance, in The Arrival, the images would create a close-up moment when a different character began to tell his or her story. Moreover, imagining the story being told through a camera lens invites readers to participate in the story, to look through a lens and experience the story as it happens. Shannon illustrated this experience as she described a particularly intense page from American Born Chinese. She says, with her invisible camera on her shoulder:

You know how if somebody gets intense, sometimes, they’ll come in? [She moves her camera forward.] Well, they’re starting to back out . . . and instead of seeing him backing out with him in the picture, you see him alone. [Shannon puts down the invisible camera and is now imitating the main character’s facial expression and body language from the panel in the book.] He must feel like, “oh no.”

By the end of her description of the camera angles, Shannon was inside the story, speaking as the character, rather than as a camera operator or an outside observer.
Connecting through Format

The students pointed out that visually, the format of panels within a graphic novel is similar to strips of film. Blocks of images drawn on a page act as frames of film, but the reader must be the projector. As the students read the graphic novels, they described running the panels through their minds, imagining the action as it happens from block to block. Shannon was the first to verbalize this idea while discussing *The Arrival*:

I felt more like I was watching a movie. Because . . . there is this one part where you actually see him moving different times. Like, you see him, he like, he's like . . . [Unable to fully explain herself, Shannon acts out the illustrations she was describing, lifting her hand to her ear, imitating the main character trying to understand a foreign language.]

Gina pipes in, “So it’s, it looks kind of like it’s an animation!” The girls are describing a particular page in *The Arrival* where several images side by side show small movements (see fig. 3). By running the panels through their minds, as a projector, Gina and Shannon were able to see the animated action unfold in front of their eyes. As they did this, the group immediately connected graphic novels and film.

McCloud also references this connection. He explains that the frames of film and comics are only different in one way. In comics, the frames are side by side, but in a film, they run together in one space. “Space does for comics what time does for film! However you might say that before it’s projected, film is just a very, very, very, very slow comic!” (8). Before a film is projected, each frame is lined up side by side, much like a comic strip is. In thinking about this connection the students were making, I thought about the fact that I had never seen an actual film strip before, and odds are, neither had my students. I believe that it is possible that they have seen film strips and projectors in other movies or television and made the visual connection that way. In reading class, we also looked at storyboards for a movie and discussed their close relationship to comics and graphic novels. It is possible that they drew the connections between comics and storyboards and then made the connection to film strips. Both Golden and Teasley and Wilder have briefly mentioned the connection between storyboards and comics in their writing. Golden writes, “These storyboards are graphic representations of exactly what would appear in each shot in a film adaptation of the text we’re reading. It’s sort of like a comic strip, though there are no dialogue balloons or ‘?###&*’ type of symbols anywhere on the picture” (53). Similarly, Teasley and Wilder write, “A storyboard looks much like a comic book—a series of drawn frames, one frame per shot, with a description of the action or dialogue written underneath the frame” (69). This connection was something that the readers came to independently and easily. For example, as students described their favorite scenes, they would add specific details that were not shown in the panels on the page, filling in the gutters that speed by on strips of film. Gina
texts have engaged students’ interests in reading and they have helped both sophisticated and novice readers to develop discursive skills” (42). Golden writes that “we know, or strongly suspect, that the skills they [students] use to decode the visual image are the same skills they use for a written text, and our goal, therefore, is to use that immediate interest in and uncanny ability with film and to make it work for us” (xiii). Golden continues to say that after his work with film, his students’ reading and analytical skills improved as well. Clearly, there are many educators finding visual media an impressive tool for classrooms.

From Classroom to Community

Using high-quality, image-based material isn’t just another wonderful option for academic settings, though. It is becoming necessary. Visual media aren’t only legitimate but are essential in preparing young adults to interact with their world outside of the classroom. Michael Bitz writes, “The increasing demand for a workforce and citizenry that is comfortable with multiple literacies, as opposed to one factory model of literacy, is at least one argument for why comics could have a place in an English language arts classroom” (39). The Carolina Curriculum for Science and Math is currently producing a textbook that begins each unit with a mini–graphic novel story to introduce and reinforce content. The educational website BrainPOP, one of my personal favorite classroom resources, uses flash videos and a variety of other tools, including comics, to engage students in their learning. The website (http://www.brainpop.com/) offers content on a countless list of topics, meeting elementary and middle school content standards. As educators, it is our role to prepare students for this world of images. Watching and reading images is a skill for the 21st-century student. With the media and technology available, young people must now maneuver through images constantly. As a teacher, though, I don’t want students to simply decode what they read (whether it is text, image, or a combination). I want students to engage and become a part of what they read. Image-based storytelling, whether film or graphic novel, allows for

Comics and Film Belong in the Classroom

Through my students’ eyes, I was able to see clearly parallels between graphic novels and film. As an educator, I unfortunately know that graphic novels and film are often viewed by the academic world as having little or no legitimate place in a classroom. “Everywhere, print-only books hold the highest position for literacy achievement; art forms that mix words with stylized pictures in bold color receive attention primarily as commercial trivia” (Heath and Bhagat 586). However, it is clear from the responses of these fifth graders that when high-quality material is selected and used well, great discussion, engagement, and learning can happen. In their discussions, the students paid close attention to detail, made direct references back to the text, and offered explicit textual examples to support their claims. Isn’t that what every language arts teacher hopes for in a classroom discussion of a novel?

Other researchers have experienced similar results. After using a graphic novel version of Shakespeare’s Othello, Wolfe and Kleijwegt note, “High-quality visuals do not simply illustrate the action contained in the text; they also provide for much richer understandings than the text alone . . . [V]isuals can offer students the opportunity to expand their level of textual comprehension” (36). Mary Rice reflects back on her process of integrating graphic texts, writing, “I have found graphic

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and even fuels student engagement. The film-like perspective graphic novels offer allows readers to enter into a story and connect with characters on an intimate level. They allow readers to interpret, predict, fill in gaps, and see the story as they read. As a teacher, these are the experiences I hope for my students each time they read a story.

Note
1. To capture the voices of these participants in a genuine way, some ums and repeated words have been included in their quotes. Ellipses mark a section of unnecessary dialogue that has been deleted.

Works Cited
Heath, Shirley Brice, and Vikram Bhagat. “Reading Comics, the Invisible Art.” Handbook of Research Teaching Literacy through Communicative and Visual Arts. Ed. Ashley K. Dallacqua taught fifth grade in Worthington, Ohio, for seven years before beginning her current adventure as a PhD student. She recently published her first article, “Exploring Literary Devices in Graphic Novels,” in Language Arts. Ashley is currently working on a doctorate degree at The Ohio State University and can be reached at dallacqua.1@osu.edu.

Writing Award Winners Announced

The National Council of Teachers of English, the Norman Mailer Center, and the Muhammad Ali Center are pleased to share that winners have been announced for the Muhammad Ali Writing Award on Ethics and the 2012 Norman Mailer Writing Awards. We extend congratulations to the winners, finalists, and semifinalists for each of the six awards. To view the winners, finalists, and semifinalists visit http://www.ncte.org/awards/student/nmwa.