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Reading and the Distracted Brain:

An Exploration of how the Graphic Narrative Can Contribute to Improve General Reading Skills and Reading Enthusiasm for Long-Form Text Reading

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Abstract

Never before were there so many people that can read and have access to reading material on demand. This is a time of great technological innovation, and carrying a small computer in the back pocket of your jeans has become a normality, and often even a necessity. An increasing number of people relies on the ability to read, and current literacy numbers are exceptionally high, with a vast majority of the world population being literate. Reading is done on a large scale by a staggering number of people, yet reading enthusiasm and the number of people who read as a leisure activity in its own right is declining. This results in a decline in the number of people able to read a long-form text in the deep reading mode, and this poses a problem. Reading long-form texts in a deep reading mode trains the reading comprehension ability and general reading skill, if these skills are not regularly trained there is a risk of becoming low-literate, which impedes someone to fully participate in society. Being low-literate decreases the chances of being able to think critically, differentiate between real and fake news, understand political party programmes, or the information attached to drugs. The increase of people at risk of becoming low-literate is connected to heavy screen use. Screen reading does not train the deep reading mode, but rather the skimming reading mode. Being well trained to read in the skimming reading mode has made it extremely difficult for people to be able to read long-form texts. In this thesis I address this problem and argue that reading graphic narratives can be a stepping stone to acquiring and improving general comprehensive reading skills and reading enthusiasm for non-graphic text. I support my argument by indicating the characteristics of the graphic narrative and how these enable the reluctant reader to read a graphic narrative in a way that resembles the skimming reading mode, while still being able to read deeply. Additionally I review several research studies that have found the graphic narrative to provide a positive learning experience for students, in the fields of second language acquisition, and reading comprehension ability.

Introduction

Graphic narratives are not a new medium, and not a small one. Most people will have read one or more in their lifetime. However, these works are often not viewed as a type of 'legitimate reading material', let alone that a graphic narrative may be attributed a literary status. This negative attitude towards graphic narratives may well be entirely undeserved; in this thesis I aim to prove that graphic narratives are valuable reading material in their own right. I will discuss the characteristics of the graphic narrative and how these aspects can contribute to the improvement of reading enthusiasm and comprehensive reading skills in general. An increase of reading enthusiasm is much needed, for it is incredibly low — especially among teenage readers, for example, a third of Dutch teenagers do not like reading and only a quarter has said to find reading enjoyable.[1] As a result, longer texts are hardly being read, as a result, reading comprehension ability often declines due to lack of practice. Oftentimes, the finger is quickly pointed towards digital media as the culprit, but wherever the fault lies it appears that in this digital media centred world people spend an increasingly smaller amount of their spare time reading 'long form' reading material (or simply 'books' for the layman). The decline of reading enthusiasm is a regretful development, because long-form reading attributes greatly to essential general reading comprehension abilities.

In this thesis I use the term 'graphic narrative', rather than the more familiar terms 'comic', 'comic strip', or 'graphic novel', because it is a more neutral and inclusive term. Many authors make a distinction between comics and graphic novels, however, they are hardly ever in agreement about what should or should not be called what. In this thesis most types of works addressed with these terms will most likely fall under the working definition of 'graphic narrative' that I use. This definition and my choice to use 'graphic narrative' will be discussed and explained below in part 3 of the Introduction. A discussion of the terms 'deep reading', and 'long-form text' will also be included there.

1. Longing for Leisure-Reading

There is no question that reading is a vital skill to have and to keep practising, indeed, a skill that is necessary in order to normally function in Western society. So much of daily life relies on people being able to read, which is why, of course, it is being taught to all children in school. Nearly everyone in the Western world is literate, however, low-literacy numbers are rising: there is an

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[1] Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief* (2019), p.10.

increasing number of people that are unable to read a text longer than 500 words well.[2] Paradoxically, where reading long, linear texts — containing more than 500 words[3] — may be declining, reading in general is not.[4] However, the kind of reading most people engage in are short-form texts, such as a tweet; the caption accompanying an Instagram photo; or brief news articles. Grabbing a book and reading for longer stretches of time is what is becoming the exception. The digital devices where most of these short texts are read, especially smartphones, are often pointed at as the culprit for these developments. But banning or cutting back on new technology are unrealistic approaches to the problem, obviously. Rather, a desirable solution would be to somehow create a 'reading culture', where reading long texts is (once again) found useful and entertaining and not just a cumbersome way to learn new information. Ideally, reading long texts should be met with enthusiasm and motivation. Unfortunately, especially school-going children and teenagers find it difficult to enjoy reading long texts, they see it as a task that is required to be completed however hard it may be. Additionally, teachers rarely see it as part of their responsibility to stimulate 'reading enjoyment'.[5]

Reading for a long period of time has become a form of leisure that for many people is no longer an easy and convenient method to relax. Long-form reading has to compete with many other forms of entertainment: many of which have become, or appear to be, easier and more fun. The 'digital revolution' has played a part in this, introducing devices that allow everyone to be connected with the Internet and each other at all times. Unfortunately, what this has also enabled is distraction, or rather the inability to pay attention, to concentrate. This phenomenon is why it has for most people become nearly impossible to find the peace of mind to sit down with a book, magazine or newspaper. Nearly everything in our daily routine has become rushed, and filled with stimuli. Another development happening alongside the digital revolution is that increasingly more value is attributed to images, while words are becoming less important. The process of not reading long texts can become a negative spiral: if it requires more effort and a very conscious decision to start reading a book it becomes less likely to choose as a leisure activity; instead attention is given to digital devices featuring mostly shorter texts; then, when short texts become the norm, long texts

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[2] Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief*, p. 10.

[3] M. Kovač, and A. van der Weel, 'Reading in a post-textual era' *First Monday*, 23 (2018), n.pag. <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/9416/7592> (21 August, 2019).

[4] Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief*, p. 9.

[5] Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief*, p.19.

become more daunting; which leads to reading fewer books; and so forth. More lengthy texts will only be read if people actually enjoy them, and not just because it has proven to be beneficial to reading skills and language comprehension.

A type of reading material that is often overlooked in the pursuit of regaining reading enthusiasm is the graphic narrative, and regrettably so, for this particular medium could prove to be a very valuable tool. In other areas, mostly didactic, the graphic narrative is slowly starting to prove its worth: mainly in second language acquisition, or as a support in introducing a new topic. In the context of fostering reading enthusiasm or the creation of a 'reading culture' the graphic narrative is hardly ever mentioned in the literature published on the subject. The graphic narrative medium is often overlooked because of the misconception that it is supposed to be material meant solely for children, or only written to amuse. It is often assumed that when reading a graphic narrative no imagination is needed — because the artist already drew all the pictures — and therefore simply does not count as 'real' reading, and that it would even stand in the way of long-form reading. I will argue in this thesis that this view is undeserved, and that in fact the reverse is more likely to be true.

2. Thesis Statement and Research Method

In this thesis I argue that reading graphic narratives can be a stepping stone to acquiring and improving general reading skills and reading enthusiasm for non-graphic text. In order to prove this I have conducted an extensive literature study and based on my findings I have decided to explore the characteristics of the graphic narrative, and to what extent and how these specific aspects contribute to the development of advanced reading skills and reading pleasure in reading stretches of non-graphic text. Characteristics of the graphic narrative include, but are not limited to, non-linear reading, the use of panels, and gutters. I will also discuss how these characteristics influence the reader's use of imagination, and how time passes in a graphic narrative. How these elements are helping or hindering reading enthusiasm and reading comprehension for longer texts is what will be discussed in this thesis.

The aim of this project is to explore if it is indeed possible to verify that reading graphic narratives can be a stepping stone to acquiring and improving general comprehensive reading skills and reading enthusiasm for non-graphic text.

3. Defining 'Graphic Narrative' and Introducing 'Deep Reading'

The necessary next step in this introductory chapter is defining a few key expressions that were already briefly mentioned above, these are: 'graphic narrative', and 'deep reading'. The former requires quite a bit more explanation than the latter.

3.1 Using 'Graphic Narrative' rather than 'Comic' or 'Graphic Novel'

A difficulty facing anyone writing about graphic publications is that of describing and defining the field. It is noticeable in the literature that authors either do not discuss the issue at all, or pay it a lot of attention. If there is no acknowledgement of the terminological issue, often the term *graphic novel* or *comic* is used consistently and solely,[6] without much explanation of what this refers to exactly. But, if the author makes a point of choosing a particular term a lengthy discussion follows on the objections against or advantages of using one or some of these terms: *comic*, *comic strip*, *graphic novel*, *graphic narrative*, *graphic story*, *sequential art*, or *multimodal books.*[7]

The type of reading material I am concerned with is covered by the term *graphic narrative*. Before defining and explaining this term, it is important to consider that the use of *graphic narrative* is not the most obvious choice. The two most common terms in English to refer to the reading material I consider are, as mentioned above, *comic* and *graphic novel*, but each has its disadvantages. Comics, especially in the view of the general public, are usually thought to be superhero stories for children,[8] while the label *graphic novel* tends to be associated with works of fiction only, or seen as referring to a more sophisticated, more artful version of comics that is suitable for adults.[9] These notions may accurately define part of the medium, but remain shallow and restrictive.

Many authors on the subject struggle to find a term for their field of study that they can all agree on and that is inclusive, precise and neutral. Ideally, such a term should also reflect the view that the graphic publication is an art-form on its own. Indeed, many authors, including artist and theorist of graphic narratives Scott McCloud, agree that the graphic narrative should be recognised

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[6] J. Baetens and H. Frey, *The Graphic Novel: an Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 5.

[7] S.E. Tabachnick, ed, *Teaching the Graphic Novel,* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2009), p. 2.

[8] S. McCloud and M. Martin, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), p. 2.

[9] J.M. Smith and K. Pole, 'What's Going On in a Graphic Novel?', *The Reading Teacher*, 72 (2018), p. 169.

as an art-form of its own.[10] [11] However, it is often still categorised as one generic *genre* of literature, unjustly so, for the entirety of graphic reading material is too varied and too interdisciplinary to fit into just one genre of literature (to mention some of the genres of graphic publication: fiction; non-fiction; romance, science fiction; psychological thrillers; magical realism; satire; comedy; superheroes; adventure; historical; educational; and a variety of genres for children and young adults). Graphic material as a whole being so complex and versatile, renowned literature professor and graphic narrative researcher Stephen Tabachnick argues that it is actually quite impossible to define it. He points out that in studying it as a medium in its own right, we put it on a par with other mediums, such as literature, and, just like literature, all graphic reading material is not definable in one or two sentences.[12] However, McCloud has presented a brief definition that is widely considered to give an accurate description of graphic publications in all forms they appear in. It is this definition I have borrowed and adapted for this study.

McCloud's definition runs as follows: 'juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.'[13] What is noticeable is that McCloud does not mention text in his definition and is concerned with 'the viewer' and not 'the reader'. He explains that including 'text' would make his definition too restrictive in his view,[14] because it would then exclude graphic reading material containing no textual elements. For the purpose of this thesis, however, this approach is too broad as I will limit my research to material that contains text as well as pictures, working together in synergy. The secondary literature reviewed also refers only to graphic publications including text, and is often part of research concerned with language acquisition. Studies discussing the possible role of textless works in language acquisition have not been left out purposely: I simply did not encounter any. Considering all of the above, I arrived at the definition I will use in this thesis: a graphic narrative is a work consisting of juxtaposed pictorial and other images combined with text in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the reader.

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[10] McCloud and Martin, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, p. 6, and p. 195.

[11] Baetens and Frey, *The Graphic Novel: an Introduction*, p. 8.

[12] C. Hatfield, 'Defining Comics in the Classroom; or, The Pros and Cons of Unfixability', in S.E. Tabachnick, ed, *Teaching the Graphic Novel*, p. 21.

[13] McCloud and Martin, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, p. 9.

[14] McCloud and Martin, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, p. 21.

Although McCloud himself prefers to stick to the more well-known label *comics* as an overall term for the art form he defines, I use the term *graphic narrative*. This term — which is not widely used outside the literature researching the medium — sounds the most neutral and inclusive.[15] Moreover, *graphic narrative* has the advantage that its main usage is as an umbrella term only. Finally, it also emphasises the storytelling aspect that is shared by all publications called *comic*, *comic strip*, *graphic novel*, *graphic story*, *sequential art*, or *multimodal books.*

On a side note, it should be mentioned that some authors make one or two broad distinctions in order to separate the works they call *comics* and the ones they call *graphic novels*. And, even though I do not adhere to these vague and inconclusive distinctions in providing my working definition I find it useful to mention them briefly to clarify that the working definition I use makes no distinction between the terms *comic* and *graphic novel*. The divisions between these terms may also sometimes be recognised in the way graphic publications are arranged on bookshop shelves, and are often the same as the generalising distinction most people make — besides them referring to the entire medium as reading material for children. Thus thin graphic serial publications are then categorised as comics, while longer stand-alone works are then categorised as graphic novels. In another rough distinction that is often made, a graphic narrative is called a comic when it has 'panels' with borders separated by small spaces termed 'gutters'. Graphic narratives that are most commonly referred to as graphic novels do not always have gutters separating the borders of the panels and are generally seen as more flexible in their style of artwork. However, general distinctions like these are inconclusive, generalising oversimplifications and therefore unhelpful in this study.

3.2 Deep Reading: an Introduction

'Deep reading' is a curious term because it has two types of definitions. There is the definition that comes intuitively when reading the term for the first time, which is not so easy to put into words, but the reader of the term will surely construct an instinctive definition in the realm of 'when a reader is engulfed by a text and it feels as if they are not just reading it but experiencing the narrative, and for a moment exist only there', or simply refer to it as something on par with a meditative state.[16] But then there is also the working definition scholars use to describe the process of reading a text and relating it to the reader's prior knowledge and allowing them to form new

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[15] H.L. Chute, Why Comics? : From Underground to Everywhere. (New York: Harper, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2017), p. 19.

[16] S. Birkerts, *The Gutenberg elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), p. 81.

ideas in slow cognitive processes including ‘critical thinking, personal reflection, imagination and empathy’.[17]

The way we read and what we read has changed. More text is consumed, but in a shorter format, and often from a screen. To say it crudely, by continuously consuming short texts and by being distracted by our electronic devices it is becoming increasingly harder to find the calm and will to read a long text. Professors of Book Studies at Leiden University and Publishing Studies at the University of Ljubljana respectively, Adriaan van der Weel and Miha Kovač consider three basic reading modes: (i) skimming, where the reader will quickly scan the text, often used for short texts; (ii) immersed reading, the kind of reading that completely absorbs the reader and makes them forget about their surroundings, which is commonly achieved when reading a well-written, but not too demanding, novel; and (iii) in-depth reading: this mode of reading is cognitively the most demanding and is required for example when reading and comprehending challenging literary texts, study material, and academic texts.[18]

A long text, containing 500 words or more, requires more effort to read. In order to read it well it will not do to read it in a ‘skimming’ manner, where the reader superficially scans the text until a small bit of relevant information presents itself. Immersive and in-depth reading requires more attentiveness and puts a greater strain on the brain than skimming. Many of the sources I reviewed do distinguish between the skimming reading mode appropriate for short texts and a reading mode for longer texts that requires more attention and concentration — this mode is often referred to as ‘deep-reading’ — but they do not distinguish between immersed and in-depth reading, as mentioned above. In these sources many attributes are ascribed to deep-reading, such as a kind of meditative state;[19] or an interactive state of body and mind where the reader learns about unknown dimensions of themselves or even the world.[20] Maryanne Wolf describes deep reading in her book *Reader Come Home* as something similar to the description of the second and third reading modes by Van der Weel and Kovač put together: immersion, which leads to the ability to process information vigilantly, critically and wisely.[21] Her description of deep reading is the one I will use in this thesis when I refer to deep reading.

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[17] M. Wolf, *Reader Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2018), p. 8.

[18] Kovač and Van der Weel, ‘Reading in a post-textual era’ *First Monday*, 23 (2018), n.pag. (21 August, 2019).

[19] Birkerts, *The Gutenberg elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, p.19.

[20] R.P. Waxler and P. Maureen, *Transforming Literacy: Changing Lives Through Reading and Writing* (Bingley, Great Britain: Emerald Group Pub. Ltd., 2011), p. 18.

[21] Wolf, *Reader Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital* World, p. 46.

In this thesis I argue that the deep reading mode is necessary to read a graphic narrative, while reading a graphic narrative might be found to accommodate the distracted mind better and be less demanding to read than for example a plain text novel, or even popular fiction: for they both require a reading mode more demanding than skimming. However, by 'activating' the deep reading mode readers will be better trained to read a long form text (without images) than by trying to force such a text on them and their distracted brains. It is necessary to train the deep reading skill by trying to read deeply often, because the deep reading of longer texts is not only a way to communicate, or ingest knowledge: it is a skill that stimulates empathic abilities in the reader; and encourages language acquisition, broadening of the vocabulary, and acquiring a critical attitude — towards, for example, political leaders, or the news. I will elaborate on the necessity of deep reading in the first chapter.

4. Scope and Structure

As a final element in this introductory chapter I will give an overview of how the rest of this thesis is structured. Additionally, I will put forth the general scope of this thesis: what is and is not included in this research. Considering the scope of this thesis I would like to point out that even though I am suggesting in this thesis that the graphic narrative medium can be of help to stimulate reading non-graphic texts, I need to emphasise that I do not of course consider the graphic narrative as a medium with the sole purpose of assisting in the stimulation of 'real' reading, but rather as a medium and an art-form in its own right.

The graphic narrative is a rather large medium and it is impossible to tackle it in its entirety within the limits of this thesis. Consequently, I have defined some restrictions regarding the graphic narratives I will consider. Graphic narratives have to contain several panels, and be longer than a page — the same general restriction for a text to be considered 'long', but because the number of words on a graphic narrative page can be highly diverse it is not a word-count but a page-count I use. Because Dutch and English are the only two languages I am proficient in I will not look at graphic narratives that are in another language. Manga is also excluded from my research, because it is such a big subcategory often accompanied by a 'manga-culture' that I think it is unreasonable to just place it under the same umbrella as all other graphic narratives without a thorough explanation — for which this thesis offers no room or relevance. Furthermore, the graphic narrative is often accused of being for children only. This is a blatant generalisation that may have some historic justification but has long since become untrue: graphic novels are being written for numerous types of target audiences, both for children and adults. Having addressed this, it can be

assumed that I will research graphic narratives relevant for their intended target audience, in other words the works will be appropriate to the age and reading level of the reader. Lastly, when it comes to the graphic narrative, I will focus on paper-published works. Digital graphic narratives do exist, and in vast and growing numbers, but in order to not overcomplicate the scope of this thesis I will not look at digital graphic narratives as a tool to stimulate general reading skills and reading enthusiasm. Partly because including digital graphic narratives will require indulging in the elaborate discussion on whether or not it is possible to deep-read from another substrate than paper, but mainly because this thesis does not offer enough room to accommodate digitally published graphic narratives also. Undeniably the surface from which a work is read does matter and certainly has an effect on reading ability.

Two additional notes on reading habits: first, I will focus on the decrease of long-form reading in the Netherlands only. And, secondly, since this decline is a phenomenon apparent in all age groups I will not make a definitive distinction there, however, most sources are referencing reading decline in school-going children, and how reading enthusiasm can be increased in the same age group — they approach this problem mostly via didactic programmes. However, the problem of low-literacy and the inability to read long-form texts deeply is one that exists in all age groups and one that can be treated in all as well.

In between the Introduction and the Conclusion this thesis will have three main chapters that form the body of the argument. The first chapter will discuss the comprehensive reading decline in the Netherlands in more detail, elaborating on the importance of comprehensive reading skills. Additionally, I will critically consider the claim that the way the brain is working has been altered under the influence of the digital revolution, and include the possible consequences that exist for reading habits. Elaborating on how the reading habits conditioned by heavy screen use are compatible with how one can begin to read a graphic narrative.

In the second chapter I will include an exploration of the reputation of the graphic narrative through its historical context. I do this to illustrate why the graphic narrative is rarely considered to be beneficial to the reading skill or why it is hardly ever used in an educational context. Following this brief piece of context I will discuss the characteristics of the graphic narrative, how these distinguish the graphic narrative from non graphic narratives (or ‘normal’ books), but more importantly, how these aspects relate to the use of the graphic narrative as a tool to enhance reading enthusiasm for reading longer texts. I will end the second chapter with an exploration of the graphic narrative in the context of the current image-driven society (where attention spans are shorter), while also considering the influence of this current cultural context on reading enthusiasm.

Chapter 3 will consider published research on graphic narratives, and demonstrate how the graphic narrative is currently being used in education. This chapter will also include examples from a few case studies demonstrating which characteristics of the graphic narrative have proven to have beneficial effects for comprehensive reading ability and reading acquisition. In reviewing the available publications I have found that the graphic narrative is being used to improve language acquisition as well as being used as a way to introduce a new subject. Most students participating in these studies reacted really enthusiastic on the graphic narrative as a way to receive information or enjoy story-telling.

In the conclusion the previous chapters will be reviewed for their contribution to the thesis statement, claiming that reading graphic narratives can be a stepping stone to acquiring and improving general comprehensive reading skills and reading enthusiasm for non-graphic text.

Chapter 1

The Decline of Reading Enthusiasm

This chapter is the first step in demonstrating that the graphic narrative can be useful in stimulating the long-form reading skill and reading enthusiasm. In this first step I will introduce the importance of reading enthusiasm by discussing the beneficial aspects of long form reading. Additionally, I will discuss the decline of reading enthusiasm and how the digital revolution, and screens in particular, have influenced reading behaviour. Lastly, I will emphasise the importance of a developed and sufficient comprehension of the written word.

Reading enthusiasm is not just beneficial to booksellers' sales numbers, indeed, it is necessary for all, because in order to be able to fully function in society an adequate level of literacy is needed. This is ideally achieved by reading long-form texts with frequency. It sounds simple enough, yet the basic literacy level of fifteen-year-olds in the Netherlands has been steadily decreasing from 2006-2018, with reading skills in particular. As a result, the Netherlands is now below the average of the European Union for reading ability.[22] More conclusively, this means that a quarter of Dutch school-going children is at risk of becoming low-literate adults with insufficient reading skills to fully take part in society: comprehending a medical leaflet or a letter from the Government will pose a challenge for them. In comparison, where in the Netherlands 25% of school-going children has insufficient reading skills, the average of all other EU countries is 20%.[23] What bears even more reason for concern is that in a recent report the Dutch Board of Education points out a direct link between good reading skills of the average citizen and a long-term growth of the gross domestic product in the Netherlands.[24]

However, the issue with reading enthusiasm is not that there are fewer readers in general, but that the texts that are being read most frequently are not stimulating the advancement of the reading skill enough: these texts are often very short and require only a little bit of concentration. Literacy and a basic reading skill can be advanced by it, but to train the more advanced reading skill — providing the above mentioned perk of being able to fully participate in society — the reading brain needs to be stimulated by deep reading long-form text. Simultaneously, the number of readers of long-form texts is declining.

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[22] Inspectie van het Onderwijs, *De Staat van het Onderwijs* (Utrecht: Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2020), p. 86.

[23] Inspectie van het Onderwijs, *De Staat van het Onderwijs*, p. 86.

[24] Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief*, p. 17.

1. The Decline of Reading Enthusiasm and the Demise of Reading Skills

A lack of reading enthusiasm creates readers with impoverished reading skills. There is a minimum level of literacy an adult needs to possess to be able to fully function in society. As established by the Dutch government: if an adult does not reach a certain minimum level of literacy they have an insufficient language comprehension, and are called low-literate. Children are never labeled as such because they are still learning, but if they are not at a literacy level normal for their age they are considered to have a language deficit, and to be at a higher risk of becoming a low-literate adult. Internationally the number of adults who are considered to be low-literate in the year 2014 is 15%, in the same year that number was 12% in the Netherlands.[25] The three simultaneous trends of (i) a decrease in reading ability, (ii) a decrease in reading enthusiasm, and (iii) an increase in the number of low-literate people, were concerning enough for the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to seek advice on how to reverse those trends. This was the main motivation for the Dutch Council for Culture and the Education Council in 2019 to formulate an advice on reading promotion. Namely, they suggest this should be done through creating a 'reading culture' and stimulating general reading enthusiasm.[26]

1.1 Declining Reading Enthusiasm: A Vicious Circle

The decline in reading enthusiasm amongst young readers seems to begin when the reading skill is taught more intensively in school: when for reading the focus shifts from entertainment to technique. It is this moment when students often experience reading as a chore and not so much as a new creative skill that is fun to learn.[27] Still, it is not the only reason why reading enthusiasm is declining, and, consequently, why also the number of frequent readers is decreasing.

To illustrate the extent of the decline in reading enthusiasm two examples will follow from research studies on the reading situation in the Netherlands and the United States. In 2009 50% of fifteen-year-olds in the Netherlands told researchers that they did not read as a leisure activity at all.[28] In 2016 in the Netherlands, a third of the children aged twelve to eighteen did not like to read, as opposed to only a quarter who did enjoy reading.[29] In another example, in 2019 in the United

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[25] Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief*, p. 11.

[26] Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief*, p. 12.

[27] Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief*, p. 19.

[28] A. Wennekers, F. Huysmans, and J. de Haan, *Lees:Tijd: Lezen in Nederland*, (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2018), p. 22. web.

[29] Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief*, p. 10.

States it was found that 58% of children aged six to seventeen enjoyed reading books for fun,[30] and this percentage has not changed drastically since 2010, when it was 60% — however, the percentage was at a low point of 51% in 2015.[31] While in the United States the overall number of readers between six and seventeen did not decline, the number of frequent readers did: down 6% since 2010. Additionally children are increasingly less likely to be avid readers from age nine and up: reading habits disappear as children grow older.[32] A similar trend is visible in the Netherlands where children lose reading motivation from the moment they are taught reading and the focus shifts from reading as leisure activity to reading as a learning task to develop technique and skill. This happens first when they are about seven years old, but is most evident when they enter secondary school at age twelve. Additionally, teachers rarely see promoting reading motivation as a part of the curriculum.[33] Right now, reading is on the one hand presented as an activity that is delightful to invest time in, but on the other hand treated as a compulsory skill that requires training. This can be rather confusing and frustrating for the learning reader. For, if they do not find reading delightful, because they find it hard (due to lack of training), they have apparently failed at reading. This feeling of failure is quite demotivating and will not make reading any more pleasant, which is again demotivating. Reading is enjoyable if the reader is able to comprehend the text fully and is able to completely focus on their reading. The reading skill, in turn, is most fruitfully acquired when the reader experiences reading enthusiasm.

However, stimulating reading enthusiasm is not as simple as pushing people to read more long-form texts, especially to the inexperienced reader. When a reader consistently focusses on a text longer than 500 words (or a single page) this is called deep reading, — as explained in the Introduction. However, long-form deep reading can be challenging if a reader is unfamiliar with reading long texts, or if there is too much unfamiliar vocabulary — for which there generally is a pretty low tolerance. Indeed, generally, readers need to know about 98% of the words in the reading material for comfortable comprehension.[34] Being able to read long form texts is a skill that benefits from practice and suffers from negligence. Currently, the growing disinterest in long-form reading

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[30] Yougov, 'Finding their Story' *Kids & Family Reading Report*, (Scholastic Inc.: 2019) <https://www.scholastic.com/readingreport/home.html> (6 September, 2019), p. 6.

[31] A. Flood, 'Sharp decline in children reading for pleasure, survey finds' *Guardian*, (09-01-2015), n.pag. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/09/decline-children-reading-pleasure-survey> (21 August, 2019).

[32] Yougov, 'Finding their Story' *Kids & Family Reading Report*, p. 11.

[33] Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief*, p. 19.

[34] D.T. Willingham, *The Reading Mind: A Cognitive Approach to Understanding How the Mind Reads* (San Fransisco: Josey-Bas, 2017), p. 90.

is stuck in a vicious circle, and also sustained by the many other forms of entertainment people can choose from, making it increasingly challenging to read leisurely at all.

A decline in reading leisurely is not surprising in a society where there seems to be so much else to do. Movies, series, games, and communication, it is all on the same screen and always on demand — as long as the internet connection is adequate and the power supply unlimited. Despite the digital revolution not having decreased reading in general, it did have a negative influence on reading deeply, that phenomenon is also called 'the screen effect'.[35] More on this anon; first an explanation on the importance of long form deep-reading will follow.

1.2 The Importance of Long Form Reading

People who enjoy long form reading, and do it often benefit from the positive aspects of a developed deep-reading skill. Firstly, and perhaps obviously, by deep reading often the reader trains the ability to read deeply, which means that it becomes easier to read long texts[36] — and more fun. Often reading long texts will also result in the expansion of the reader's vocabulary in both (i) breadth: learning new words; and (ii) depth: learning new meanings for known words.[37] Regularly reading long texts in the deep reading mode will also increase the general knowledge of the reader, both lingual and societal: lingual, in the sense that deep reading will improve the knowledge about the language that is being read; societal, in the sense of broadening the reader's cultural frame of reference.[38] Other benefits of regularly reading long texts in the deep reading mode include: fostering attentiveness and imagination, making for a more inquisitive being, and developing a sense of contextual relativism that makes for a more empathetic person.[39] Indeed, research has shown that reading long form fictional narratives can contribute to the reader being less prejudiced.[40] Reading fictional narratives can subconsciously influence, or even alter, the reader's view on, for example, social or ethnic groups and religions. This is possible because in a story the reader can get acquainted with circumstances or lifestyles they are unfamiliar with while being in a

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[35] A. van der Weel, 'Where will the digital turn in reading take us?', G. Proot, D. McKitterick, A. Nuovo, and P.F. Gehl (eds.), *Lux Librorum: Essays on books and history for Chris Coppens* (Mechelen: Flanders Book Historical Society, 2018), p. 231.

[36] Waxler and Maureen, *Transforming Literacy: Changing Lives Through Reading and Writing*, p. 29.

[37] Willingham, *The Reading Mind: A Cognitive Approach to Understanding How the Mind Reads*, p. 78.

[38] G.J. Dorleijn, D. de Geest, and P.J.A. Verstraeten, *Literatuur* (Elementaire Deeltjes 50, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), p. 130.

[39] Birkerts, *The Gutenberg elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, p. 79.

[40] Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief*, p. 16.

safe and risk free environment: reading both fiction or non-fiction allows the reader to adopt another's perspective or experience.[41]

Stimulating empathic abilities through deep reading is something Maryanne Wolf discusses in her book *Reader Come Home*. She mentions empathy among young people has declined by 40% in the last 20 years.[42] In her book, she argues that by reading stories, the reader will experience different perspectives, and will be able to relate to them — while learning that they are not alone in their experiences. Being a skilled reader is also of importance in a political context, for good deep reading skills are directly related to (i) the ability to keep the ruling power in check, and (ii) the ability to differentiate between real and fake news, and also (iii) the ability to follow or participate in a political debate with peers and to comprehend party programmes.[43] Additionally, Wolf emphasises again the importance of being able to read well and critically. She expresses concern about the declining number of people who possess this ability in recent years, she adds that with the decline of expert readers there is also a decline of critical thinkers, which, she argues, could have great consequences for our community as a whole:

> The most important contribution of the invention of written language to the species is a democratic foundation for critical, inferential reasoning and reflective capacities. This is the basis of a collective conscience. If we in the twenty-first century are to preserve a vital collective conscience, we must ensure that all members of our society are able to read and think both deeply and well. We will fail as a society if we do not educate our children and reeducate all of our citizenry to the responsibility of each citizen to process information vigilantly, critically, and wisely across media.[44]

To recapitulate, it is clear that there is a decline in reading enthusiasm and how that negatively influences how much long-form text readers are willing to read, which in turn leads to a decline in the number of readers experiencing a deep-reading mode while reading. Additionally, it is clear that regularly experiencing the deep-reading mode can be very worthwhile. However, the number of people who enjoy these benefits is also declining, because they become increasingly less motivated to read deeply and more motivated to consume shorter and less demanding content from their screens. It is a vicious cycle. A particularly worrying aspect is the declining degree of language fluency and, consequently, the risk for an increase in the number of people becoming low-literate.

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[41] Stichting Lezen, *Wat doet het boek? Een onderzoek naar de opbrengsten van lezen* (Amsterdam: Stichting Lezen, 2017), p. 13.

[42] Wolf, *Reader Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*, p. 50.

[43] Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief*, p. 17.

[44] Wolf, *Reader Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*, pp. 200-201.

Keeping these concerns in mind it is very important to stimulate a reading culture and promote reading enthusiasm.

2. The Influence of Screens on Reading Behaviour

In this part of the chapter I will address the influence of screens on reading behaviour and the reading brain. An important note on the long-form reading decline mentioned in this chapter is that the number of people that read long texts is declining, nevertheless the number of literate people is actually growing. That is not really surprising in this society where the dependency on the ability to read is ever more pressing, especially considering current digital developments, as discussed before. Reading is necessary as a way to communicate with each other, conduct business, or do shopping. Screens have become indispensable in daily life. Excessive use of screens seems to create a situation where the reading skill is trained mostly by reading short texts from these screens, and by doing this in a skimming reading mode. Long-form reading and the accompanying deep reading modes become increasingly rare, and unsurprisingly so, considering that it is actually harder to enter a deep reading mode when reading a long linear text from a screen than reading it from paper.[45] It has been argued that the way reading often happens from screens has influenced the way we read from paper, but also that the way we use these screen bearing media has influenced how our brain works. That is to say that the altered brain functionality would influence our ability to keep focus, which also influences how we read texts — regardless of whether they are read from paper or screen.

2.1 Screens: Hyperpalatable Mental Stimuli

The decline of print reading is often ascribed to the rise of digital reading. Katherine Hayles questions this notion in *How we Think*, because in a lot of research this correlation is often assumed but not actually proven. She mentions that several studies on this subject can be deemed questionable because the researchers assumed this correlation from the outset and often interpret attained data while influenced by their own hypothesis. She stresses that research summarised in popular science books can be grossly oversimplified and the reader must be wary.[46] Yet, the abundant presence of screens in daily life is undeniable. At the same time, while we should be wary of unconsciously drawing conclusions, a decline of long-form reading is ongoing. Furthermore,

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[45] Weel, van der 'Where will the digital turn in reading take us?', p. 235; Kovač and Van der Weel, 'Reading in a post-textual era' *First Monday*, 23 (2018), n.pag. (21 August, 2019).

[46] N.K. Hayles, How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), pp. 64-68.

even though we read more than ever before, presently, a great portion of text is consumed from screens, by skimming short texts.[47]

Screens have proven to be very appealing and successful in capturing our attention. Indeed, to keep digital readers engaged with their screens is profitable for media businesses: they design, in the words of philosopher Matthew Crawford, 'hyperpalatable mental stimuli'[48] to steer and control our attention.[49] If our brains are indeed getting used to, or even addicted to such a diet of stimuli, it does not seem strange that a large block of plain text can no longer win the favour of our attention. In this respect it is also interesting that Crawford does not regard digital technology as the deeper cause of our attention problems. He relates these to a style of perception that began to develop during the Enlightenment.[50] This style includes the *un*learning to gain information about the real, physical world directly from our own autonomous experience where various of our senses are being in contact with the physical world and work together to inform our brain about it, as happens in training for high-skill crafts or skilled sports. Learning to master and practising a difficult skill in this way makes people feel good because they experience self-expansion.[51] Crawford does not discuss the reading process itself, therefor it is hard to say if deep reading long pieces of text — on paper — would fit in with the skills he describes. But it is clear that long-form reading does require what is trained by using such skills: giving long spans of undivided attention, and gaining the sense of enjoyment in a skill that has taken time and effort to learn. This suggests that developing the skill itself will bring joy. Additionally, Crawford's theory on the cognitive aspects of the learning process, including the physical elements, relates to the findings of Kovač and Van der Weel that a text is better comprehended when read from paper as opposed to from a screen.

It is not yet possible to justify replacing paper reading by screen reading, the ability to comprehend texts is still better trained from paper than from a screen. Studies have shown that reading from paper was beneficial to the comprehension of the text versus the same text read from a screen. This effect increased when scrolling was involved.[52] When scrolling through a piece of text

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[47] A. van der Weel, 'Where will the digital turn in reading take us?', p. 230.

[48] M.B. Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: How to Flourish in an Age of Distraction* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), p. 20.

[49] Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: How to Flourish in an Age of Distraction*, pp. 16-22.

[50] Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: How to Flourish in an Age of Distraction*, pp. ix; 6-8; 117.

[51] Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: How to Flourish in an Age of Distraction*, pp. 23-7; 52-3.

[52] Kovač, and Van der Weel, 'Reading in a post-textual era' *First Monday*, 23 (2018), n.pag. (21 August, 2019).

the reader will experience it as seemingly endless, which has proven to be very demotivating.[53] Another factor screen reading adds to the demotivation of the reader is the denial of modal confirmation of holding the material and feeling the progress literally sliding through their fingers, for a screen cannot offer that. Additionally, it has been demonstrated by Van der Weel and Kovač that screens offer an environment that is not as productive as paper when it comes to comprehending a text. They report that 'in 91% of studies, when the text involved more than 500 words […] comprehension scores were significantly better for print than for digital reading', also finding that if the texts were more complex they were understood better when read from paper.[54] This is important to consider since the amount of available reading material on the Internet is growing explosively. However, the length of these online texts is declining and the purpose is more often informational.

With these aspects of screen-reading in mind it is interesting to observe that even though reading ability in the Netherlands among fifteen-year olds is worse when comparing it to other EU countries, their ability to extract specific information from a text is higher than the EU average.[55] Since reading abilities are changing, it is useful to consider a different approach to teaching reading, one that also considers how students use and develop their reading skills in a context with almost constant exposure to digital media. However, it is vital to continue to train the ability to read deeply and fully comprehend texts, for it will make for a more critical, empathetic being capable of being led by their own thoughts and conclusions instead of those of others. Screen reading habits, such as skimming and scrolling have gravely influenced paper reading habits.

Considering the influence of screens on reading habits, Katherine Hayles raises the point that the decline in the use of close and deep reading when reviewing a source might not necessarily be the worst possible development. She mentions that hyper reading has led researchers to machine reading — and evidently machine learning — which is an extremely valuable aspect of academic research.[56] Machine reading has forever changed the way research can be done, literary research included. Hayles applauds this development. She comments that other scholars should do too, and explore the new, revolutionary additional ways in which research can now be done. For now, however, this thesis will focus on how the benefits of long-form reading can be preserved by

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[53] Kovač, and Van der Weel, 'Reading in a post-textual era' *First Monday*, 23 (2018), n.pag. (21 August, 2019).

[54] Kovač, and Van der Weel, 'Reading in a post-textual era' *First Monday*, 23 (2018), n.pag. (21 August, 2019).

[55] Inspectie van het Onderwijs, *De Staat van het Onderwijs*, p. 86.

[56] Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*, pp. 78-79.

finding an accessible pathway, one that is accommodating for readers whose reading ability has been greatly influenced by screen reading.

2.2 The Importance of Cognitive Patience

For deep reading the reader must possess enough cognitive patience to commit to the text in front of them. Wolf describes cognitive patience as the ability to lose oneself in a written story, and to experience the thoughts and feelings of a totally different person. By reading stories, the reader will experience different perspectives — and learn that they are not alone in their experiences — and will be able to relate to them. They will learn that the world is made up of greys and that it is important to consider several sides to any story.[57] Additionally, Wolf stresses the importance of background knowledge in the deep-reading brain: the mind must be prepared to be able to form new ideas. This is particularly lacking in a society where all knowledge is instantly at one's fingertips, and not stored in our brain. She worries about this development and how we will form ideas in this new situation. Wolf also describes that the lack of background information can lead to un-critical readers, who no longer naturally check whether a source is reliable or not.[58] With the introduction of the Internet and then the smartphone, its users have become media-hungry, resulting in constantly feeling the need to divide their attention across their different digital devices. As a result the given attention is of lesser quality, because there is too much to hear and see, and because there is a continuous demand for more.[59] The media-hungry mind of the modern reader often lacks the cognitive patience to be able to commit to a long text, which in turn might appear bland to the hyper palatable mental stimuli it is used to consume at a high pace.

3. Re-learning Deep Reading

The human brain is a wonderful and very complicated machine. It generally learns from repetition, and if something gets lost the brain can often find a way to relearn things it used to know. To explain it in a rather oversimplified manner: the brain is capable to find a new path to it and regain the lost ability. When the brain learns to read it is not only taught to decode letters into words, words into sentences and all text into meaning, it is also taught a way to extract that meaning. This is the way a reader reads. Today, with all the technology humans surround themselves with, most of the reading that is done will be of short texts in small bursts throughout the day read from a screen.

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[57] Wolf, *Reader Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*, pp. 46-47

[58] Wolf, *Reader Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*, p. 57.

[59] Wolf, *Reader Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*, p. 71.

In order to process that much text humans have developed a way of reading that involves being very selective in which pieces of the text are being read: the text is being skimmed for the relevant pieces of information only, and abandoned when those are found. If the source for reading material is primarily a screen, then the primary way of reading will unconsciously become screen-reading, adopting this reading-mode regardless of the medium.

The consequences are quite serious when screen-reading takes place on, as Wolf puts it, the 'distraction-saturated Internet', for it is the place 'where sequential thinking is less important and less used,' which means that 'we begin to read that way even when we turn off the screen and pick up a book or newspaper.'.[60] The brain mechanisms that allow to re-route neurological processes is both reason for concern and for relief: by using appliances with screens all day our brains are taught to read in a way unaccustomed to reading long-form texts well, and this is worrying. Indeed, reading research reinforces the validity of such concerns, because the reading brain is being shaped continuously by the environmental demands placed on it — or not placed on it.[61] Luckily, this mechanism implies that the brain can be retrained, which is a relief. Now, the step towards a long, text-only novel might be a bit too ambitious for the brain that is trained to skim; however, reading a graphic narrative from paper can help in retraining the brain to read long-form texts. The graphic narrative will still provide plenty of visual stimulation, allows for non-sequential reading, and the act of sitting down with a book will be the same with a graphic narrative as with a text-only book.

4. Creating a Reading Culture

The current situation fosters a negative spiral of declining reading enthusiasm, where readers are becoming increasingly more reluctant to pick up a book. Firstly, especially in the case of those attending school, they might associate reading with a chore they *have* to do. Secondly, if they finally do settle on a long read, the modern reader is obstructed by the screen reading habits they have accumulated by using their attention hoarding, screen bearing devices. Thirdly, the obstruction provided by the screen reading habits will not only make it harder to read a long text, it will also most likely demotivate the reader to read such texts, for these have become too difficult and are now hard to follow. As explained above, the ability to read deeply has come in jeopardy. In 2018 the Dutch Institute for Social Research presented a research report about the reading habits of Dutch citizens: they concluded that fewer people are reading long-form texts in a deep reading state. The

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[60] Wolf, *Reader Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*, p. 80.

[61] Wolf, *Reader Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*, p. 80.

report states that in order to change that decline society as a whole will have to work together to stimulate and maintain a reading culture.[62]

This report defines a 'reading culture' very broadly by referring to it as: 'reading in general, and specifically reading (paper) books'.[63] The Dutch Board of Education elaborates on that definition by stating that in a reading culture not only books are present, but also adults who will act as a reading patron who motivates people to read.[64] The main goal of a reading culture is, according to the Dutch Board of Education, to stimulate (young) people to read, and once a reading culture is established reading will be something common and of importance. This paper stresses the importance of role models when establishing a reading culture: at school the teacher is to fulfil the role of a reading role model, and at home the parents. Another part of the reading culture is the reading specialist, this is someone who stimulates readers to read stories and books, and also assists in deep reading.[65] What these two reports fail to mention is that 'reading culture' a much broader concept than how they describe it. Indeed, what is meant by 'reading culture' is ever changing, can change through time and even mean several things at once. As can be read below in the beginner of the next chapter, Frank Furedi discusses in his book *Power of Reading: From Socrates to Twitter* what is deemed the proper way of reading and which reading material is appropriate is often up for debate; opinions changing through the centuries.[66]

In order to re-establish a reading culture and promote reading motivation the Dutch Council for Culture and the Education Council urge the government, publishing houses, libraries, and school boards to form a united front in establishing a new reading policy. In their report the Council for Culture and the Education Council suggest three things: firstly, a 'reading policy' where reading motivation is an obligatory part of a school's curriculum.[67] Secondly, they urge publishing houses, libraries, and schools to broaden their view on appropriate reading material for students.[68] Lastly they encourage schools and libraries to create a 'reading culture' where the goal is to create 'centres

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62 Wennekers, Huysmans, and De Haan, *Lees:Tijd: Lezen in Nederland*, p. 123.

63 Wennekers, Huysmans, and De Haan, *Lees:Tijd: Lezen in Nederland*, p. 21.

64 Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief*, p. 4.

65 Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief*, pp. 41-43.

66 F. Furedi, *Power of Reading: From Socrates to Twitter* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

67 Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief*, pp. 24-29.

68 Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief*, pp. 34-37.

for reading' including reading consultants and experts.[69] The report mentions examples from Norway and America where reading experts and consultants were present at a school. After their arrival there was a notable change in reading culture: students read more and were more likely to visit a library on their own.[70] However, these experts are costly: a more frugal yet effective option is a well stocked library in the school itself, for the physical presence of books makes reading more appealing and accessible.[71]

When recreating a reading culture the graphic narrative could play a vital role for reluctant readers, especially those with screen reading habits. The characteristics of the graphic narrative make it a medium both stimulating enough for the distracted mind, and enticing enough to stimulate deep reading. The aforementioned report has dedicated one paragraph to the graphic narrative in the context of improving reading attitudes: they state that many young adults like to read graphic narratives and should not be discouraged to read them; they also mention the positive effect on improving reading ability through reading graphic narratives, and emphasise that especially the reluctant reader can benefit from a type of reading material that can bridge the gap between reading for pleasure and compulsory reading material for school.[72] Besides this fleeting mention, the graphic narrative is still scarcely suggested as a medium beneficial to acquiring the comprehensive reading skill, or for motivating reading pleasure in general. In the next chapter I will also discuss the specific aspects of the graphic narrative and address why this medium should be more actively being considered in the search for reading stimuli, and viewed as legitimate literature.

5. Final Thoughts on the Decline of Reading Enthusiasm

Long-form deep reading is not limited to the understanding of words alone. It is about understanding a story, being able to interpret the information that is presented, and form new ideas that are the reader's own. When trying to create a reading-culture in a society of constant distraction it is important to realise that the act of reading is not only very useful but also fun to engage in — the latter of those two often being forgotten or eliminated by making reading a 'chore'. Reading for the sake of reading will not happen. In order to ultimately be able to profit from the benefits related to a developed (deep) reading skill, the process of reading itself will have to be found a pleasant

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[69] Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief*, pp. 42-44.

[70] Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief*, p. 27.

[71] L. Kuitert, *Het boek en het badwater: De betekenis van papieren boeken* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), p.19.

[72] Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief*, p. 36.

activity. The human brain is trained to react to change, that is part of the reason why distraction comes easy with the use of electronic devices: these are facilitating the instinct to react to change, because their content can vary infinitively. This instinct is also appealed to by graphic narratives: the many images force the brain to engage, a page in a graphic narrative is much more stimulating than one in a text-based book, or at least at first glance.

Chapter 2

Characteristics of the Graphic Narrative and Their Relevance to Reading-Enthusiasm

In the previous chapter I introduced the problem of the decreasing reading enthusiasm for reading as leisure activity and long-form deep reading in general. I mentioned that establishing a reading culture is one of the things the Dutch government strives to do in an effort to increase reading enthusiasm and simultaneously reduce low literacy levels due to the declining number of people who read long-form texts. This chapter will be the next step in demonstrating that the graphic narrative can be a valuable tool in stimulating long-form reading. Specifically, this chapter will examine *how* the graphic narrative can be a stepping stone to acquiring and improving general reading skills and reading enthusiasm of long-form texts, and thus to creating a reading culture.

This chapter will consist of three parts. The first part will be a small sidestep into the history of the graphic narrative. It is relevant to acknowledge that the current absence of the graphic narrative in stimulating reading enthusiasm is not due to lack of potential, but due to the reputation the medium still has of being reading material for children only — or is not 'real' reading material at all. This reputation of the graphic narrative medium is no longer deserved, for it has matured into an all-inclusive medium, stretching from stories for small children to substantial narratives with a more adult target audience, and appearing across the entire genre-spectrum. However, it is not uncommon for a new type of popular reading material is received with resistance from the 'reading experts'; new types of reading material have suffered much discouragement for centuries.[73] The first part of the chapter will span from the beginning of the modern graphic narrative in the mid-nineteenth century until present day.

The second part of the chapter will focus on the characteristics of the graphic narrative. When discussing these aspects it will become clear how graphic narratives differ from non-graphic narratives, but also what their similarities are. Reading a graphic narrative can be in many ways a similar experience to reading a long-form text without images. It is these images, however, that make the graphic narrative more appealing to the distracted mind, forming a bridge between the short texts people are used to reading from screens to long-form narratives — better known as books.

The distracted brain, and the current media landscape that played a part in shaping this state of mind are the focal point of the third part of this chapter. In this part it will be illustrated how the

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[73] Furedi, *Power of Reading: From Socrates to Twitter*, pp. 7-9.

current image-centred society creates a need for a bridge between images and long-form reading, or rather between the screen and books. In our heavy screen use our brains have become accustomed to being visually stimulated almost constantly. To stimulate long form reading, the distracted brain could be directed toward the page of a graphic narrative to accommodate both the development of the reading skill and visual stimulation of the media hungry brain.

1. Not Just for Children: a History of the Graphic Narrative

It will no longer do to generalise all graphic narratives and consider them as reading material chiefly aimed at children, or as in fact not 'real' reading material at all. Why this undue generalisation exists and why the graphic narrative is rarely considered to be able to contribute to the solving of the reading-enthusiasm problem can be derived from the history of the medium. A short, disposable story, written to offer momentary amusement primarily for children is how the graphic narrative came into existence during the nineteenth century and how it gained popularity during the twentieth century, but the medium has long since outgrown its child-oriented roots. In the following paragraphs I will elaborate on the maturing of the graphic narrative medium and its general perception. I will focus mainly on the Netherlands, but will at times consider the United States and other countries for the sake of comparison.

As I mentioned above: new types of reading material have been received with reservations and discouragement throughout the centuries, partly due to supposed 'unfavourable' contents of new works, and partly due to a mistrust in the public to 'read in a responsible manner and draw the "right" conclusions.'.[74] In the seventeenth century, with the popularisation of the novel, people — and especially women — were warned against 'over-reading' which was inaccurately supposed to cause an array of mental inflictions. Through the centuries there have been many strong opinions and findings on reading and the effects it has on readers. Often the effect of reading is related to the reader's mental or physical health, and said to be able to affect their moral compass. The addictive effect of reading material and the 'gluttonous' consumption of it is described in ways very similar to how smart-devices and their use are described currently.[75] The fears of mass-reading in the past are similar to those of reading the graphic narrative when it was first introduced. The fears and concerns about reading have also been steadily ignored throughout the centuries, people have kept on reading, and have found to be generally not inflicted with episodes of hysteria and a suddenly corrupted moral code, also discovering the very positive effects of excessive reading. Why the

[74] Furedi, *Power of Reading: From Socrates to Twitter*, p. 8.

[75] Furedi, *Power of Reading: From Socrates to Twitter*, pp. 133-137.

graphic narrative should also be redeemed and treated as appropriate reading material is described below.

1.1 The First Modern Graphic Narratives

Rodolphe Töpffer – a Swiss author, painter, cartoonist, and caricaturist — is often appointed as the father of the modern graphic narrative. In the 1840s he published comedic works in which he combined caricature-like drawings and text.[76] These drawings were supportive to the text, and the purpose of the stories was to amuse, while reflecting on current events. Töpffer's stories were both exported and translated throughout Europe, even reaching America. Graphic narratives in a similar style started to emerge in Germany and France.[77] The graphic narrative became quite popular in the middle of the nineteenth century, but as the twentieth century drew closer the popularity stagnated, mainly because of the notion that these graphic narratives were solely for children.[78]

Graphic narratives were mainly published in newspapers in the first half of the twentieth century, it is there that the medium gained popularity, eventually becoming an essential part in almost every newspaper, and then growing to become a mass medium. This was possible because of the population's high literacy level, better wages over all, combined with a low price for newspapers, and better and cheaper ways of printing.[79] The graphic narratives that appeared in newspapers were usually very short, consisting of only a few panels, featuring a punchline in the last panel, and were without an overarching storyline. In this form they still often appear in newspapers now.

The publishing of graphic narratives in book-form began in America in the 1920s with reprints of newspaper 'comic strips', and it did not take very long for other graphic narrative publications to appear. In Europe, magazines appeared which predominately featured graphic narrative content. The European magazines were different from the American ones for in Europe it was customary to publish several different stories in one issue, where instead in America the norm was to publish several episodes (or chapters) of the same story in a single magazine. The American magazines were referred to with the well-known term 'comic book',[80] the first of which appeared in

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[76] A.A. Babic, ed, *Comics as History, Comics as Literature: Roles of the Comic Book in Scholarship, Society, and Entertainment* (Plymouth: The Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014), p. 2.

[77] R. Richard, *The Dutch Comic Strip: a Short Survey* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Panda, 1977), p. 3.

[78] Richard, *The Dutch Comic Strip: a Short Survey*, p. 7.

[79] W. van Helden, R. van Eijck, J. van Waterschoot, and J. Pollmann, *Strips! 200 jaar Nederlands beeldverhaal* (Eindhoven: Lecturis, 2013), p. 35.

[80] G. Perry, and A. Aldridge, *The Penguin Book of Comics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Ltd, 1967), p. 10.

1938 and featured the character Superman.[81] In the Netherlands newspapers remained the dominant publisher of graphic narratives in the period 1920-1945.[82] However, from the 1920s onward the Netherlands also saw the publication of graphic narrative magazines for the youth. The works in these publications were from Dutch authors, but also contained much imported work. Children remained the primary target audience for these magazines, both in the Netherlands and in the United States.

As the readership of graphic narratives grew, the Dutch government started to interfere in the graphic narrative industry by taking a rather extreme view and a subsequent call to ban graphic narratives in schools and libraries:[83] in 1948 the Minister for Education, Culture and Science declared that the reading of graphic narratives must be restricted, for he supposed that their contents were purely sensational,[84] and accused graphic narratives of generally corrupting the youth, causing 'suicide of the mind'.[85] The campaign resulted in many parents prohibiting graphic narratives in the house. As a reaction, publishers made sure their magazines were didactic and had a strong moral character.[86] Graphic narrative magazines did this by publishing educational texts and creative projects besides the graphic narratives. The target audience remained children.

1.2 Comix and 'The Underground'

A cultural change started rippling through the graphic narrative industry in the course of the 1960s and 1970s. Artists in America desired a more adult version of the graphic narrative to refute the idea that it was a medium solely for children. They wanted to tell politically charged stories, use the graphic narrative to explore sexuality, or to be rude, and uncensored. Before this movement, graphic narratives containing political statements were not uncommon, however, these statements were always contained in a deeper layer while the main story and drawing style was still aimed at children. As long as children were the chief target audience papers often felt obliged to publish a censored version if the graphic narrative was found to be too rude, ruthless, or revealing.[87] Graphic

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[81] Chute, *Why Comics?: From Underground to Everywhere*, p. 2.

[82] Helden, van, Van Eijck, Van Waterschoot, and Pollmann, *Strips! 200 jaar Nederlands beeldverhaal*, p. 53.

[83] Helden, van, Van Eijck, Van Waterschoot, and Pollmann, *Strips! 200 jaar Nederlands beeldverhaal*, pp. 66-67.

[84] Richard, *The Dutch Comic Strip: a Short Survey*, p. 29.

[85] Richard, *The Dutch Comic Strip: a Short Survey*, p. 33.

[86] Helden, van, Van Eijck, Van Waterschoot, and Pollmann, *Strips! 200 jaar Nederlands beeldverhaal*, pp. 73-74.

[87] Helden, van, Van Eijck, Van Waterschoot, and Pollmann, *Strips! 200 jaar Nederlands beeldverhaal*, pp. 40-41.

narrative artists evaded the chance to be censored by publishing independently and outside of studios, thus regaining control over what they could write and draw. The movement was called the 'Underground' and artists were calling their graphic narratives 'comix'.[88] This movement started in the 1960s in America, mainly San Francisco and New York, but simultaneously artists in France also went 'underground'. Under the influence of these underground movements, and the availability of their work through import, artists in the Netherlands followed suit and also started to experience the freedom of being able to create stories about anything. They wrote graphic narratives on sex, sexuality, politics, and social issues.[89] Authors would experiment with the set boundaries of the medium and expand them.

Even though the underground movement was revolutionary for the development of graphic narratives it reached only a small adult reading audience of graphic narrative-enthusiasts. In the Netherlands the graphic narrative reading audience remained mainly male and between the ages 8-18 (excluding the small portion of enthusiasts reading the underground works). Luckily, that started to change when the woman's magazine *Libelle* started to publish the recurring 'Jan, Jans en de kinderen' from 1970 onward. The readers of *Libelle*, mostly adult women, who read this graphic narrative about the daily life of an ordinary family with surprisingly insightful pets (especially the ginger cat), were forced to conclude that at least not all graphic narratives were terribly violent and soul crushing, and could also for adults be fun to read. This was arguably quite an improvement for the image of the medium.[90]

In the 1970s the graphic narrative had expanded greatly, in how it could look, what it could be about and by whom it could be read. However, the general assumption was mostly still that graphic narratives were simple, disposable, little stories that were mainly aimed at children. In order to bypass this prejudice that stuck to the medium the author Will Eisner decided in 1978 to call his new, book-length graphic narrative *A Contract with God* not a 'comic book' — as would be the custom — but a 'graphic novel'. If he had not put that new term on the cover it would probably only have been sold in specialised bookstores, but now it got picked up by general bookstores instead. Eisner used the term 'graphic novel' instead of 'comic book' to highlight that the type of narrative he used was similar to that of a text-based book, or novel. And it worked: his book appeared in the general bookstore, and many artists followed his example, calling their own graphic narrative by the same term, instead of calling it a 'comic'. With this new term and new approach to

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[88] Chute, *Why Comics?: From Underground to Everywhere*, p. 13.

[89] Helden, van, Van Eijck, Van Waterschoot, and Pollmann, *Strips! 200 jaar Nederlands beeldverhaal*, p. 97.

[90] Helden, van, Van Eijck, Van Waterschoot, and Pollmann, *Strips! 200 jaar Nederlands beeldverhaal*, p. 145.

the graphic narrative, now with a book-length story artists and authors not only reached a wider audience, but also got to challenge themselves to create a lengthy story in the graphic narrative spectrum. Most artists were not used to have to consider the story and its rhythm as much. In order to keep surprising the reader writers experimented with the visual aspects of the graphic narrative.[91] These techniques are part of what makes the graphic narrative such a unique medium, and one that is able to stimulate reading enthusiasm in readers accustomed to screen reading.

1.3 The Graphic Narrative Now

Since the introduction of the term 'graphic novel' the graphic narrative medium has grown, developed, and changed a lot. It has long since stopped being a childish, disposable form of entertainment, but its reputation as such a medium remains persistent. Just a relatively small number of people will recognise the graphic narrative as a medium more than a genre. Of course, this tenacious reputation makes it hard for the medium to be considered a valuable asset in creating a reading culture and generating more reading enthusiasm for long form texts.

Graphic narratives are now available in most regular bookshops and are being published in virtually every genre. This great variation in the medium already shows that a shift is happening where graphic narratives are moving into the realm of 'regular' books and are becoming more generally acknowledged as 'legitimate' reading material. Unfortunately, the graphic narrative is not quite there yet. However, this reputation the graphic narrative medium has will possibly be able to help in the regard of creating a reading culture: with a low threshold for reading a graphic narrative stimulating a reluctant reader to read one will be easier, which will hopefully lead to the next and open the world of reading (both graphic and textual) to the reader. Here, the reputation of the graphic narrative can be used to its advantage: presenting a reluctant reader with a graphic narrative might pleasantly surprise them, and because the medium is perceived as 'easier' and its reading style well suits the screen-reading brain they will be able to read it confidently. This is an example of how the graphic narrative can give a reader a warm welcome to the reading experience.

This compact overview of the history of the graphic narrative has explained the reluctance many feel towards the graphic narrative itself, and towards using it as an aid to stimulate reading enthusiasm. It might not seem the most obvious choice to use graphic narratives in order to promote 'normal' long-form reading because of the low number of words and high number of images. And understandably so, for it is a rather recent development for graphic narratives to be taken seriously

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[91] Helden, van, Van Eijck, Van Waterschoot, and Pollmann, *Strips! 200 jaar Nederlands beeldverhaal*, p. 174.

as literary works. Yet, the graphic narrative has evolved and contributes to a lot of the same processes plain texts do, such as deep reading and training cognitive patience. The importance of these processes were discussed in the previous chapter and in the next part of this chapter I will discuss how the graphic narrative contributes to these processes by some of its unique characteristics.

2. The Characteristics of the Graphic Narrative

This part will give an overview of the characteristics of the graphic narrative relevant to increasing reading enthusiasm. I will explore the mechanisms of the medium and how these differ from and resemble the mechanisms of 'regular' long-form texts, but more importantly I will provide an insight into how the graphic narrative can be a stepping stone to improve general reading skills and improve reading enthusiasm for long-form texts.

The main feature of the graphic narrative is of course the large quantity of images. The goal of the images is not to aid the reader, and make it easier for them. The goal of the images is to work with the text and create a story, just as a text-only narrative would do. In a graphic narrative the images and the text work together; one is not better or more important than the other and without one the other would make no sense: there is complementarity. However, the skills required to read a graphic narrative resemble screen reading more than those required to read text-only pieces, which is why it is a medium well fitted to reacquaint the reader with long-form deep reading if they have lost touch with the practice due to excessive screen use.

2.1 Non-Linear Reading

Where a plain text has an obvious starting and ending point — depending on what the custom is in the part of the world where the text is from either from left to right or right to left, mostly top to bottom — a graphic narrative does not, or at least not necessarily. The visual elements invite the reader to look at the images first and the text later. When the reader has observed the whole page they dart back to each image individually, in chronological order (where relevant), while the text is attended. The story is put together by going back and forth between sequential reading and non-sequential exploring of the page. This procedure — that hardly ever happens consciously[92] — keeps the brain busy: the graphic narrative can thus combine the productivity of reading and the procrastination of distraction, without switching to another format of consumption.

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[92] K. Kukkonen, *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2013), p. 8.

A page in a graphic narrative often consists of several *panels*. A panel is a single image, usually defined or limited by a line drawn around it, also called the *border*. The reader is meant to make out the story by mentally connecting each panel and imagining what has happened between them. The size of these panels and how they are arranged on the page affect the narrative speed, for example a lot of small panels encourage a faster pace than a fairly large one where a lot of elements have to be considered.[93] Inside a panel time also progresses[94] — going against the common misconception that a panel in a graphic narrative is a snapshot of a single moment, similar to a photograph. Many consecutive things can happen in a single image and the moment at the beginning of the panel can be seconds or even minutes prior to the moment at the end of the panel. This phenomenon is easily illustrated by characters reacting to one another, in either speech or action, all within the panel.[95] Time inside a panel usually moves linearly, however on a page this kind of progression is not necessarily the case: this means that an author can write a page where events not only happen simultaneously, but are also read simultaneously.[96] On the page of a graphic narrative there is plenty of room to show the reader the same event from different points of view, or to show different points in time concurrently — which can be particularly interesting when telling a historical tale[97] — or to feature another event that is happening alongside the main story but in a different location. Similar storytelling techniques are used in plain texts, but are usually not able to come to the reader in such a rapid alternation, or, in fact, at the same time.

In order to illustrate how non linear reading can take shape in a graphic narrative I have included a page from *The Gigantic Beard That Was Evil* by Stephen Collins (fig. 1).[98] Due to the composition the reader is first drawn to the large image of the head of the main character Dave before studying the panel at the top of the page. The row of panels underneath are both one image and several instances of time, as can be seen by the length of Dave's suddenly growing facial hair. Indeed, the whole page depicts such a short timespan that everything seems to be happening all at once; especially the top and bottom panel, which appear to be from the same instance of time.

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[93] J. Bland, 'Pictures, Images and Deep Reading', *Children's Literature in English Language Education*, 01 (2015), Vol.3(2), p. 32.

[94] E.S. Rabkin, 'Reading Time in Graphic Narrative', in Tabachnick, ed, *Teaching the Graphic Novel*, p. 36.

[95] McCloud and Martin, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art,* pp. 96-97.

[96] S. Bukatman, 'Sculpture, Stasis, the comics, and Hellboy*', Critical Inquiry*, 40 (2014), p. 107.

[97] F. Goldsmith, 'Picture It: The Diverse Possibilities of Graphic Novel Literature', *Young Adult Library Services*, 9 (2011), p. 24.

[98] S. Collins, *The Gigantic Beard That Was Evil* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2013).

Figure 1: An example of non-linear reading from the graphic narrative *The Gigantic Beard That Was Evil* by Stephen Collins.

While reading a graphic narrative all the information in the page comes at the reader instantly:[99] the scene is set all at once, leaving it to the reader to analyse every bit in more detail. Reading a non-graphic text is a lot more guiding, because the author has almost ultimate power in deciding which parts of the scene the reader will encounter in which order, and in which amount of detail. The directness of a graphic narrative is more similar to the present media consumption through our screens, and is more accessible, at least at first sight, for a graphic narrative is just as potent for deep analysis and close reading as a plain text can be. Ultimately, what makes reading a graphic narrative particularly different from reading a long-form text is that it is up to the reader to decide in which order the panels on the page are being read.[100] It is quite customary to first review a page in its entirety before focussing on single panels, alternating between image and text, perhaps going back a few panels to check for missed details that could refer to what is revealed later, all of which is surrendered to the whim of the reader. This way of reading is quite similar to how most people have been conditioned to read from screens: darting back and forth while scrolling through a webpage, unable to read a text from the top to the bottom in one go, and getting distracted due to a short attention span. Luckily, in a graphic narrative this behaviour is rewarded, it is how this medium was designed to be read. The graphic narrative allows the reader to multitask, and willingly 'distracts' the brain by stimulating to consume the story by putting together its different pieces scattered across the page. The graphic narrative allows the reader to enjoy reading a long narrative by enabling them to read it in this new, skimming way screens have conditioned to read like: the medium invites them to read non-linear, which is very familiar to the distracted brain.

2.2 The Gutter and Imagination: Reading Between the Panels

When it comes to deep reading it is important for the reader to have an active imagination while reading. It is vital to the deep-reading process that the reader is stimulated to search for and create connections with the material and prior knowledge the reader has, but also to make connections between different aspects that are put forward in the text itself. Considering that, an argument often used against reading graphic narratives is that it is supposed to require little or no imagination from the reader to understand the story. Although the images might be supportive to the imagination, reading a graphic narrative still requires a great amount of creative thinking, not for what is pictured, but for what lies in between the panels. Having to fill in the blanks activates the brain. The reader's imagination is not compromised when reading a graphic narrative, but stimulated just the

[99] Kukkonen, *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels*, p. 7.

[100] Baetens and Frey, *The Graphic Novel: an Introduction*, p. 106.

Figure 2: This page from *Paper Girls* (Volume 3) gives a clear example of how a reader's imagination can be stimulated by having to consider the fate of a character by what happens to them in the gutter.

same as when reading a plain text.

Most of the imagination in a graphic narrative is used in between the panels. The gap between two panels is called the *gutter*,[101] and what happens in between two panels is implied but never revealed, leaving it to the reader to imagine anything and everything that has happened in that space. In between panels, the reader is left to their imagination, it is up to them to decide how the events in one panel relate to the ones in the next. The separate images need to be combined to form a single idea: so even though there is nothing to be seen between panels the reader's experience tells them there must be something there.[102] This is demonstrated by the page from *Paper Girls 3* depicted above (fig. 2):[103] the readers is given several visual clues as to what dilemma the teenager in the red boots, Kaje, is pondering. What she decides to do is not shown, only the reaction of one of the men who pursued her to the edge of the cliff. The author has cleverly arranged the panels so that the page has to be turned in order to find out if Kaje jumped and if she survived if she did.

Besides having to connect one panel to the next a graphic narrative reader also has to determine the order in which to read the panels, as mentioned above. For example, on a page with a high density of panels varying in size the arrangement and the order can be quite ambiguous. Of course, a writer might choose to be ambiguous on purpose, by arranging the panels a certain way, or showing only a fraction of the image within the panel, or offering clues to the reader that make interpretation highly susceptible to endless variation depending on the imagination of the reader.[104] The reader of a graphic narrative is required to use their imagination, and actively connect the panels presented to them. They need to envision the progression of the story in the gutter, and by doing so they are re-entering that abandoned manner of consuming a narrative: the deep reading mode.

2.3 The Figurative in the Graphic Narrative: Making the Invisible Visible

How the invisible can be made visible in a graphic narrative is a casual way of introducing inexperienced text-reader to the workings of symbolism. In a film or a photograph invisible things such as smell or wind normally stay invisible. Graphic narratives can — just as plain texts can — visualise invisible things. Not only by drawing wavy lines for wind or smell: indeed, graphic

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[101] Not all graphic narratives have an actual space between one panel and the next, but that does not affect the way panels are read. Leaving a small strip of space between panels is a style choice made by the author.

[102] McCloud and Martin, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, pp. 66-67.

[103] B.K. Vaughan, C. Chiang, M. Wilson, and J.K. Fletcher, *Paper Girls 3* (Portland: Image Comics, 2017).

[104] McCloud and Martin, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, pp. 84-86.

narratives can even portray emotions, either by showing them on the face of a character, or by altering the background accordingly. There is also the more literal way of showing emotion by showing tears for sadness or sweat for nervousness, but a more symbolic way of displaying emotions could be showing spiral shaped eyes for being overwhelmed or dizziness.

Figure 3: One way Art Spiegelman uses symbolism in his work *MAUS* (first published in 1986) is by depicting Jews as mice and nazis as cats.

The text balloon is very popular and virtually unmissable in the graphic novel, and a great example of visualising sound or thought. Most authors make use of balloons, and not solely as a place to put spoken (or thought) words. These graphic narrative icons come in many shapes and sizes, enabling the author to not only let characters speak and convey thoughts, but also to express emotions, or even weather conditions by varying shape, or altering the letter-styles of the text balloon. Indeed letters do not even have to be featured in a text balloon, a simple question mark, a series of 'z's, or other symbols[105] can be sufficient to convey meaning. The shape, size, or absence of the balloon or the shapes it contains can be great indicators of the feelings of the characters, as well as the letters in them. In graphic narratives words can have onomatopoeic values when the size and boldness of the letter directly translates to the manner in which the word is uttered, with many more variations possible — the meaning of which is easily obtained from context.[106]

Art Spiegelman's work *MAUS* describes the life of Spiegelman's father during the nazi regime in Poland and WWII. One very obvious way in which Spiegelman uses symbolism is by

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[105] For example: '@#☆!@?!' for swearing.

[106] Kukkonen, *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels*, p. 9.

depicting the Jewish citizens of Poland as mice and the German oppressor as cats (fig. 3).[107] By establishing the two groups in a predator-prey scenario the kind of grip one group has over the other is emphasised. Additionally, Spiegelman provides many other, some more subtle, uses of symbolism: for example, all the text is in the author's own handwriting, except for the 's', that letter is written as it was on SS-uniforms throughout the book. When looking again at the page from *The Gigantic Beard That Was Evil* (fig. 1) the confusion of the main character and the alarm expressed by his co-workers is not only depicted by their words but also by their expressions, and the layout of the curvy-lined panels on the page; especially, because nearly all the other panels in this graphic narrative are squared rather than wavy.

Graphic narratives make the invisible visible in a rather unique way. The reader is often not told through words, but shown through imagery. Usually an image is open to more than one interpretation, challenging the reader of a graphic narrative to actively search for the meaning of an image. Moreover, this use of imagery can serve as an introduction to the use of symbolism in a narrative to the reluctant or inexperienced reader.

3. Distracted Reading in Today's Image-driven Cultural Context

In the previous parts of this chapter I have explained why the graphic narrative is often not considered as suitable reading material, and has not received a literary approach by authors until fairly recently, and I have discussed the characteristics of the graphic narrative medium. Fortunately, the medium has developed into something with plenty of publications that are worthy of literary consideration. This comes at a time when people are getting more and more used to consuming an almost constant stream of images through their screens. It started with television but exploded with the Internet, especially since the Internet has become omnipresent through the mobile devices we carry with us everywhere. In the previous chapter I described how screen-reading has influenced our reading habits, how the general interest in any sizeable text has been reduced, and, indeed, how longer texts have become harder to read. In the last part of this chapter I will explain how the current image-driven cultural context and the constant indulging of short texts and images on the screens that surround us have created an environment where the graphic narrative can thrive.

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[107] A. Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

3.1 The Rise of the Image and How Literature Benefits

An interesting point is raised by Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey in *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction* where it is stated that 'literary culture has been changing to become more receptive and open to graphic narratives and visual culture, per se'.[108] This development is demonstrated by the phenomenon that books often gain popularity through visual media, such as cinema, television series, or through shows such as *Oprah's Book Club* – a show that has been off the air for 10 years, but has now been revived by a streaming service. Baetens and Frey continue by describing that the esteem of the word alone is no longer enough in the public-commercial sphere, which is why publishers and novelists now accommodate the more visually-oriented public.[109] They emphasise that authors and publishers are increasingly involving the visual world, because words alone do not seem to be enough. The high popularity and the great number of literature-related YouTube channels and Instagram accounts are an indication of the influence of the non-text based, book-affiliated world. These channels are mostly promoting books within the Young Adult section of the literary world, but their influence is quite far-reaching. Publishers will often send books for review to creators — with both large and small following — rather than to reviewers that publish in papers, in exchange for a review.

3.2 The Necessity of Screen-Reading

Reading from screens has become a regularity in daily life. Smart devices have become something humans are dependent on, which is exactly what this technology was meant to accomplish. Content is presented to the consumer in a way that is designed to be irresistible to the brain, for not only is the consumer dependent on the content, the provider is dependent on this consumption,[110] or it would cease to exist.

What is peculiar about the incredibly rapid development of smartphones and other smart devices is that they were designed to claim a lot of attention — and thus taking the attention away from other activities, leisure long-form reading being one of them. It can be quite unsettling to realise that a handful of designers from large technological firms have designed a product most people devote a great amount of time in their day to, but giving this time and attention away without knowing the possible consequences. (Even for the developers there is much to learn still about how people react to their inventions.) These inventions have, of course, also greatly innovated the world

[108] Baetens and Frey, *The Graphic Novel: an Introduction*, p. 192.

[109] Baetens and Frey, *The Graphic Novel: an Introduction*, p. 193.

[110] Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: How to Flourish in an Age of Distraction*, p. 16.

we live in today, by making physical distances hardly a problem for communication, and opening many doors for businesses, but also changing the way humans seek entertainment — to name only a few examples. Information about science, how your friends are doing, and the shenanigans of celebrities have been made readily available at all times. We are engulfed by these pieces of technology that are specifically designed to absorb as much of our attention as they possibly can, and we have welcomed them into our homes and lives. Indeed, their addictive nature is generally acknowledged and yet everyone uses these devices, even children.[111] Without going into further detail, the smart device is here to stay and will continue to claim attention, for now. In order to ease the brain back into reading long texts the graphic narrative can play an important part, their appearance implies they are easy to read and the word-to-image ratio makes them appealing to the distracted brain that has been conditioned to read from a screen.

3.3 Screen-Reading on Paper with the Graphic Narrative

Graphic narratives are increasingly present in mainstream culture. Katalin Orbán relates this to the widespread presence of hyper-reading and hyper-attention, together with the digitisation of the media consumption.[112] Orbán goes on to explain that the general adaption of digital reading habits has caused a rather fleeting way of reading where the reader will dart across the page and never be fully engulfed by the text. This observation corresponds to the changed way of reading described in the previous chapter.

When reading a graphic narrative the page demands attention, some parts probably more than other, not necessarily in the order in which reading ought to happen. This is part of how a graphic narrative is supposed to work: ‘Sequential organisation is necessary, given the basic need of putting images next to one another in order to keep the story going. Non-sequential reading is inevitable, given the impossibility for the human eye to separate the panel from the page’.[113] What Baetens and Frey note is that it is not necessary to read in a specific order, or at least not all the time, as explained above. This means that the graphic narrative medium is supportive of the reading habits of the distracted brain and invites it to let the eyes dart around the page before continuing with the narrative. Stephen Tabachnick agrees by stating that reading a graphic narrative fits the modern reading habits perfectly. He points out that while graphic narratives will do no such thing as

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[111] Wolf, *Reader Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*, p. 125.

[112] K. Orbán, ‘A Language of Scratches and Stitches: The Graphic Novel between Hyperreading and Print’, *Critical Inquiry*, 40 (2014), p.169.

[113] Baetens and Frey, *The Graphic Novel: an Introduction*, p. 106.

replace non-illustrated texts, nor that the reading experience is better or worse — which really depends on the quality of the work, not on whether or not images are involved — but does argue that the graphic narrative medium provides a comfortable reading experience 'in this age of technological speed and visual sophistication.'[114] Experiencing reading as a comfortable and enjoyable activity through a graphic narrative 'reading' itself becomes a form of entertainment again, which is obviously very valuable to the cause of increasing reading enthusiasm. This is only possible by recognising that the skimming way people read from a screen (as discussed in Chapter 1) is accommodated by the graphic narrative, which asks of its readers to jump across the page for the best reading experience.

In her book *How We Think* Katherine Hayles addresses the change in reading ability apparent in the younger generations. She argues that in order to accommodate people with poor paper-reading skills but developed digital-reading skills a form of assessment or a way of teaching should be developed that is closer to where their reading skills are rather than to where they are desired to be. A digital reader can be too far removed from paper-reading skills to allow for deep reading and general understanding of the text. It is then rather useless to teach them as if they are able to read well from paper. Hayes suggests a more digitally oriented learning method for these readers.[115] In the next chapter I will illustrate how the graphic narrative has already proven to be an aid to students learning a new language and how the graphic narrative positively influences the ability to comprehend a narrative.

4. Final Thoughts on the Characteristics of the Graphic Narrative

The historical context of the graphic narrative medium provides it with a rather unique position: the medium is not intimidating to pick up, and yet capable of containing high quality contents for nearly all imaginable target audiences. Indeed, the medium is even well-equipped to appeal to the modern reading brain that is conditioned to read only the necessary information in the skimming reading mode, and alternate between different tasks or indulgences. All the while the graphic narrative is still complicated enough to provide a comfortable deep reading experience for the distracted reader. This is possible due to the characteristics unique the graphic narrative. In the next chapter I will review the experience of graphic narrative readers: specifically focussing on the reader's ability to discern information from a graphic narrative and whether reading it generates reading enthusiasm.

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[114] Tabachnick, ed, *Teaching the Graphic Novel*, pp. 4-5.

[115] Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*, pp. 59-60.

Chapter 3

An Examination of Research on Graphic Narrative Use in Education

In this chapter I will demonstrate how the graphic narrative is already making an impact on students. A brief overview of the graphic narrative related research will follow in order to illustrate to what extent and how the characteristics of the graphic narrative contribute to the development of advanced reading skills and reading pleasure for long-form texts, concluding with a short elaboration on the necessity of instruction in reading the graphic narrative. I will do this by reviewing research focussing on determining the educational properties of graphic narrative. Namely, I will pay attention to how the graphic narrative can contribute to topics such as language acquisition, contextual understanding of a text, and introducing new subject matter. A returning notion in the literature is that in order to best understand and teach graphic narrative material some background knowledge or instruction on how to read such works is vital.

1. Enthusiastic Students

An example of the success of graphic narratives in an educational environment is given by graphic narrative writer and teacher Gene Luen Yang. He discussed the use of graphic narratives in the classroom in a TED talk in 2018. He tells us how he himself experimented with a visual form of education to offer as an alternative when he was unable to teach a class. He figured that, since the current generation of students is so used to watching video or (moving) images in general that a video version of his lecture would be the best option, so he recorded himself giving his lecture, but the response to these video lectures was positively dreadful. Which led to him pouring his lessons in a graphic narrative mould, providing the students with printouts of his lessons in comic-book-style, which the students received with incredible enthusiasm. They now had material that was visually appealing and informative, but, unlike a video, this could be consumed at every students' own pace, skipping back and forth through the instruction at leisure.[116] This kind of response resembles the experience reported in the research papers and books consulted for this chapter. These sources looked at how students of different age groups reacted to graphic narratives, and how they learnt from them. In general they found that students were enthusiastic about the more visual approach to study material the graphic narrative medium can offer.

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[116] G.L. Yang, 'Comics belong in the classroom', *TED*, 15 June, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjvTIP7pV20> (8 June, 2020).

Students were found to enjoy both the book-like aspects, and the screen-consumption features a graphic narrative provides. This is because of the way we read has changed and the graphic narrative relates to that by 'integrating hyperreading with familiar forms of materiality', Katalin Orbán argues, but it also demands the reader to pay deep attention to the narrative.[117] Additionally, students reacted enthusiastic to sources that were visually appealing and were more interested to read these sources. The study that found this argues that this reaction suggests that 'visually appealing elements initiate and guide cognitive processing during learning.'[118] Indeed, students of all different levels of reading comprehension ability preferred graphic narratives when selecting reference material to increase knowledge on a subject.[119] This coincides with the finding of Stephen Tabachnick in his work *Teaching the Graphic Novel* where he argues that graphic narratives are particularly useful to pique student's interest in new subjects.[120] Generally, the graphic narrative is appreciated for how it implies to read like a screen, but turns out to encourage deep attention of the kind a text-only long-read is known to be capable of.

To elaborate further on the graphic narrative in an educational context, Tabachnick describes that students who read graphic narratives indicated to be inspired to approach their reading and thinking far more critically as opposed to when they read a purely textual piece.[121] Indeed, the graphic narrative facilitates an awareness of symbols and icons,[122] which is of course one of the characteristics of the graphic narrative medium mentioned in Chapter 2. Additionally, the sparked willingness to and interest in reading deeply remains a promising quality of the graphic narrative, and works towards the goal of creating a reading culture; an environment wherein reading is something important and organic invites those surrounded by it to read,[123] whether the material are

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[117] Orbán, 'A Language of Scratches and Stitches: The Graphic Novel between Hyperreading and Print', p. 181.

[118] S.W.L. Wong, H. Miao, R. Wing-Yi Cheng and M. Chi Wing Yip 'Graphic Novel Comprehension Among Learners with Differential Cognitive Styles and Reading Abilities', *Routhledge: Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 33 (2017), p. 414.

[119] Wong, Miao, Wing-Yi Cheng and Chi Wing Yip. 'Graphic Novel Comprehension Among Learners with Differential Cognitive Styles and Reading Abilities', p. 423.

[120] A. Mandaville and J.P. Avila, 'It's a Word! It's a Picture! It's Comics! Interdisciplinary Approaches to Teaching Comics', in S.E. Tabachnick, ed, *Teaching the Graphic Novel*, pp. 245-246; Wong, Miao, Wing-Yi Cheng and Chi Wing Yip. 'Graphic Novel Comprehension Among Learners with Differential Cognitive Styles and Reading Abilities', p. 424.

[121] B.E. Vizzini, 'Hero and Holocaust: Graphic Novels in the Undergraduate History Classroom', in S.E. Tabachnick, ed, *Teaching the Graphic Novel* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2009), p. 241.

[122] Mandaville and Avila, 'It's a Word! It's a Picture! It's Comics! Interdisciplinary Approaches to Teaching Comics', pp. 245-246.

[123] Raad voor Cultuur, Onderwijsraad, *Lees! Een Oproep tot een Leesoffensief*, pp. 41-44.

graphic narratives or not. By reading graphic narratives this environment opens up for the otherwise reluctant reader who struggles with deep reading long-form texts.

2. Reading Ability and Language Acquisition

The graphic narrative is often used in language acquisition for learners of English as a second language. According to Tabachnick graphic narratives were a leading method to learn English as a new language for immigrants coming to America in the second half of the twentieth century, and indeed still prove to be a valuable resource in learning and teaching a non-native language.[124] He found that the 'multimodal lens' graphic narrative offers is very beneficial for second-language-learners.[125] The multimodal lens here refers to the combination of text, still foreign to the language learner, and the images, which depict a more broadly understandable narrative. Janice Bland elaborates on this by stating that the visual aspects generate some narrative footing for the reader by which they can follow the story even if their linguistic competence is still limited.[126] In her research she focusses mainly on the language acquisition of children, but the basic application of graphic narratives in language learning is similar for both children and adults — as long as the visual narrative is somewhat relatable. The graphic narrative can help learners of a new language to better understand the fictional world presented and the cultural connotations it contains.[127] Indeed, a study from 2012 found that children who read graphic narratives are stimulated in their development of critical and political literacy, creating a broader worldview.[128] Another study found that readers in general benefit from reading material presented in a graphic narrative format; regardless of their individual reading comprehension ability level, they found that readers benefitted equally, while remaining in line with their existing reading comprehension ability.[129]

It is important to stress that, even though the graphic narrative can benefit readers struggling with being able to read long-form texts, that the use of graphic narratives does not eliminate the use

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[124] C. Matz, 'Supporting the Teaching of the Graphic Novel: The Role of the Academic Library', in S.E. Tabachnick, ed, *Teaching the Graphic Novel* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2009), p. 331.

[125] C. Ferguson, 'Steam Punk and the Visualization of the Victorian: Teaching Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and *From Hell*', in S.E. Tabachnick, ed, *The Cambridge Companion to the Graphic Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 201.

[126] J. Bland, 'Pictures, Images and Deep Reading', p. 25.

[127] J. Bland, 'Pictures, Images and Deep Reading', p. 28.

[128] C. Hatfield and C. Svonkin, 'Why Comics Are and Are Not Picture Book', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 37 (2012), p. 434.

[129] Wong, Miao, Wing-Yi Cheng and Chi Wing Yip. 'Graphic Novel Comprehension Among Learners with Differential Cognitive Styles and Reading Abilities', p. 423.

of plain-text,[130] but rather provides teachers with another tool that can be used in the classroom in order to enrich the students' experiences of consuming new knowledge, all while 'enticing reluctant readers into prose books and, in some cases, offering literary experiences that linger in the mind long after the book is finished'.[131] Inspiring students in this manner is, of course, only possible if the graphic narratives that are provided are of a standard and a level appropriate to their reading ability.[132] Lastly, it is important to note that some instruction in reading a graphic narrative can be beneficial and even necessary to provide a proper reading experience, both for the teacher and the student.

3. Teaching the Graphic Narrative

The bare, basic elements of a graphic narrative are the words and the images, working together in synergy to bring forth a narrative, or other, non-narrative information. Because the images and words work so closely together, it is important to pay equal attention to both. Neither one is more important than the other. However, most people have been taught to prioritise text over image,[133] for images are used solely complementarily in most plain-text works; when starting to read graphic narratives it can be challenging to get accustomed to paying equally close attention to the images as the text. Indeed, most readers will not be conscious of this necessity, which is why it is important to be made aware of these text-specific tropes when starting to read graphic narratives. Not only the student should be aware of these tropes, but the teacher should be informed also, and understand the workings of the graphic narrative.[134]

Every detail in a graphic narrative is relevant; to be able to fully comprehend the story reading the words alone will not do: readers will have to engage in slow-reading, of both pictures and words alike.[135] Using images in teaching is obviously not new. However, the expectation that students intuitively understand the imagery used in class is not always met. The reason, in part, is that visual literacy is generally not taught, but is expected to come naturally; but this does not

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130. Wong, Miao, Wing-Yi Cheng and Chi Wing Yip. 'Graphic Novel Comprehension Among Learners with Differential Cognitive Styles and Reading Abilities', p. 424.

131 D. Gallo and S. Weiner, 'Show Don't Tell: Graphic Novels in the Classroom', *The English Journal*, 94 (2004), p. 115.

132 Gallo and Weiner, 'Show Don't Tell: Graphic Novels in the Classroom', p. 117.

133 Smith and Pole, 'What's Going On in a Graphic Novel?', p. 171.

134 Ferguson, 'Steam Punk and the Visualization of the Victorian: Teaching Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and *From Hell*', in S.E. Tabachnick, ed, *The Cambridge Companion to the Graphic Novel*, p. 200.

135 Smith and Pole, 'What's Going On in a Graphic Novel?', p. 175.

necessarily happen.[136] Indeed, specific visual features the writer of a graphic narrative uses to engage the reader might be overlooked if no instruction on how to read graphic narratives was received.[137] The graphic narrative is an interdisciplinary medium which requires an interdisciplinary teaching approach.[138] The familiarity experienced by the visual aspect of a graphic narrative might make it seem like an 'easier' medium to consume. However, a graphic narrative is just slightly better suited to the distracted brain of the modern screen gazer.

4. Final Thoughts on the Graphic Narrative Medium in an Educational Context

The graphic narrative is not a permanent new approach to reading, it is a gateway of stimulating reading enthusiasm, tickling the reading brain and making it eager to come back for more. The graphic narrative is capable of enticing a whole array of readers, which is why it is a medium that is worth being enthusiastic about, also in the classroom. But, in order to enlarge the vocabulary and become sufficiently good at reading — to no longer be at risk of becoming low-literate — still a lot of plain text needs to be consumed. Which in turn is something the graphic narrative can stimulate, because it causes an increase in reading enthusiasm, familiarising the reader with reading as a leisure activity. It is impossible to predict whether or not the reader enthused by graphic narratives will proceed in reading primarily text books but the graphic narrative has at least lowered the threshold for these long-form texts (or any book): the reader used to reading in a skimming manner is reacquainted with deep reading, enabling them to be equipped to read a long-form text deeply. However, because the graphic narrative is not yet used on a large scale to improve reading enthusiasm and provide an environment stimulating the act of reading, it is impossible to say how or when the reader will exactly make a switch from reading graphic narratives to plain texts; further research in this field will provide more clarity on the effect of reading graphic narratives on general reading behaviour.

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[136] Wong, Miao, Wing-Yi Cheng and Chi Wing Yip. 'Graphic Novel Comprehension Among Learners with Differential Cognitive Styles and Reading Abilities', p. 413.

[137] Smith and Pole, 'What's Going On in a Graphic Novel?', p. 174.

[138] Hatfield, 'Defining Comics in the Classroom; or, The Pros and Cons of Unfixability', in S.E. Tabachnick, ed, *Teaching the Graphic Novel*, p. 23.

Conclusion

Never before were there so many people that can read and have access to reading material on demand. This is a time of great technological innovation, and carrying a small computer in the back pocket of your jeans has become a normality, and often even a necessity. An increasing number of people relies on the ability to read, and current literacy numbers are exceptionally high, with a vast majority of the world population being literate. Reading is done on a large scale by a staggering number of people, yet reading enthusiasm and the number of people who read as a leisure activity is declining. This results in a decline in the number of people able to read a long-form text in the deep reading mode, and this poses a problem. Reading long-form texts in a deep reading mode trains the reading comprehension ability and general reading skill, if these skills are not regularly trained there is a risk of low-literacy, which impedes people's full participation in society. In the Netherlands the average of low-literacy in children is 25%, that is 5% higher than the EU average. Being low-literate decreases the chances of being able to think critically, differentiate between real and fake news, or to understand political party programmes or the information leaflets for drugs. The increase of people at risk of becoming low literate is connected to heavy screen use. Screen reading does not train the deep reading mode, but rather the skimming reading mode. Being well trained to read in the skimming reading mode has made it extremely difficult for people — especially the younger generation — to be able to read long-form texts. In this thesis I address this problem and argue that reading graphic narratives can be a stepping stone to acquiring and improving general comprehensive reading skills and reading enthusiasm for non-graphic text.

The increasing threat of low literacy is enabled by the 'screen-effect' induced by the digital media driven society that has become the norm. The persistent screen use alters the way reading happens. For on the screen the brain is used to focus shortly and selectively and to read in a 'skimming mode', a reading mode the brain will then try to enforce on all texts the reader attempts to read, which makes 'deep reading' increasingly difficult. And it is the 'deep reading' mode that enables critical and creative thinking, broadens the vocabulary, increases reading comprehension ability, and stimulates the use of imagination. However, the graphic narrative accommodates the skimming reading mode, because this medium allows for non-sequential reading. This allows the distracted brain to have a very comfortable reading experience, while still being able to be absorbed by the narrative.

To most people the suggestion of using this very visual medium appears odd, for the medium does not have a particularly literary high-standing reputation. This is not entirely unjust,

but if the history of the medium is considered it can be concluded that how the medium once started is not what a graphic narrative is now. Disregarding the graphic narrative medium as being for children only, or unliterary entirely, is unjust and outdated. However, this misconception about the current state of the graphic narrative medium has rendered it to be in very low regard, making it appear less daunting to those who are not confident enough to consider highly praised literary works. Many people start to see reading as a chore from as early as seven years old: when the focus in school shifts from reading for fun to reading as a skill that must be studied and acquired. At the same time, graphic narratives are often (unjustly) discouraged to use as reading material, excluding them from the pool of literature read as part of the curriculum, but making them instantly more appealing and entertaining.

The images used in a graphic narrative are another important appealing factor. The visual component draws the reader's attention. On the page of a graphic narrative a lot of things are happening, when the panels each ask for instant attention the distracted brain is allowed to dart back and forth to consume all the presented information. Indeed, when an author decides to place panels next to each other displaying things that happen simultaneously the brain is required to multi task, similar to general behaviour on a smart device. However, the images in a graphic narrative are not only attention seekers, they also stimulate reading processes usually associated with deep reading: imagination is stimulated by picturing what happens in the gutter between panels; and the use of text balloons and figurative elements to express emotions or senses such as smell or taste serve as an introduction to the use of symbolism.

After reviewing research on graphic narrative in educational contexts it can be concluded that the medium can play a valuable role in improving language comprehension ability. Research has found that using the graphic narrative medium is beneficial to (second) language acquisition. Additionally, students generally react enthusiastically to graphic narrative study material. Indeed, research has shown an increase in reading comprehension ability, as well as a preference for graphic narratives when a new subject is introduced, or as reference material. However, the graphic narrative medium proved to be insufficiently beneficial to students who were already very proficient readers and thus too focussed on prioritising the text — which is counterproductive when reading a graphic narrative because the text and the visual elements work together, rendering either one useless without the other. Luckily, these students would not need the graphic narrative to stimulate them to read plain texts, because they are already able to. These students would not necessarily benefit from educational reading material in a graphic narrative format; ultimately it is near impossible to provide some kind of educational method that is the most productive for all

students, rendering it wise to provide them with several options for an optimal learning experience for more types of learners.

The declining ability to read well is worrying, especially with the implication that an increasing number of people are (becoming) low-literate. The amount of long-form reading is declining as well. A possible solution to better the reading ability of most people is to establish a reading culture, its primary aim being to stimulate reading and most importantly reading enthusiasm. The graphic narrative is a great place to start for someone who seems to be unable to direct enough attention and for a long enough a time to a plain text book. Further research towards reading behaviour in people who have started reading graphic narratives will have to be done to answer definitively how reading graphic narratives can lead to reading plain, long-form texts. However, it is reasonable to assume that stimulating reluctant readers to read graphic narratives is beneficial to the overall reading habits. This assumption is based on the research discussed in this thesis: the graphic narrative is more appealing to the generation that has grown up with attention hogging screens; the images invite them into a story and require them to deep read both the images and the text. The graphic narrative allows for deep reading — even for people who have severely shortened their attention span by excessive screen use — by means of the characteristics of the medium, which are: encouraging non-linear reading; and stimulating the imagination by both having to continuously link the narrative between the separate images, and recognise and decipher the symbolism seen in them. Indeed, research has shown a better understanding of information if it was presented in a graphic narrative format rather than a plain text format. People who are at risk of becoming low literate will still need to read a lot of plain text; the graphic narrative can offer a push in the direction of long-form texts but generally contains too little connected text to be able to sufficiently train the reader's reading ability toward being an advanced reader, and replacing long-form, plain texts. Yet, the graphic narrative is still a very useful tool — besides providing a stepping stone to long-form reading — especially as a textbook format in an educational context, and also as a way to introduce new subject matter.

The long form reading skill has been neglected. The speed of modern life, accommodated by the technological revolution has distracted us. Reading has become a chore to add to the ever growing list of things that need to get done, sinking to the bottom, drifting to the back of our minds. The electronic devices that run our lives have taught us to find relevant information in a fast and efficient way. But the lack of training our deep-reading skill makes us susceptible to reducing how critically we view of the world around us, or in the worst case, to becoming low-literate. To regain our deep-reading ability and more importantly the enthusiasm for reading we need to establish a

reading culture and, obviously, go back to reading long-form texts from paper, instead of short texts from a screen. The characteristics of the graphic narrative medium allow us to get reacquainted with the deep reading mode while still having a comfortable reading-experience similar to reading a text from a screen in a skimming manner. If we broaden the available and approved reading options to include the graphic narrative returning people to a reading habit will be one step closer.

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