# *Foreword to Issue 1: Picture Stories*

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The inaugural issue of *Wings of Fire* contains nine essays from the senior seminar, "Picture Stories," which I taught in Fall 2022. The course focused on a series of so-called "wordless novels" from the 1920s and 30s, books composed entirely of wood-engraved images that lacked words as well as captions and page numbers. In spite of these apparent handicaps, each of the novels is vitally interested in a new kind of visual storytelling that represented a departure from the literature and art of the time. In this sense, the novels responded to and helped to shape the genre of the silent film. Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) thus played an important role in our course, adding a theatrical and psychological dimension to the woodcut novel.

The impetus for the seminar was the continuing critical and popular neglect of these novels, a neglect that has always struck me as odd given their widely acknowledged role as origin of the contemporary graphic novel and direct connection to the underground comix scene of the 1960s. The second half of the course investigated the many links between the wordless novel and its contemporary progeny.

Part of the neglect of wordless novels, as we learned, stems from their transmedial nature. They fall into a gap between the academic disciplines of literature, art history and film and as such confound critics, who have struggled to find an adequate language and critical vocabulary with which to study them. These pictorial narratives attempt to do what the novel does, but without the basic building blocks of words, and what the cinema does without the moving image. They are not quite conventional art either since they exist in sequence and cannot be hung on a wall, or displayed loose-leafed, or grouped thematically in a portfolio. Indeed, they are bound between covers like novels and emphatically signal that they are meant to be "read." They also defy the standard media at the disposal of the artist or illustrator — pen and ink, colored pencil, watercolor, etc. Instead, they reach back to the practice of wood engraving, a method used frequently in the Renaissance for instructional block books and religious prints. As we discovered, their form – and the extensive labor required to complete them – was a part of their social function as well as their cultural and political importance. The woodcut artist was interested in forging a direct physical connection with the proletarian audience that enthusiastically embraced the new form.

The labor audience made clear to us the revolutionary politics of the wordless novel, its overt communist, socialist and activist agenda (perhaps another reason for its neglect, particularly during the late 1940s and 50s). Many of the works feature a working class hero who confronts fundamental problems of social inequity in a capitalist system defined by exploitation. The visual immediacy of the commitment to change becomes palpable in these novels and feels far more urgent and subversive than any pamphlet or tract. The audience did not need to know how to read to understand the meaning of these books. Nor did they require deep pockets to purchase them. Frans Masereel's novels, for example, appeared as small paperbacks printed on cheap paper that were published in huge runs and sold at a reasonable price. They were easily carried about in the pocket and workers could read and re-read them quickly between shifts or on their break. Moreover, they were readily circulated between friends and at rallies, marches and protests, and they were disposable in case of emergencies. Their wordlessness and hence ambiguity meant that individuals were able to avoid both persecution and prosecution.

This ambiguity, of course, makes the novels ripe for analysis and interpretation and offered us a rich entanglement of political and aesthetic questions. In class we considered a number of these questions, spending a good deal of time thinking through the relationship between the wordless novel and Modernist art, silent film and the traditional nineteenth-century novel; the extent to which the pictorial and graphic novel colonizes these established art forms and invents a wholly new genre (and visual rhetoric) more attuned to the modern and postmodern age; and how a visual narrative fundamentally differs from a verbal one. For instance, how do pictorial novels grapple with the problem of psychological depth in their characters? How do they exploit the kinetic energy that defines film without compromising the slow reading that enhances the richness of their ideas?

We began by tracing the origins of the pictorial and graphic novel in Frans Masereel's remarkable woodcut experiments, *The Passion of a Man* (1918), *Passionate Journey* (1919), and *The Idea* (1920), as well as Otto Nückel's lead-cut wordless novel, *Destiny* (1926). The course then moved on to an in-depth consideration of three of Lynd Ward's wordless novels of the 1930s, *Gods' Man* (1929-30), *Madman's Drum* (1930) and *Song Without Words* (1936), and examined their intersection with movements like German Expressionism, Art Nouveau and Art Deco.

In absorbing the influence of comics, comix and cinema in the 1960s, the pictorial novel gradually opened the door to words and evolved into the graphic novel. Using Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1994) as a theoretical vantage point, we examined two graphic memoirs, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) and Lynda Barry's *What It Is* (2008), and Richard McGuire's ingenious meditation on the comic form, *Here* (2015). We concluded with Martin Vaughn-James's *The Cage* (1975), a "visual novel" without a protagonist or, for that matter, any human characters at all. The challenge presented in this provocative philosophical statement about media, technology and perception effectively brought together many of the aesthetic and political concerns we had considered throughout the course.

By the end, I think all of us came to realize that "Picture Stories" is not an oxymoron, that a sequence of pictures can suggest narratives as complex as any verbal novel, and that the graphic combination of word and image offers creative possibilities that continue to expand the novel as a traditional form.