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Originally published in Varoom! Issue 16, Autumn 2011, ISSN 1750-483X

The Art of the Speech Balloon:

A collection of ruminations, preoccupations, truths and tales examining what is commonly known as the speech balloon, and its dear but distinct relative, the thought balloon.

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Peter Brookes brilliantly transformed words into a physical weapon back during the 2010 election campaign in his image documenting what must probably be one of the biggest political gaffes of recent times. The cartoon exposes our own vulnerability in the face of words and their capacity to turn on us when least expected. Whilst most spoken words are uttered, then slip away unnoticed, there are some that return to plague us. It takes just three images for Brookes to mutate a passive, visual convention that we identify as particular to the cartoon and comic world, into a physical form that inflicts bodily harm - akin to the damage that those two words caused Brown's political career.

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On the principles & certitudes

The speech balloon, a universally recognised graphic device, is employed as a means to represent both spoken and thought words, most commonly in comics. This is achieved through the use of a form, frequently bubble-like, typically within which is placed typography. On occasion image may also be used. Traditionally a thought balloon is distinguishable from a speech balloon by a cord of bubbles attaching the principal bubble to the thinker's head.

Speech and thought balloons are simultaneously both a pictorial and a textual device. Initially we read the words (or images) cradled within the balloon and comprehend their meaning. But our understanding of this meaning is also reinforced by both the choice of typography employed and the structure that the words are contained within. The visual properties of the type, image and balloon may all illuminate further what the character is speaking, thinking or doing.

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On physicality

Freud wasn't wrong when he wrote in 'Jokes and their relation to the Unconscious' that 'words are a plastic material with which one can do all kinds of things'.

Speech and thought bubbles come in many guises. Some are formal, orthodox in attitude, the suit-wearers of the species. Others are rotund, doltish even, bloated - but confidently so. And still others are susurrate - breathy, ethereal, poised to disintegrate and, in form, rather similar to an exhalation on a cold winter's day. The visual conventions are manifold.

Most commonly a speech or thought balloon is devised from an outline to define the form, and the surface itself. The boundary line differentiates between what is happening within the bubble form, and what is happening beyond it, in the comic frame. Those boundaries may be angular, beveled, indistinct or blousy as required and desired by their creator.

Two things have held my interest in terms of the creative possibilities of these devices:
i) The fact that uttered and imagined words and images take up no literal physical space in our reality, and yet in a comic-reality they do. If we push this line of enquiry harder, we may

question further this physicality. Are both speech and thought balloons essentially flat? May they not also be considered a container? This term suggests volume, mass, and solidity. So if speech/thought balloons are receptacles of information, do they have dimensions? Are they solid or filled with air? Are they transparent or are they white? And what of the contents? Are these also three-dimensional? Do the words float, or are they hung?

ii) Although spoken words are on some level understood by all who can make sense of the language, thought is different. It is perceived exclusively by the thinker, and in the case of a comic, also by the audience. The thought balloon makes manifest what would otherwise never be witnessed.

David Carrier, in his book 'The Aesthetics of Comics' describes the interplay of the speech balloon and the comic frame as a 'theater with a soundproof glass wall between actors and audience, and with the spectators reading the dialogue from supertitles. Seeing a play in such a theater would be like reading comics'.

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On the history of visualising words - a somewhat intermittent and mercilessly edited account

Of course there's an extensive and complex history of visualising spoken or thought word in a variety of ways, and the form that we now recognise instantly has experienced various permutations over the centuries. Here I have endeavoured to extract some key examples of early speech balloons that have perhaps best examined the nature of the physicality of speech and thought.

Within European history, text has been used in painting as a vehicle for adding meaning to the image, often where the gesture, stance and expression of the subject, and object-symbolism may not communicate all. In Renaissance art scrolls billow and unfurl across the canvas. Some quite literally snake out of the subjects' mouths, clearly representing speech. Others are visual devices that act as an outside narrator to the story, adding important information that cannot be communicated through image alone. They are all as imagined as the speech bubbles in contemporary comics.

But words, either religious texts or meaningful maxims were included in paintings via actual, palpable objects. These items might be engraved (grand carved columns festooned with flowers and ivy or ornate stone urns for example); printed (a book casually left open on a desk or idly poised in the lap of the sitter); or handwritten (a folded note clutched by the subject or a sheath of papers stacked casually in the foreground).

Completely independently and far preceding the Europeans, in southern America there is compelling evidence to suggest that the Mesoamericans also developed sophisticated written systems to visualise spoken words, songs and music. Images and objects discovered at many archeological ruins depict humans and animals with questionmark-like forms leaping from their mouths. Similar to the ribbon-esque scrolls previously mentioned, the 'banderole' or 'speech scroll' employed by the Mesoamericans is potentially more abstract in its nature than its European relative. The tongue-like shape darts from the direction of the speaker's mouth and may link the speaker to a series of other images. If our latter-day translations of these devices are correct, these images are glyphs, figures used as symbols to represent words, sounds and ideas. It's suggested that the manner in which these speech scrolls are decorated, may give information about the tone of the words, or the identity of the person speaking them.

Thomas Rowlandson's 'The Loves of the Fox and the Badger, or the Coalition Wedding' is an adroit example of a strip demonstrating the full gamut of techniques available to the artist in the late 1700s for exploring the interplay between text and image. The piece, a satirical illustration poking fun at the troubled coalition between Charles James Fox and Lord North after Fox's Commons victory in 1782, uses a frame format, captions, scrolls, text-inscribed

objects and speech and thought bubbles containing both typography and image. In this instance, the contained image, surrounded by radiating lines, suggests a dream.

Continuing the practice of using objects to display narrative, in the late 1800s Richard F. Outcault famously created 'The Kid', a yellow nightshirt-cladded street urchin, who speaks to the newspaper-reading audience via his clothing. This speech balloon in this instance then is humanoid and certainly in terms of the comic strip, a living and breathing speech/thought balloon at that.

Winsor McCay remains I suspect unprecedented as the most sophisticated boundary-pusher of the pliable side to speech and thought balloons. Not only this, several of his works test the concrete possibilities of the comic strip as a whole. 'Little Nemo in Slumberland,' published between 1905 and 1914 in first the New York Herald and then later the New York American, presents Little Nemo in a series of dream states, in which alternative universes are depicted. A particularly appropriate nightmarish scene shows a series of ever-expanding speech bubbles taking over the entire frame and the characters within it.

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On where this leaves us

As Brookes' image attests, speech and thought balloons still today hold much scope for enquiry into how we speak (and think) and how diverse are the solutions for articulating this in the visual world. Comics are potent forms in which to do this, but equally so is the removal of the speech balloon from this context that we expect to view it within. Once isolated, it can be dissected and deconstructed to examine not just the expressive qualities of the utterance itself, but on a more poetic level, be a rumination on the philosophical and internal workings of language itself.

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Lizzie Ridout is currently completing an Artist's Book Residency at the Women's Studio Workshop, Rosendale, New York, where she will publish **Ways to talk and yet say nothing or ways to not talk and yet say everything** (ISBN 1-893125-79-3) at the end of the year. The publication will explore the spoken – and unspoken - word and alternative two- and three-dimensional interpretations of the speech balloon. The project is documented on <http://sketchbook.lizzieridout.com>.

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