Visual Vernacular

An Inter and Intra Sign Language Poetry Genre Comparison

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Leiden University

Name:	Marieke van Brandwijk
Student number:	S1512137
Supervisor:	Victoria Nyst
Second corrector:	Maarten Kossmann

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1. Introduction

When looking into sign language poetry during one of my classes about sign language and Deaf culture, I was shown a video of Ian Sanborn who performed a poem about the journey of a caterpillar who becomes a butterfly. Interestingly enough, even with my limited knowledge of Dutch Sign Language, I could understand and follow along with the story completely. This fascinated me because other sign language poetry I had come across often was too hard for me to grasp fully, and it took me a lot of effort to follow along. With Sanborn's poem it was different: it was not only fully understandable for me but it had a different esthetic compared to what I had seen in other sign language poems: there were many fluent movements, and the signs used were very visually enticing. I was so fascinated by his work that I showed many of my friends; it was the first body of sign language poetry work that really spoke to me. Later I found out that this form of sign language poetry is called 'visual vernacular', and when presented with finding a subject for my bachelor thesis, this is the subject that I chose.

Visual vernacular is a subject that has been barely touched upon in the research field. There are no papers to be found dedicated specifically to visual vernacular, and hardly any others that touch on the subject for a major part of the study. Most of the papers used for reference material in this thesis are only mentioning visual vernacular briefly. As can already be assumed from this, not many people know about visual vernacular. If they come across it they do not distinguish it from other sign language poetry, or other similar art forms such as pantomime. By comparing visual vernacular to other similar art forms it is clear what exactly makes visual vernacular stand out as its own form of art.

After getting interested in sign language poetry I decided to attend the opening of the first sign language wall poem in Leiden. A performance of visual vernacular was given during the opening festivities, and afterwards the host of the opening, Roos Wattel, said that she hoped that the signing of Dutch signers would be influenced by visual vernacular. According to her, and many in the audience agreed with her, Dutch Sign Language has had an increase of the use of Signed Dutch (a sign system which translates the Dutch language into signs, not to be confused with Dutch Sign Language which is a language on its own and not derived from Dutch), and this was not desirable. By introducing more visual ways of signing, with visual vernacular as the inspiration source, Signed Dutch could be reduced in Dutch Sign Language. The only way for visual vernacular to reach this kind of influence level is when people are introduced to it so they can get inspired, and it is therefore important that visual vernacular receives more attention.

In this thesis I shall begin with an overview of where visual vernacular started and who gave it a name and a stage. Then I shall give an overview of the different definitions given of visual vernacular, and which aspects and techniques visual vernacular has and uses. Then the three most important and influential performers of visual vernacular shall be briefly introduced, after which I shall elaborate on the different styles used by different people, both as a change through the years as different from person to person. I shall propose inspiration sources that may have affected this change in style through the years. Then I will look into the categorization of visual vernacular by looking into the research of the National Association of the Deaf, who made Sign Language Literature categories (Bahan, 2006). I shall explain the difference between visual vernacular and classifier stories, and then propose a re-

categorization to fit visual vernacular into the Sign Language Literature categories. Then I shall explain the difference between visual vernacular and pantomime.

To research these topics I have used many different kind of sources. The most frequently used among these is the book 'Signing the body poetic – Essays on American Sign Language literature' edited by HDL Bauman, JL Nelson and HM Rose. It contains a multitude of essays by different researchers, all touching the subject of American Sign Language literature, and more than once do the essays talk about visual vernacular. It was one of the only bodies of scientific research that actually mentioned visual vernacular. Another important source was Bauman (2003), in which parts of a letter written by Bernard Bragg (the most important visual vernacular performer) were quoted in which he talked about visual vernacular. The most important and informative resource however was a documentary by the TV series 'l'oeil et la main' on France 5 on visual vernacular called 'VV…?' by Stroesser (2015). The aim of this documentary was to introduce the public to visual vernacular, to explain what it entails and what different styles there are. Many different performers tell about their performance style and their definition of visual vernacular.

For this thesis I decided to use both scientific and non-scientific sources, because both are significant for achieving a better understanding of visual vernacular. The scientific sources gave a more scientific viewpoint on the topic, comparing it with research already conducted in the sign language literature field, whereas the non-scientific sources gave the point of view of the artists themselves.

An inter- and intra-comparison of visual vernacular is made in this thesis, also touching on the subjects of pantomime and classifier stories. To gain knowledge on these subjects I did not only review the literature and other sources available, but also studied and analyzed many different videos of visual vernacular performances. By doing this the thesis will provide the reader with a broad overview of what visual vernacular entails, what the differences within the visual vernacular genre are, and how visual vernacular distinguishes itself from other similar art forms. This thesis is an addition to the knowledge of Sign Language poetry, and it gives visual vernacular the stage that it deserves.

2. Background

2.1 History

In 1967 the National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) was founded in the United States of America by, among others, Bernard Bragg. This theatre had two main purposes: to expose hearing people to the power of sign language in performance and to provide performance opportunities for deaf people (Bauman, Nelson & Rose, 2006). Bernard Bragg 'developed' the concept visual vernacular while being involved with NTD (Stroesser, 2015). According to Bauman, Nelson and Rose, visual vernacular is 'a distinguishing feature of ASL that involves the use of filmlike cuts, such as shifting between characters and cutting to show different perspectives of a scene or action' (Bauman, Nelson & Rose, 2006). Derrida tells us that visual vernacular was 'an initial breakthrough in the uses of cinematic properties of manual languages' (Derrida, 2006). Giuseppe Giuranna (a renowned performer of visual vernacular), and Bragg himself oppose this, saying that visual vernacular, and with that the use of cinematic properties of manual languages, has been around for a significant amount of time.

Bragg tells us about how, when he was a teacher at an American school for the deaf, he saw deaf children using the techniques. He was surprised because the children were not from deaf families, American Sign Language (ASL) was therefore not their mother tongue, and yet they signed with such clarity and fluency. Bragg found out they were telling the stories of the movies they saw the night before, and mimicking the stories the way they had viewed them on screen. This technique is not one anyone ever taught them. It came naturally (Stroesser, 2015). Giuranna explains that when he was four years old (in 1970), he was already using visual vernacular to tell a story, and all the techniques used in visual vernacular were already present (Stroesser, 2015). Even though the technique had officially been dubbed as visual vernacular by then, Giuranna learned the technique from his father, and seeing as they lived in Italy at the time, and the internet was accessible to private individuals starting from 1993, and visual vernacular would not be the first thing that would be put on the internet, it is highly unlikely that Giuranna's father knew about the technique from Bragg. Rather, it seems like this technique has been around for a long time. According to deafmedia.de, it is 'an ancient style of storytelling that has been passed on from generation to generation'. Bragg did not develop the technique, but it was first researched, performed on stage and given a name by him.

2.2 Definition

2.2.1. Cinematographic techniques

Visual vernacular is a form of art mostly performed by Deaf artists. It combines many different elements of, among others, mime, poetry and cinematographic techniques, and together with strong movement, iconic signs, gestures and facial expressions it is a most expressive storytelling style. It is used 'to capture the world in all its visual complexity' ("Visual Vernacular - Doing Things Differently", 2017).

As mentioned before, performers of visual vernacular make use of many cinematographic techniques. These techniques include 'long shots, close-ups, and panorama', and when used in visual vernacular the performer assumes 'the perspective of each character and even aspects of the setting' (Wolter, 2006). In sign language terms this technique is called role shifting: the signer takes on the role of a subject or object in their story, and shifts between the different roles as the story goes along. The performer 'provides perspective shifts, presenting scenes from different distances, angles, points of view' (Kinoshita 2005). Bernard Bragg tells us: 'the performer remains all the time within the film frame, so to speak, presenting a montage of cross-cuts and cutaway views' (letter to the author by Bragg, Bauman, 2003).

Bernard Bragg tells us that the technique is called visual vernacular because the perception is not at all for the ear, but uniquely for the eye (visual), and that it is a language that is typical for a community, shared by everyone, in this case specifically for the deaf (vernacular) (Stroesser, 2015). Derrida (2006) tells us that it is a vernacular because 'it appeals to the vernacular codes of the cinematic medium'. Bragg explains: 'it "liberates latent resources of visual self-expression in creative signing that leads to new fluency and dramatic impact"'(letter to the author by Bragg, Bauman, 2003).

2.2.2 Iconicity

Next to cinematographic techniques, there are many other aspects of what makes a sign language poem visual vernacular. One of these is that it makes extensive use of iconicity, as

noted by my own observations of different performances of visual vernacular. Iconicity is a feature of a sign first noticed, researched and presented by Charles Sanders Peirce in his 1903 lecture ‘pragmatism: the normative sciences’, which was later written down in a book bundling his papers and lectures (Pierce, 1931). Signs are iconic when ‘aspects of its form are directly related to what is represented.’ (Bellugi & Klima, 1976). It is when one or more features of a sign ‘reflect the characteristics of the concept, thing, or activity it symbolizes’ (Valli, Lucas & Mulrooney, 2011). Because iconicity is the relation of a referent and our own mental model of this referent (Taub, 2001), it is internationally comprehensible. A great example of an iconic sign is the ASL sign for baby (see figure 2.1).

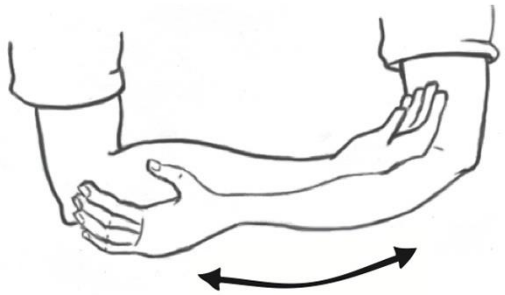

Figure 2.1 The ASL sign for baby, one of the most iconic and well-known signs across the world

The ASL sign for baby is based on the characteristics of a baby, or in this case what one does with a baby: rocking it back and forward. The placement of the arms and the movement are iconic in this sign, as this is the way one would place their arms and hands, and move them when rocking a real baby. Because this sign is so iconic and characteristic, it is very likely that in many places in the world people would understand what was meant by this sign, even if this is not the sign in their sign language for baby, or if they do not have any knowledge of a sign language at all. Visual vernacular consists not only of pre-existing iconic signs, but its users create their own iconic signs to tell their story. They use their handshape as a classifier for the referent. An example of this can be seen in the introduction scene of the documentary of Stroesser (2015), when Giuseppe Giuranna tells us in visual vernacular what he sees and does; he uses novel iconic signs to portray the petals in the flower design of a stone adornment on the side of the building (figure 2.2), and his own ponytail dangling behind him while he walks inside the building (figure 2.3). One could say he created his own classifiers, but more on that later.

Figure 2.2. Giuranna portraying flower petals with novel classifier (Stroesser, 2015)

Figure 2.3. Giuranna portraying his ponytail with novel classifier (Stroesser, 2015)

2.2.3. Internationally comprehensible

Visual vernacular is assumed to be understandable across many sign language boundaries. Kaite O'Reilly, a many times awarded and renowned Deaf playwright, writes on her blog: '[It] can be used worldwide, it does not matter which sign language you use, BSL, ASL, or Japan Sign Language' (O'Reilly, 2015). Giuseppe Giuranna had the same experience when his visual vernacular performance was understood in France, even though French Sign Language and Italian Sign Language are not related (Stroesser, 2015). Ace Mahbaz, a young performer of visual vernacular, states that not only is visual vernacular internationally comprehensible across sign language users, it is also accessible for hearing people (Stroesser, 2015). On the website of Clin d'Oeil, a yearly sign language film festival, it is even stated that 'visual vernacular is a form of expression where language is not an issue. [It is an] art where the body tells stories' ("Festival Clin d'Oeil", 2017). Although many state visual vernacular to be internationally comprehensible, it has to this date not been scientifically researched and can therefore not be stated as a fact until scientifically proven. However, it does seem as though, at least in the western world, visual vernacular can be understood in spite of the native language of the viewer.

2.2.4. Not translatable

Another aspect of visual vernacular is that it is not translatable into spoken language. Nicola della Maggiora, like Ace Mahbaz another young and relatively new visual vernacular artist, says in an interview in the documentary 'VV…?' by Stroesser (2015), that it is an art form uniquely belonging to the Deaf. He says that the stories could be written down, but that it would lose the 'subtle nuances'; it would 'no longer be the same thing.' Because of visual vernacular being so visual, a performer can, for instance, portray two ideas at the same time and view their relationship to one another while it transforms (Mindess, 2014). Honesty Willoughby, who took second place at the British Sign Language poetry competition "BSL

SLAM" in 2017, says that she does not sign words, but uses visual vernacular, and that if she would write her poem down it would be in the form of a graphic novel because visual vernacular is visual art (Valentini, 2017). Kaite O'Reilly agrees with this, saying that visual vernacular is not language-based, that it is more free than that. You do not only use iconic signs, but also gestures, facial expressions and hand- and body movements in your story (O'Reilly, 2015).

In short, visual vernacular is an art from that belongs to the Deaf, performed by mostly Deaf people and is comprehensible across different sign languages. Furthermore, because of the iconic nature of the signs used in visual vernacular, it is comprehensible by hearing people as well. Visual vernacular uses a combination of flowing movement, visual rhythm, facial expressions, poetry and, above all, iconic signs, novel or already existing, and cinematographic techniques.

2.3 Famous visual vernacular performers

2.3.1. Bernard Bragg

Born in the United States of America in 1928, Bernard Bragg is the co-founder of the National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) ("Life and Works of Bernard Bragg » Biography", n.d.). He has worked as a mime artist for years, as well as having had many acting jobs, having toured with NTD, and he is considered the grandfather, sometimes even the founder, of visual vernacular. He was the person that gave visual vernacular a name and a stage, and with that he established it as a form of art.

2.3.2. Giuseppe Giuranna

When Giuseppe, born and raised in Italy, saw Bernard Bragg perform visual vernacular for the first time, he realized that the storytelling style his father had taught him long ago had a name, and that there was a stage for it as well (Stroesser, 2015). He grew out to be one of the most influential people in the visual vernacular world, not only performing his visual vernacular poems on stage, but trying to pass the art form on by giving workshops all around the world to different audiences. He is known for his own style, where visual rhythm plays a big role.

2.3.3. Guy Bouchauveau

He sees his visual vernacular as untranslatable to spoken language and can only draw it out as though it were a comic book. He says it is 'cold' written down (Stroesser, 2015). This has to do with the one-dimensional characteristic of spoken language as opposed to the multi-dimensional characteristics of visual vernacular: you are able to portray a multitude of aspects in one sign, whereas you need a multitude of words to portray the same aspects in spoken language. The drawings in a comic book can display multiple aspects in one drawing, and are therefore easier to use to depict the story (Stroesser, 2015).

3. Methodology

For this thesis the following performances of visual vernacular shall be analyzed:

- Giuseppe Giuranna – 'the sheriff and the horse'

- Ian Sanborn – ‘the rooster’
- Ace Mahbaz – ‘game over’
- Giuseppe Giuranna – ‘the car’
- Amina and Jamila Ouahid – ‘unexpected moment’
- Ian Sanborn – ‘the super deaf black stallion’
- Bernard Bragg – ‘piscine au clair de lune’
- Ian Sanborn – ‘the caterpillar’

Many of these performances can be found on the video sharing platform YouTube. Some of the artists have posted the videos there themselves via their own YouTube channels. Ian Sanborn has a YouTube channel named ‘Ian Sanborn’ on which he posts original sign language poetry and visual vernacular. Ace Mahbaz has a small YouTube channel called ‘Ace M.’ with at the moment only one video with a visual vernacular performance. The same goes for Amina Ouahid, whose YouTube channel only features two videos out of which one is visual vernacular. The channel is called ‘Amina Ouahid’, and her sister does not seem to have a channel. Giuseppe Giuranna and Bernard Bragg do not have their own YouTube channels on which they feature performances. Giuranna said during the opening of the wall poem in Leiden that he does not have time to film his performances and put them online himself. Luckily, some of his performances can be found online, such as ‘the sheriff and the horse’ and ‘the car’ which are featured in a video by YouTube channel ‘deafmedia.de_by_zfk’. They make episodes by Deaf people for Deaf people in German Sign Language, and the topic of episode 19 was visual vernacular. The performance of Bragg of ‘piscine au clair de lune’ can be found in the documentary of Stroesser (2015).

Even though YouTube is used most frequently for sharing videos of visual vernacular performances, other platforms such as Vimeo are used from time to time as well. However, when one is looking for new performances on the internet, one has the most result when looking on YouTube.

The dataset is chosen because it is a good representation of the different kinds of visual vernacular that exist; it features videos from visual vernacular such as it was in the early stages to the most recent performances. All the different techniques that are used to this date in visual vernacular can be found in this dataset. To analyze the videos I started watching the performances while already having read up on literature about visual vernacular, and having watched the explanatory documentary of Stroesser (2015). With this knowledge and watching the videos repeatedly, I started noticing different styles within the genre, as well as how it is different from any other art form that may resemble visual vernacular.

4. Results

4.1 Styles

Within visual vernacular there are many different styles of performing. Honesty Willoughby states that with visual vernacular, everyone’s own voice comes out. Everyone has their own method and style, and the rhythm of signing changes accordingly (Valentini, 2017). This means that the styles vary both through the years and from person to person. The variation through the years can be explained by the source of inspiration for the stories in visual vernacular.

4.1.1 Variation through the years and inspiration sources

4.1.1.1 Early visual vernacular

Earlier visual vernacular, for instance that performed by Bernard Bragg, had some language specific signs incorporated, is performed relatively slow and resembles mime more than the styles do nowadays. An example of this can be seen in his performance of 'piscine au clair de lune' (Bragg, 2015). Bragg tells the story of a man walking towards a swimming pool and jumping off of the diving board while the moon watches. He starts out as the man taking a nine second walk, then switches role to the face of the moon that looks at the man for two seconds, switches back to the man looking up at the moon and walking on for seven seconds before the man sees the diving board. When comparing this to Ian Sanborn's story: the rooster, when the rooster sees the sun rising and he switches back and forth from the sun to the rooster, it takes him a significantly shorter amount of time: the rooster spots the sun for one second, the sun starts coming up for one second, the rooster looks around and back to the sun for three seconds after which he starts to take a deep breath of air for three seconds and then loudly crows at the sun for three seconds. What takes up more time in early visual vernacular performances when compared to more recent visual vernacular performances is the role switching itself. Bragg does not switch fast between the roles of the moon and the man, but takes his time. Nicola della Maggiora, a performer of visual vernacular himself, suggests that this might have to do with the early inspiration source of Bragg: silent movies (Stroesser, 2015).

Another interesting feature of early visual vernacular, which can be seen in the performance of Bragg, is that he does use whole body movements for his story, but they are still restricted. When Bragg walks to the diving board, he does so by making a walking motion with his feet and legs while being stationary (see figure 4.1). It is therefore whole body movements (his a rms sway as he walks as well), but still restricted, because he performs it in one place. The use of the whole body is seen again when he climbs on the diving board (figure 4.2), and when jumping on the diving board (figure 4.3).

Figure 4.1. Bragg (2015) walking

Figure 4.2. Bragg (2015) climbing the diving board

Figure 4.3. Bragg (2015) jumping on diving board

This is remarkable seeing as one of the definitions of visual vernacular that differentiates it from pantomime (see 5.2.2) is that visual vernacular is performed within the signing space: 'a space extending from just below the waist to the top of the head' (Emmorey, 2008). Legs are not part of the signing space and are therefore normally not present within visual vernacular. The difference between pantomime and visual vernacular here is still the restriction in changing of position that is present in the latter. These traits make it likely that Bragg takes

his inspiration not only from silent movies, which are older movies and slower in pace, but also from pantomime. The speed of the walking and especially the speed of role switching attribute to this. The reason for this could be that he himself is a mime player as well as a visual vernacular artist.

4.1.1.2 Contemporary visual vernacular

4.1.1.2.1 Role switching and increased speed

As visual vernacular performance progressed, the speed of storytelling started to increase. One performer that really started with this is Giuseppe Giuranna, one of the most well-known visual vernacular artists at present who takes his inspiration from a mixture of cinema, comic books and 3D (Stroesser, 2015). The movies that Giuranna bases himself on are more modern, and they are generally faster in pace. This may be the reason why Giuranna started telling his stories faster. A great example of the fast pace of movies nowadays, especially when it comes to switching points of view, can be found in the movie 'Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2' (Heyman, Barron, Rowling & Yates, 2011). In one scene, trolls are fighting their way over a bridge towards the castle, straight through an army of statue knights. The scene has a birds eye view of the troll swinging his club at the knights for less than a second, then the same motion is shown from the side for less than a second, then one knight is seen hitting the troll in the leg for less than a second, then we are back at the birds eye view of the troll hitting the knights. As can be subtracted from this description, the movie pace is very fast.

Another technique that is very typical for this style can also be found in this scene from Harry Potter: the fast switching of points of view, or as it is called in sign language literature terms: role switching. This is a cinematographic technique which stands out in the performances of Giuranna as well. Switching points of view happens way more often than in early visual vernacular, most likely as a result of the speed increase of the storytelling: one can now do more in the same amount of time. An example of frequent role switching can be found in one of the performances of Giuranna: 'the sheriff and the horse'. He switches roles from the sleeping sheriff (figure 4.4) to the walking horse (see figure 4.5) many times back and forth.

Figure 4.4. Giuranna (1992) as the sheriff who falls asleep

Figure 4.5. Giuranna (1992) as the horse

Role switching is a cinematographic technique, for it is a technique that is used in movies frequently: by switching cameras the directors can show different points of view of the same event, as can be seen in the example of the scene with the troll on the bridge. That cinematographic techniques are used indicates that movie styles are an inspiration for the style of the stories. Another style inspiration used nowadays are 3D techniques. These can be seen in the works of Giuranna in the way he uses facial expressions: squinted eyes and scrunched up face (figure 4.6) for more distant subjects or objects, and wide open eyes and an open face (figure 4.7) for close subjects or objects. This techniques adds depth (the third dimension) to the story.

Figure 4.6. Giuseppe Giuranna points to something far away

Figure 4.7. Giuseppe Giuranna shows something up close

4.1.1.2.2 Fluency and geek culture

Another style of current visual vernacular performance is inspired by the so-called ‘geek culture’. Ace Mahbaz and Nicola della Maggiora, two relatively new and young performers of visual vernacular, use this style and take their inspiration from videogames and computers (Stroesser, 2015). A very literal example is the performance of Mahbaz which is called ‘game over’ where he shows us different ‘old school’ video games such as Pacman, Tetris, and Super Mario Bros with his arms, hands and fingers in a very fast and fluent sequence (Mahbaz, 2017). Nicola della Maggiora tells us that this is the difference in style compared to in the initial stages of performance: it is faster and more fluent now (Stroesser, 2015).

4.1.1.2.3 Editing tools in videos

Another, very recent form of style difference can be found in the videos of the performances that are being put online. Performers use editing tools to add other dimensions to their visual vernacular. A great example of this is Ian Sanborn, who uses a wide range of digital effects to back up his performance. In his video 'caterpillar' he uses the shift from black and white to color to indicate that the caterpillar (figure 4.8) has become a butterfly (figure 4.9) (his facial expression, which was neutral before, but ecstatic after the transformation indicates this as well).

Figure 4.8. Sanborn (2014) portraying the caterpillar in black and white

Figure 4.9. Sanborn (2014) portraying the butterfly in color

He uses a low shutter speed (figure 4.10) for extra effect in some movements, and speeds up the video in between different points of view to distinguish them better. He uses slow motion in other parts of the video (figure 4.11), and he combines these effects to make for an even more unique style of visual vernacular. All together these effects make for a very different experience for the viewer compared to when he would not have added them.

Figure 4.10. Sanborn (2014) speeds up video to mimic the flapping of wings

Figure 4.11. Sanborn (2014) makes slow motion images for sunrays shining

4.1.1.3 Stories based on any day events

Inspiration can be drawn from other visual sources too, as for example from real life. This leads to stories that are based on events that could happen any day. A beautiful example for this is the 'unexpected moment' performance by deaf sisters Amina and Jamila Ouahid, where they team up to perform a story about a car crash, one sitting behind the other. The sister in the front plays the protagonist, who is driving her car down the highway. The sister in the back plays the scenery that passes by the car, like the trees moving by (figure 4.12), then the car crashes and she plays the glass that scatters over the front sister's face (figure 4.13), and after she plays the paramedic that tries to revive the front sister to no avail while the front sister watches in ghost form (figure 4.14). This performance goes to show that anything in the visual spectrum can be used as inspiration for a visual vernacular story.

Figure 4.12. Ouahid & Ouahid (2014) driving a car while the scenery comes by

Figure 4.13. Ouahid & Ouahid (2014) in the car crash when the window shatters

Figure 4.14. Ouahid & Ouahid (2014): dead driver witnesses the unsuccessful attempt at revival

4.1.2 Variation from performer to performer

4.1.2.1 Giuseppe Giuranna – rhythm

Styles vary from performer to performer as well. Giuseppe Giuranna for example uses rhythm as a major aspect in his visual vernacular performances. He perceives rhythm from visual sources, for instance when you are seated in a car and light poles flash by, or when you look at the light of a lighthouse that comes around every so often, or the waves of the sea that crash into the sand and make their way back in an endless cycle. The rhythm is predominant in

most of his stories, and can be seen especially well in the performances ‘the car’ and ‘the sheriff and the horse’.

In ‘the car’ the rhythm comes from all the reoccurring processes and scenery in and around the car. An example of this are the lane lines on the highway. If you drive at a constant speed, they will move past you in a rhythm. Giuranna portrays this by holding the steering wheel with his non-dominant hand, while pointing out the lane lines (figure 4.15) and following them with his index finger as they pass underneath him with a flick of the wrist of his dominant hand (figure 4.16). By stomping his foot on the ground in an ongoing rhythm, he manages to maintain it for the duration of the performance, and seeing his body sway due to the stomping of his foot gives an extra sense of rhythm to the performance.

Figure 4.15. Giuranna (1998) points to the lane line right in front of the car

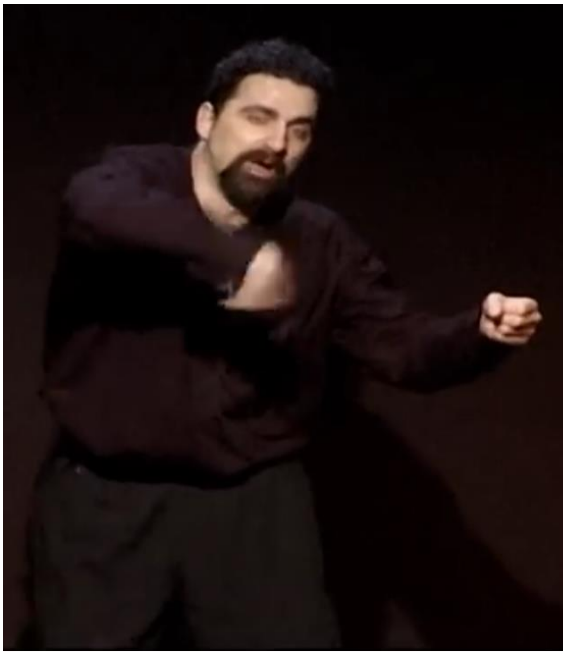

Figure 4.16. Giuranna (1998) lets the lane line pass under the car

Using body movement in a rhythmic cycle is not only present in ‘the car’, but also in ‘the sheriff and the horse’. Here, instead of swaying sideways, his body moves up and down in an ongoing rhythm throughout the performance. Even when he switches roles from the horse to the sheriff that is falling asleep on its back, both roles keep to the same rhythm: the horse keeps its tread, because of which the sheriff bounces up and down, and so do his hat (Figure 4.17) and his bandana (Figure 4.18).

Figure 4.17. Giuranna (1992) portrays the hat of the sheriff which bounces up and down

Figure 4.18. Giuranna (1992) shows the bandana of the sheriff bouncing

Another big feature in Giuranna's stories is that his signs flow very smoothly from one to the other; there is no pause in his stories. When compared to Bragg's performance of 'piscine au clair de lune', it stands out that Bragg is pausing a lot in his performance. He first walks, then pauses and looks at the moon, then he starts walking again. These transitions are not one smooth movement, but rather sequential activities. Mahbaz told France 5 that when he saw Bragg perform, he liked it. But when he saw Giuranna perform, he loved it. He thought it was beautiful and he knew then that that was what he wanted to do (Stroesser, 2015). This tells us there is indeed a difference of style between Bragg and Giuranna, as is explained above.

4.1.2.2 Guy Bouchauveau – comedy and comic books

Guy Bouchauveau used comic books to portray his stories before he put them into visual vernacular, and also draws his inspiration from them. In Stroesser (2015) he tells us that he draws his ideas for visual vernacular stories in comic book form, because he could not write it down in words ("it would be lifeless and cold"); the comic book form of telling a story with pictures is more appropriate for 'writing' visual vernacular down. He was more comedic in his approach to visual vernacular. When creating a new performance he added in the comedic factor to his stories after he had drawn them out. The comedy in his performance is already clear from the title of one of his stories: 'les deux zizis': 'the two penises'. This story revolves around two penises, one of which is circumcised and the other is not. The reaction of the audience to this performance is mostly laughter, while with the other performers and performances it is mostly wonder and fascination.

4.1.2.3 Ace Mahbaz – popping

In his performance 'video games', Ace Mahbaz is fluently 'popping' in his video: the movements are not completely flowing like Giuranna's, but rather one fluent movement which stops and starts again rapidly by contracting muscles, as can be seen in the dance style 'popping'.

4.1.2.4 Ian Sanborn – balance between opposites

In the performances of Ian Sanborn that can be found on his YouTube channel (Ian Sanborn) it is very striking that he is an avid user of the editing tool style. He uses many contrasting techniques in his videos, such as black and white versus color (when the caterpillar changes

into a butterfly in his video ‘the caterpillar’), sped up versus slow motion movements (the caterpillar whose crawling legs are slowed down but whose making of a cocoon is sped up), and most significant of all: movement versus motionlessness. Whenever he is not in the role of one of his characters, his hands are the only parts of his body that portray his character. His face stays completely still, his expression stays blank, and the only things that move are his arms and/or hands. This makes for an even greater contrast when his face does get incorporated into his performance, as for instance during his performance of ‘the rooster’ when he assumes the role of the rooster.

Like Giuranna, Sanborn uses rhythm in his performance of ‘The Super Deaf Black Stallion’. He shows a horse running from side to side, speeding up and eventually slowing down and showing himself off. He does this by showing alternately the hoofs of the horse pounding on the ground, his breast muscles working, his ears flapping and his mane bouncing up and down on his forehead. While he alternates between these movements, he keeps one steady rhythm with his upper body and his arms and hands, which give the impression of a horse running. He speeds up his rhythm and the amount of alternation to show the horse running faster, and then slowing everything down again to show the horse running slower.

Visual vernacular is an art form which grows with its time, and is therefore not likely to ever stop changing. As the technology around us changes, so does visual vernacular; not only in the way it is performed, but also what provides the inspiration for the stories to be based on.

5. Discussion

Now that we have found different traits of visual vernacular in the existing literature and by observing the dataset, it is interesting to look at where visual vernacular can be categorized within sign language literature, and how it is different from other forms of visual art.

5.1 Categorization

Visual vernacular is evidently part of sign language literature. The question that remains, however, is: where exactly can it be categorized? Research by the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) brought forth six categories, each with its own subcategories. The six categories are: narratives, songs, stories with constraints, poetry, group narrative, and sign play (Ben Bahan, 2006).
Songs, group narrative, and sign play can quickly be ruled out as potential categories where visual vernacular could reside, because visual vernacular does not have the characteristic traits of any of these forms of sign language literature: it is not a song translated into sign language, it is not performed in a group where everyone is both the performer and the audience, and it is not a play on existing language specific signs where a feature of the sign is changed (Sutton-Spence & Kaneko, 2016), after all, visual vernacular does not use any sign language specific signs. The three categories left are poetry, stories with constraints and narratives, and at first glance it is not clear where visual vernacular resides. Let us therefore take a closer look at these three categories.

5.1.1 Poetry

Poetry in sign language is defined by Klima and Bellugi (1979) as ‘creating a balance between the two hands, creating and maintaining a flow of movement between signs, and manipulating the parameters of the signs’. By observing the dataset, the balance between the two hands and the flow of movement between signs stand out, as can for example be seen in

‘the caterpillar’ (Sanborn, 2014). When the caterpillar forms his cocoon, Sanborn uses both hands with fluent movements to spin the cocoon. The manipulation of the parameters of the signs can be observed extensively throughout the dataset as well: creating novel iconic signs is fundamentally the same as manipulating the parameters of a sign. Freeman (1970) says that poetry can be defined as ‘an aesthetically purposeful distortion of standard language’. This means that poets can distort a standard language in new ways to create novel words. When applying this to sign language poetry, and in particular to visual vernacular, novel handshapes and classifiers can be created which distort the standard sign language. By creating novel handshapes and by distorting sign language by hardly ever using sign language specific signs, visual vernacular can be considered poetry. However, this is not the only category where visual vernacular fits in, as will be clear when we look into the other potential categories.

5.1.2 Stories with constraints

Stories with constraints are stories that have ‘constraints on the form of these stories [which] come from rules that are outside the story structure’ (Sutton-Spence & Kaneko, 2016). An example of this is an ABC-story, where every consecutive sign in the story has to be in the handshape of every consecutive letter in the sign language alphabet (Sutton-Spence & Kaneko, 2016). Visual vernacular, as can be seen in the dataset, has the constraint that it cannot contain any sign language specific signs, but can only consist of iconic signs that can be understood internationally. Even though this is most definitely a constraint, it is not a constraint seen before in the category stories with constraints. Therefore, there are no examples to be shown of a story with constraints that resembles visual vernacular, other than in having a constraint. Thus, visual vernacular could be viewed as a story with constraints as well, even though it just as well is poetry. Finally, there is yet another category where visual vernacular could fit in: narratives.

5.1.3 Narratives

Narratives are stories that ‘relate various events in chronological sequence’ (Bahan, 2006). This definition is quite general, but narratives is narrowed down into five subcategories: narratives of personal experience, cinematographic stories, folktales, translated works, and original fiction (Bahan, 2006). One of these subcategories, cinematographic stories, sparks interest seeing as cinematographic is a term often used when defining visual vernacular. Bahan tells us: ‘a cinematographic story foregrounds [cinematographic techniques] and uses [them] extensively throughout the work’ (Bahan, 2006). As can be subtracted from the definitions of many different sources above, the term ‘cinematographic’ goes hand in hand with visual vernacular. To say that cinematographic techniques are used ‘extensively’ throughout the work, can almost be considered an understatement. But, visual vernacular is not the same as a cinematographic story, seeing as sign language specific signs are used alongside the cinematographic techniques in cinematographic stories. An example of a cinematographic story is the story ‘vital signs’ by Roger Vass, Jr. He tells the story of a man whose doctor tells him he only has a week left to live. In his performance he uses many cinematographic techniques such as role shifting from the sign language interpreter who translates what the doctor said into ASL (figure 5.1) to the man (figure 5.2) who can be distinguished by their different facial expressions, body language and singing style: the interpreter is careful when telling the man he is gravely ill, whereas the man signs very fast, full of surprise and shock. This is the cinematographic technique perspective change, or role shifting in sign language terms.

Another cinematographic technique used is zooming. It can be seen in the difference between the way his body is sitting on the edge of the bridge (figure 5.3) which is zoomed out, to his face looking with the direction of the cars as they pass by (figure 5.4) which is zoomed in.

Figure 5.1. Vass, Jr. (2006) as the interpreter

Figure 5.2. Vass, Jr. (2006) as the patient

Figure 5.3. Vass, Jr. (2006) sitting down

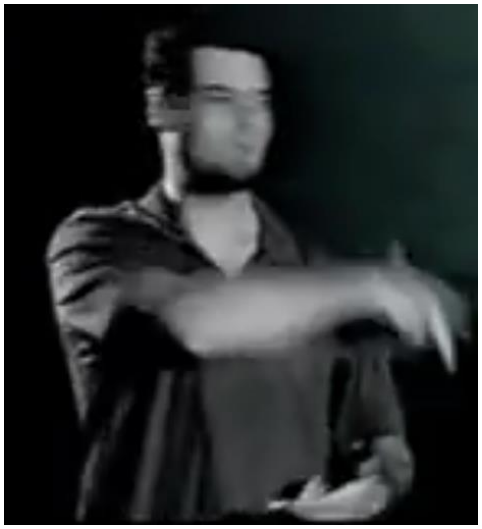

Figure 5.4. Vass, Jr. (2006) sees cars going past

Another cinematographic effect present in this cinematographic story is the 3D effects Vass, Jr. uses when the man falls from the bridge: Vass, Jr. points out how far the fall is by showing the deck of the bridge going further away from the man (figure 5.5), and then showing the pillars of the bridge going past him (figure 5.6).

Figure 5.5. Vass, Jr. (2006) falls away from the bridge deck

Figure 5.6. Vass, Jr. (2006) sees pillars of the bridge go past him

The category 'cinematographic stories' has one subcategory: 'classifier stories'. Ben Bahan states that the cinematographic stories category can be referred to as classifier stories (note 10 in his article) as well; they are interchangeable. However, after having watched several classifier stories and cinematographic stories, I do not agree with this. Firstly, when observing classifier stories I found that in classifier stories, one uses a majority of classifiers, but one does not make extensive use of cinematographic techniques. Techniques such as zoom are definitely used in a classifier story, but not extensively throughout the story as observed in a cinematographic story. Secondly, in all different classifier- and cinematographic stories observed, the storyteller of a classifier story is only the storyteller, whereas the storyteller of a cinematographic story assumes the role of both storyteller and main protagonist; he or she switches rolls.

That visual vernacular is related to cinematographic stories is clear, but if visual vernacular would reside in the category cinematographic stories, where (also in relation to classifier stories) would that be? There is more to be said about the difference between classifier stories and visual vernacular, before an answer to this question can be put forward.

5.2 Differences between visual vernacular and similar genres

5.2.1 Classifier stories

In what ways do classifier stories differ from visual vernacular? First of all, Ben Bahan tells us that classifier stories "consist entirely, or almost entirely, of classifiers" (Bahan, 2006). Classifiers are handshapes which represent 'the visual and geometric feature of an object.' (Derrida, 2006). An example of this is an index finger pointing upwards, which represents a person, or a flat hand with the palm facing down, which represents a car. There are many different kinds of classifiers used in a classifier story, such as size and shape specifiers (SASS), semantic classifiers and body classifiers. SASS show the physical characteristics of the object that the classifier is referring to (Liebman, 2005). Semantic classifiers are a closed set of predetermined classifiers. An example of this is one pointer finger upwards which is an indication of a person. Even though the vertical position of the finger relates to the vertical

position of a person standing, it is general knowledge of the sign language used that lets people understand this metaphor, for the rest of the features of the finger does not signify 'person'. Body classifiers are handshapes that represent other parts of the body, mostly feet and legs seeing as they are outside of the signing space (Liebman, 2005).

When looking at classifiers stories, what one sees is that a lot of classifiers are used, but a classifier story hardly ever consists exclusively of classifiers. Lexical signs are used to tell the story as well, and the sign language used depends on the signer. One can therefore say that someone tells a classifier story in American Sign Language, or in Italian Sign Language etcetera. The stories have language specific lexical items and are therefore not internationally comprehensible like visual vernacular is. The contemporary visual vernacular in the dataset never uses language specific lexical items, only iconic signs.

Second of all, not all classifiers in a classifier story are based on iconicity while visual vernacular is completely iconic. This is especially clear in the category 'Semantic Classifiers', seeing as they are 'not represented by their iconic characteristics but are abstract representations' (Liebman, 2005). This means that, when looking at the iconicity, the handshape only slightly represents the referent. The classifier for a car, for instance, is a flat hand with the palm facing downward. This does not represent a car other than in the surface dimension: a car is longer than it is wide. A bicycle is represented, in the same way, as a flat hand with the palm facing towards the non-dominant side of the body. This is because a bicycle is taller than it is wide. But seeing as a hand does not share any other features with either a car or a bicycle, it will not be recognized as such without this explanation, or without first signing 'car' or 'bicycle' respectively. Visual vernacular is precisely that: one can understand it without any knowledge of any sign language, and without any further explanation. Of course, there are still degrees as to how well it is understood, but that differs from performance to performance. In short: classifier stories also use semantic classifiers, where the classifier is not based solely on iconicity, whereas visual vernacular only uses classifiers based solely on iconicity.

Third and last of all, Brenda Liebman tells us that 'classifiers are designated handshapes […] used to represent nouns and verbs' (Liebman, 2005). The key word here is 'designated'. When observing classifier stories I found that performers use the classifiers given in some or all of the classifier categories mentioned above, but they stick to the designated handshapes. Visual vernacular goes beyond that. Performers travel off the beaten path and quite often create novel classifiers. Sutton-Spence & Napoli (2013)[1] explain this: "[T]he novel handshapes allow the signer to set up a framework for telling a story that would be more difficult and maybe even impossible to tell with the appropriate conventional classifiers." A good example of this is the start of the documentary of Stroesser (2015), where Giuranna uses novel classifiers to recreate a flower design (figure 2.2) and his own ponytail (figure 2.3).

In short, the differences between classifier stories and visual vernacular are firstly, that classifier stories do contain sign language specific signs, whereas visual vernacular solely consists of iconic classifiers. Secondly, classifier stories can contain classifiers from the category 'semantic classifiers', which are not solely based on iconicity but rather on the abstract representation of the object, whereas visual vernacular only contains classifiers based

[1] This quote is taken from the preprint version of this article "How much can classifiers be analogous to their referents?", as I was not able to obtain a copy of the published version.

on iconicity. Lastly, classifier stories only use already existing classifiers whereas visual vernacular goes beyond that and performers create novel classifiers to suit their story. These are also the reasons why visual vernacular is internationally comprehensible and classifier stories are not.

Visual vernacular and classifier stories are not the same, as is argued above, and therefore I shall propose a different categorization of the two. Both stories contain cinematographic techniques, and shall therefore be classified within the category cinematographic stories. But instead of cinematographic stories and classifier stories being interchangeable as argued before by Bahan (2006), classifier stories gains a 'sister' called visual vernacular under the same 'mother' cinematographic stories.

This still poses the problem that visual vernacular is also definitely part of sign language poetry and stories with constraints as is said above. I would like to argue that visual vernacular could reside in any of these three categories, but does not specifically belong in any of them without keeping any connection to the other two. It unites the categories mentioned into one new form of art.

We now know how visual vernacular differs from cinematographic stories and classifier stories, but how is visual vernacular different from a similar non-sign language form of art?

5.2.2 Pantomime

5.2.2.1 No clear definition

When comparing visual vernacular to other art forms, pantomime's resemblance to visual vernacular is most striking (Sutton-Spence & Boyes Braem, 2013). However, there are a multitude of definitions to be found on pantomime, and they describe different phenomena. The name 'pantomime' is used for the use of the body without speech to portray a message. This can pertain to gestures such as the waving next to a cheek to tell someone that the food tastes good which happens in the Netherlands, but it is also used for the stage performed art form pantomime. There is no clear distinction between the two, except for that one is used to perform and to entertain an audience, while the other has no such intention; it is only used to portray a message.

Because the distinction is not clear between the artistic form of pantomime and the non-artistic form, and as of today no consensus has been reached on one definition to distinguish between them (Sutton-Spence and Boyes Braem, 2013), I shall touch upon a multitude of definitions that describe pantomime and compare them to visual vernacular.

5.2.2.2 Comparison with different stage types of pantomime

There are many different types of pantomime to be found on the stage, with many different aspects to them. Pantomime performance is more broad than the French performer wearing a barrette, white face paint and a red lip, a horizontally striped t-shirt, dark pants and the typical white gloves. There is, for instance, a movement which is called 'corporeal mime' that minimizes the use of facial expressions, sometimes even going so far as to cover the face entirely, and rely solely on body movement to tell a story (Sutton-Spence and Boyes Braem, 2013). Obviously, this is very different from visual vernacular, because facial expression is one of the key instruments a visual vernacular performer has in portraying his story. On the other hand there are artists, such as Charles Aubert, who think facial expressions to be really

important when performing pantomime. Aubert wrote ‘the art of pantomime’ in which he used over 70 pages to show drawings of different facial expressions that can be used in pantomime performance (Aubert & Sears, 1970). Visual vernacular makes use of a lot of facial expression, especially when switching between roles of different characters in the story to let the audience know which character is being portrayed. The facial expressions are an essential part of visual vernacular, without it a big part of what visual vernacular is about would fall away.

Some pantomime performers use props when telling their stories (Sutton-Spence and Boyes Braem, 2013). An example of this is Marcel Marceau, one of the most influential mime artists there has ever been, using a hat with a flower on it and a hoop in his performance of a circus lion trainer that tries to get to lion to jump through the hoop (see figure 5.7).

Figure 5.7. Marcel Marceau as a circus performer using props

The visual vernacular performers in the dataset never make use of props to tell their stories, the only assets they use are their hands, upper body and facial expressions. One thing that could be compared to the props used in pantomime is the use of video techniques by some performers. But this is only a comparison in that both props and video techniques are means besides their body that aid the performer in their story.

Some performances of pantomime include sound in the form of music or actual speech. This was not seen in the dataset of visual vernacular used in this thesis. The reason for this is most likely that it is a form of art performed by Deaf people. They would not benefit from speech or other sounds being included, and it would be lost on the Deaf audience members watching the performance. There is therefore no reason why there would be sound in visual vernacular.

5.2.2.3 Comparison with general pantomime characteristics

Even though pantomime is hard to define, many have tried through the years. Therefore we shall take a look at the definitions of Żywiczyński, Wacewicz & Sibierska (2016), who wrote a paper on defining pantomime for language evolution research, and Tellier (2009), who made a comparison of characteristics of pantomime and, among others, sign language. Żywiczyński, Wacewicz & Sibierska (2016) define pantomime as the following:

'A non-verbal, mimetic and non-conventionalized means of communication, which is executed primarily in the visual channel by coordinated movements of the whole body, but which may incorporate other semiotic resources, most importantly non-linguistic vocalizations. Pantomimes are acts of improvised communication that holistically refer to a potentially unlimited repertoire of events, or sequences of events, displaced from the here and now. In doing so, pantomime does not depend on semiotic conventions.'

The characteristics of Tellier (2009) include 'an obligatory absence of speech', 'linguistic properties are absent', 'pantomime is not conventionalized' and 'pantomime is global and analytic'. Emmorey (2008) adds to these characteristics that 'pantomime is always transparent and iconic'. Keep in mind that these definitions do not necessarily pertain to performance based pantomime, but to any form of conveying a message using only body language.

There are some new characteristics which we have not discussed before, such as the iconicity that Emmorey (2008) adds. Both pantomime and visual vernacular performers are using iconicity to tell their stories, it is predominantly present in both art forms. In the case of pantomime this can be predicted seeing as performers of pantomime do not use any sign language or any other conventionalized means of body language (Tellier, 2009). This seems to be one of the main reasons why people think of pantomime when they see visual vernacular, apart from the use of body movement to tell the story. Because of this iconicity, many pantomime artists can be found as street performers in touristic cities; the language the audience speaks does not matter, it is understood by everyone. This is another similarity to visual vernacular: the international boundary-crossing character the performance has.

Whitmire (1927) states that pantomime is performed with movements of the whole body, and this can be seen in every performance of pantomime. An example of this can be observed in figure 5.8 where one of the performers is literally sitting down. Something similar only happened in early visual vernacular (Bernard Bragg making walking motions with his whole body), but was not present in other videos of the dataset. In those, the performance had to stay within the signing space: sitting may be portrayed with a slight slouching of the shoulders and a tucked in stomach (figure 5.9).

Figure 5.8. Mime player sitting down

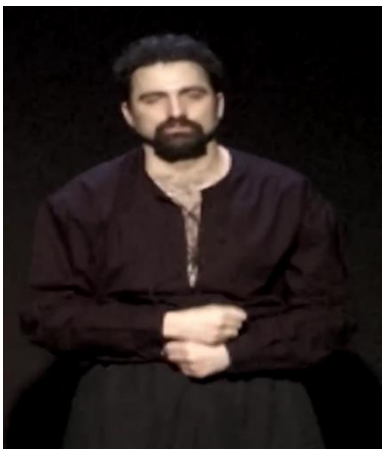

Figure 5.9. Visual vernacular player Giuranna (1992) sitting down

One could assume that the reason for visual vernacular having the same space constraint as sign languages do, is because visual vernacular is in the 'sign language realm', whereas pantomime is not. The reason why Bragg does use some more body movement than is the standard in contemporary visual vernacular, could be because his visual vernacular is highly influenced by pantomime.

Another feature that stands out when watching pantomime performances is that there is a lot of spatial movement on stage. This is very contrary to what visual vernacular artists do, who stay in the same spatial position, hardly ever moving around. If they want to give the illusion of moving, for instance walking somewhere, they walk in one spot, such as Bragg did when 'walking' towards the diving board in his performance of 'piscine au clair de lune'(Stroesser, 2015), or they show the walking from a zoomed out perspective by using their hands as feet, as can be seen when Sanborn's horse runs in 'The Super Deaf Black Stallion' (Sanborn, 2018). Pantomime performers, however, can take up as much as the whole stage with their performances. When Sutton-Spence and Boyes Braem (2013) conducted an experiment with Deaf sign language poets and pantomime performers, even the Deaf poets commented on the many spatial movements the pantomime performers made, without being asked to comment on it. It is clear that this is a major difference between pantomime and visual vernacular.

Then, Żywiczyński, Wacewicz & Sibierska (2016) tell us that

'pantomime refers to whole events or sequences of events in a holistic "continuous strand", with no self-apparent onsets and terminations in the stream of movement, which does not naturally decompose into easily isolable component parts. While it may be possible to single out segments as a matter of post-factum analysis, such segments would lack obvious discrete boundaries and may not be freely recombinable.'

Pantomime is holistic, which means that the arm and hand movements are all one big movement instead of the hand and arm movements 'being used in isolation from other body movements' (Żywiczyński, Wacewicz & Sibierska, 2016) This is a very big difference with visual vernacular, where the arm and hand movements are isolated from body movements. The latter are hardly ever existent in the visual vernacular dataset, whereas the hand and arm movements are the most important means of telling the story. Furthermore, a visual vernacular story consists of iconic signs. Signs are indeed 'isolable component parts', and therefore visual vernacular cannot be seen as a 'continuous strand' of events. However, this does not mean that visual vernacular is not signed fluently, it merely means that the stream of information can be divided into subcategories; in the case of visual vernacular it can be subdivided into signs.

Żywiczyński, Wacewicz & Sibierska (2016) also tell us that pantomime is non-linguistic, that it is 'improvised acts of communication executed in the visual channel'. With this they refer not only to the staged variant of pantomime, but to the non-staged variant as well. Visual vernacular is definitely linguistic: there is a structure to the signs and there are restrictions in the movement. Another important word in this description is 'improvised'. Visual vernacular is hardly ever improvised, but is a well thought out performance that may take a long time to come up with, perfect and practice before it is performed in front of an audience.

After having observed pantomime performances it stood out that the performer never does any role shifting. The performer always stays in one character, and if there are events

unfolding, the performer is the protagonist of the story. From time to time, the story makes the protagonist a spectator to the storyline, but still the performer stays put in his one role as protagonist. A pantomime artist does not make use of other cinematographic techniques that are used in visual vernacular either, such as zooming in and out on an object or subject. This is a big difference with visual vernacular where the performer uses role shifting and zooming in and out on a very frequent basis to say the least. Both are cinematic techniques used in visual vernacular for perspective change.

5.2.2.4 Overview of similarities and differences

All in all it is very clear that visual vernacular is not the same as pantomime, both the on and off stage variant, even though pantomime and visual vernacular are both performed in the visual channel, are understood globally without having to deal with language barriers and both rely heavily on iconicity. The differences between the two make it very clear that they can indeed not be viewed to be the same art form. An overview of the similarities and differences between pantomime and visual vernacular can be viewed in table 3.1.

	Pantomime	Visual vernacular
Story telling medium	Body movement, facial expression, meaningful utterances of sound	Body movement, facial expression
Use of iconicity	Yes	Yes
Understood by audience despite language barrier with performer	Yes	Yes
Body movement restrictions	No	Yes, body movement is restricted to the signing space
Holistic	Yes	No
Linguistic	No	Yes
Usually improvised performance	Yes	No
Perspective change (through role taking)	No	Yes
Use of props	Yes	No
Use of spatial movement	Yes	No
Possibility of speech	Yes	No
Use of cinematographic techniques	No	Yes

Table 3.1. Pantomime (on and off stage) and visual vernacular compared on major characteristics

5.2.2.5 Suggestion for future research

What would be interesting to see is if, on a neurological level, pantomime and visual vernacular are different. This can be tested by recreating the experiments of Corina, Vaid, et al. (1992). They tested whether there was any different neural system at play between when a person uses pantomime and when a person uses sign language. They found that for sign language, there is a left-hemisphere dominance (where the language processing and producing

part of the brain is located), but for pantomime there is no laterality effect. This proves that the two actions are produced differently when looking at the neurological processes, and are therefore not the same. A suggestion for further research is to repeat this experiment, but instead of testing sign language, testing visual vernacular. This could tell us whether visual vernacular is produced in the language center of our brain, and how far off or how similar it is neurologically to pantomime.

Another experiment that could be executed to determine whether the same parts of the brain are used for the understanding of pantomime and visual vernacular is the experiment done by (Corina et al., 1992; Kegl & Poizner, 1997; Poizner, Klima & Bellugi., 1987). They tested whether a person who was aphasic to sign language could understand pantomimic gestures. It turned out that this person could indeed understand pantomimic gestures, which proved that there was neurological evidence that signs of a sign language are not elaborate pantomimes. An idea for a future research question is whether a person aphasic to sign language can understand visual vernacular. If this person cannot understand visual vernacular, that would suggest that visual vernacular is processed in the same part of the brain as where sign language is processed, as opposed to pantomime.

Even though these experiments would further support the claim that visual vernacular and pantomime are not the same art forms, it is already proven as such with the above arguments. Visual vernacular and pantomime are similar, but cannot be considered as the same.

6. Conclusion

Out of all the different sign language art forms that exist, the most iconic performance one can view is a visual vernacular poem. It is a true Deaf art form, not based on any hearing forms of performance, but it is not for Deaf eyes only. The iconic nature of the signing used in visual vernacular makes it accessible to both hearing and Deaf audiences, and it even crosses the borders of different sign languages. It is an art form that can appeal to anyone without having to be altered to do so, and this is what makes it so unique. Every spectator can find something that appeals to them, for there are many different styles to be found within the visual vernacular genre. From slow movements with some pantomime influences, the early visual vernacular, to rapid fluent movements that sometimes incorporate visual rhythm as a major aspect: contemporary visual vernacular.

Pantomime was an influence in the early stages of visual vernacular, especially in the performances of Bernard Bragg, the artist who gave visual vernacular a name and a stage, but who did not invent it. It is an art form that has been passed down through generations, but had never gotten the recognition as its own form of art until Bragg came along. Even though pantomime may have influenced visual vernacular, it is most decidedly not the same form of art. There are many differences to be found, one of which is that both may use the body to portray a story instead of the voice, but pantomime performers use their whole body, whereas visual vernacular is constricted to the signing space.

Another form of art with which visual vernacular can be compared is classifier stories, which is a form of sign language literature. Cinematographic techniques and classifier handshapes are most definitely used throughout visual vernacular as they are throughout classifier stories, but the main difference between these two art forms is that classifier stories uses sign language specific lexical items as well. This means that classifier stories are never

internationally comprehensible, let alone by hearing people; one has to have knowledge of the specific sign language that the classifier story is told in in order to understand it.

Because visual vernacular is truly a unique form of art, it deserves its own spot in the categorization of sign language literature by the National Association of the Deaf (Bahan, 2006). Because of the frequent use of cinematographic techniques, it can be categorized as a subcategory of cinematographic stories, as a sister to classifier stories, but it also has the features to reside in the categories sign language poetry and stories with constraints. It is an art form that unites the three categories and cannot be placed in one of them without having ties with the other two.

What is most striking is that visual vernacular is still very unknown in the world of sign language poetry. When Giuseppe Giuranna performed at the opening of the wall poem in Leiden, it was the first time for many audience members to be introduced to visual vernacular, even though they were interested in sign language poetry. That day they were introduced to something new, because it was embedded in another program that they chose to go to. It is my hope that more and more people are introduced to visual vernacular and start to go to performances for the visual vernacular itself. I hope that they are inspired to discover and to share, as I have been which led to this thesis, for there is so much beauty to find in the caterpillar, even before it has turned into a butterfly.

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Figure 2.2 screenshot of Giuseppe Giuranna's opening scene in the documentary 'VV…?' (Stroesser, 2015)