

**VISUAL LITERACY IN THE GRAPHIC NOVEL *NESTE GANG BLIR ALT RIKTIG (EVERYTHING WILL BE ALL RIGHT NEXT TIME)*
BY LENE ASK**

RALUCA-DANIELA RĂDUȚ¹

ABSTRACT. *Visual Literacy in the Graphic Novel Neste Gang Blir Alt Riktig (Everything Will Be All Right Next Time) by Lene Ask.* This article aims at analysing the novel *Neste Gang Blir Alt Riktig (Everything Will Be All Right, Next Time)* written by the Norwegian writer and illustrator Lene Ask (b. 1962) by using the close reading technique and the concept of visual literacy which emphasises the importance of the pictures in the understanding and the interpretation of this graphic novel. With respect to the interpretative level of the book, the accent is placed on the analysis and the evolution of the main character, Marit, and the effect of her dysfunctional family and her parents' behaviour on her development as a grown-up. Marit's simple and yet complicated life is presented from two main perspectives, a narrative and a visual one, aiming both her past and present.

Keywords: *Norwegian graphic novels, visual literacy, dysfunctional family, visual perspective, Lene Ask, narrative perspective.*

REZUMAT. *„Alfabetizarea vizuală” în romanul grafic Data viitoare totul va fi bine de Lene Ask.* Acest articol are ca scop analiza romanului grafic *Neste Gang Blir Alt Riktig (Data viitoare totul va fi bine)* scris de ilustratoare și scriitoare norvegiancă Lene Ask, folosind analiza pe text și conceptul de „alfabetizare vizuală”. Acesta din urmă pune accentul pe folosirea imaginilor în procesul înțelegerii și interpretării romanului grafic. Referitor la nivelul interpretativ al cărții, accentul este pus pe analiza și evoluția personajului principal, Marit, precum și pe disfuncția familială și pe efectul comportamentului părinților acesteia în dezvoltarea ei ca adult. Viața simplă și totodată complicată a lui Marit este prezentată prin intermediul a două perspective, narativă și vizuală, ambele vizând atât prezentul, cât și trecutul acesteia.

Cuvinte cheie: *romane grafice norvegiene, „alfabetizare vizuală”, disfuncție familială, perspectivă vizuală, Lene Ask, perspectivă narativă*

¹ Senior Lecturer, PhD, at the Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literature, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca; has published the book entitled “The Poetry of Jan Erik Vold and the Norwegian Lyric Modernism in the 1960s” and a series of articles on Norwegian contemporary poetry. E-mail: raluca_daniela_radut@yahoo.com

Introductory remarks

In the 20th century, during the interwar period, among the Norwegian writers of books for young adults who wrote especially about young girls was Evy Bøgenæs (1906-1985), one of the most productive writers of her time: “the genre’s most productive [writer] in Norway, [...], who from the 1930s and all the way up to the 1970s wrote a book per year about young girls who met their great love [...]”² (Ørjasæter 1997: 703, my own translation). Other resonant names regarding this type of literature were: Margit Ravn (1885-1960), Annik Saxegaard (1905-90) and Juli Wiborg (1880-1947). According to Tordis Ørjasæter, between 1920s and 1930s, the protagonist of almost all the books for young adults was a young girl “[placed] in a solid social environment, the importance of a close relationship with the parents, dreaming about love, [...]”. In the history of literature and the literary criticism, these books have been totally neglected due to their lack of literary qualities, but they have been very popular among girls, [...]”³ (Ørjasæter 1997: 704, my own translation). Nils Bjørgås (1910-1983) in *Siste sommaren* (*The Last Summer*, 1950), Halldis Moren Vessas (1907-1995) in the book entitled *Tidleg på våren* (*Early in Spring*, 1949), Finn Havrevold (1905-1988) in *Vigo*, all followed a real and concrete pattern, regarding the construction of the plot with real life common themes which help the reader portraying the protagonists’ interior changes and experiences. Moreover, these types of stories and novels taught young readers how to face the struggle and the difficult situations in their lives (i.e. the divorce of their parents, the single parent family, the loss of the parents). In this sense, one of the Norwegian writers who presented how the main character could face struggles and problems of a dysfunctional family was Kari Ørbech (1902-1997). For instance, in the novel *Det kan ikke være sant* (*It Cannot be Real*, 1956), the protagonist, a young girl, had to face the conflicts of her divorced parents.

Tjordis Ørjasæter in the seventh volume of the History of Norwegian Literature stated that writers such as: Marit Kalstad (1931-2016), Anders Havelid (1929-20018), Else Breen (b. 1927) placed the difficulties of those times and the social problems to the centre of their stories, thus giving the reader the opportunity to be compassionate towards the unpleasant experiences of the protagonists and even associate with them. Therefore, the readers can find the themes and the real life problems presented and analysed in these books for young adults,

² “genres flittigste utøver i Norge, [...], som fra 1930- og helt opp i 1970-årene langt på vei skrev én bok pr. år om unge piker som møter den store kjærligheten, [...]”

³ “[plassert] i et solid miljø, betydningen av nær kontakt med foreldrene, drømmen om kjærligheten, [...]. I litteraturhistorien og i litteraturkritikken har disse bøkene vært totalt neglisjert på grunn av deres manglende litterære kvaliteter, men de har vært svært populære blant de lesende pikene, [...]”

as being something they can relate to and identify themselves with the protagonists: “the characters are created so that the young readers can identify with and try to experience the world from their point of view”⁴ (Ørjasæter 1997: 706, my own translation). With respect to the literature for young adults of the 21st century, it is important to mention that while Jostein Gaarder (b. 1952) is creating the plot of his novels and stories using elements of fantasy and philosophy, Gro Dahle (b. 1962) is deeply anchored in the actual problems of a modern family, including psychological problems, trauma and abuse.

In discussing contemporary literature, one cannot dispute the ever-growing popularity of graphic novels – especially for teens. Graphic novels, [...], have long had a foothold in the publishing industry (they were quite popular in Europe long before the United States. [...]) Within the genre of graphic novels, it must be noted that there are several types that readers can enjoy – including history, biography, classic adaptations, and science information – but teen fiction is still by far the most popular (Carter qtd. in Hayn and Kapland 2012: 27-28).

From the beginning of the 1900s up until now, the Norwegian literature for children and young adults has undergone a series of changes. Regarding their form and structure, the long narrative stories and novels full of details and depictions, turned gradually into comic books and graphic novels. Consequently, the children and the teenagers are encouraged to use their own imagination, creativity and intuition in order to understand the message of the story which resides behind the comic frames and the pictures from a graphic novel. As concerns the comic books and the graphic novels published in Norway in 2019 and 2020, here are a few examples: *Krypto ned i dypet* (*Into the Deep. Crypto*, 2020) written by the Norwegian animator and illustrator Hans Jørgen Sandnes (b. 1979), *Nordlys bok 3 - Kråkesøstrene* (*Northern Lights book 3 - The Crow Sisters!*, 2020) by the Norwegian writer Malin Falch (b. 1993), *Bjørnar - En historie fra Nordlys!* (*Bjørnar - A Tale From the Northern Lights!*, 2019), and illustrated by Regine Toften Holst, *Jellyvamps*, 2019, by Ida Eva Neverdahl (b. 1993). These are only a few Norwegian contemporary writers and illustrators who are using in their books for children and young adults, plenty of fantastic features but also concrete and simple things taken from nature and everyday life experiences, thus being able to create a subtle crossing line between reality and fiction, between fantastic characters and protagonists belonging to the real world.

It is important to remark as well the writer and illustrator Lene Ask who was born in 1974, in Stavanger, Norway, and who wrote and illustrated books for

⁴ “man vil skape skikkelser som unge lesere kan identifisere seg med, og prøver å oppleve verden fra deres synsvinkel.”

children and young adults, thus trying to bring up in front of the contemporary young adult readers the classic stories of the 1900s, by introducing elements of interest for the new generation of teenagers. She is a writer, photographer and illustrator of graphic novels, comic books, picture books and also word-free books (*Du – You*, 2016). The recurrent themes that appear in her books are friendship and mystery in *Usynlige sammen (Invisible Together)*, 2019), *Mai og Juni (May and June)*, 2018), teenagers' difficulties, experiences and their first love in *Det du ikke sier, er sant (What You Say Isn't True)*, 2017) and *Det hjelper ikke å blunke (Blinking Doesn't Help)*, 2016) and family histories in the epistolary graphic novel *Kjære Rikard (Dear Richard)*, 2014).

Neste gang blir alt riktig (Everything Will Be All Right Next Time, 2012)

Neste gang blir alt riktig (Everything Will Be All Right Next Time) is the story of a girl, Marit who lives and works in Oslo, but was born and raised in the countryside. The plot of this graphic novel is built on two different narrative plans, namely a plan which follows the present moment when Marit is a grown-up, working and living in Oslo, while the second plan is made of several forays into the first plan, through various flashbacks from Marit's childhood. Thus, the reader is subtly invited to be a part of this graphic novel, by trying to interpret the images, the colours, the facial expressions and the body language of the characters more than the words which are not so many in this graphic novel but still are very attentively used by the illustrator and which helps the reader to better understand the context. In the article entitled "Picturing Family Histories: Torill Kove and Lene Ask", Melissa Gjellstad states that: "To read comics requires an understanding of two factors: first, what is pictured inside the frame of each comics panel, and second, what is implied in the space outside the frame" (Gjellstad 2010: 439).

In order to analyse this graphic novel, one of the most important skills that should be used is the visual ability to watch attentively each and every detail illustrated in the rectangular frames of the graphic novel. According to the Professor and art historian James Elkins, "since the 1980s the rhetoric of images has become far more pervasive, so that it is now commonplace in the media to hear that we live in a visual culture, and get our information through images" (Elkins 2009: 4). The term "*visual literacy*" has been around for some time as a fundamental notion in the study of art history, iconology and visual culture. It is a strong and seemingly unavoidable metaphor, one that compares the acquisition of skills, competence and expertise (quite distinct levels of mastery) to the mastery of language and literature. Seeing, it suggests, is something like reading" (Mitchell 2009: 13). Thus, it is of great importance that the readers know what and how to interpret a graphic novel. According to the Professor

Carrie Patterson, “visual literacy is the ability to accurately receive visual message, to use those messages to construct meaning, and then to create and convey visual messages. The more proficient you are in visual literacy, the more visual power you have” (Patterson 2019: 8).

The opening scene of the book illustrates a supermarket in Norway and a mother with her girl entering the library where Marit works as a librarian in Oslo. The image of the mother together with her girl is not placed by chance in the beginning of this graphic novel. The deeper the reader goes into its plot, the more serious and problematic the relationship between Marit and her mother seems to be. While the first three pages of the book present Marit at work, the following four pages are flashbacks generated by the scene with the mother and the girl and their arguable conversation at the library, in front of Marit. The sudden change of the scenes, the different content of the speech bubbles represent both a change of the scenery and of the characters, except Marit who this time is a school girl, illustrated in five rectangular frames together with her best friend Martin. Furthermore, the fact that she wears the same clothes in most of the scenes of this graphic novel, a green sweater and a pair of light brown trousers, requests the reader’s attention in order to observe the changes of the protagonist throughout the whole novel. Besides this, the illustrator portrays attentively the differences between Marit’s representations in the countryside, when she was a little girl, and those from Oslo, where she is an adult, having the same haircut, but being a little bit taller and having the body structure of an adult female.

Graphic narrative in particular, with its infinite possibilities of arranging frames, panels, and individual scenes within frames and panels (including, but by no means limited to, arrangement in a sequence), should provide ample illustration for the necessity to employ a more dynamic and multileveled conception of reading that takes into account the manifold schemata, assumptions, inferences, and hypotheses that readers rely on to impute narrative meaning to a sequence of images” (Lefèvre qtd. in Thon and Stein 2013: 38-39).

In addition, the fact that Marit wore almost the same clothes may symbolise that regarding her relationship with her mother, nothing has been changed since she was a little girl. Both Marit and her mother remain the same, and even more, her childhood’s trauma is unchangeable and she is still affected by the memories she had with her mother. Her mother’s unusual behaviour, her neurotic crisis, forced Marit to see herself as being almost all the time, a bad and uneducated child. “Trauma provokes a shock. It’s not just a rough time, it’s an *impasse*, something that doesn’t go away. Time freezes at this moment. Repeat: trauma remains forever in the present. The pain remains acute, an open wound. More exactly, trauma is repetition” (Huston qtd. in Ireland and Proulx 2013: 38-

39). The contrast between Marit's mother, Reidun, and her father, John, also resides in the colour of their clothes. Every time her father is illustrated in one of the scenes, his is smiling and is wearing vivid and colourful clothes. In fact, Marit perceived her father as being one of her best friends, the one with whom she had the best memories from her childhood. Her father, John was a very kind, tolerant and wise person. Martin, the best friend of Marit, told about his father the following: "Your father was good enough even if he was a Christian"⁵ (Ask 2012: 20). In addition, this religious aspect of the story is also emphasised through the icons in the form of photographs which appear on the walls, in Marit's room since she was a little girl. These are made intentionally visible by the illustrator in order to place the accent on the fact that Marit was born and raised in a Christian family. She was surrounded by guarding angels on the walls, while her father used to thank God before and after the meal time: "God bless the food. Amen"⁶ (Ask 2012: 8). Although, Marit is Christian she is tolerant with those of other religions, for instance with a Muslim boy, Azin, who came to the library in Oslo. Thus, "exposure to different cultures enables the individual to become more reflective. By experiencing different cultures, individuals tend to become more aware and critical of their own cultural values, beliefs and perceptions. [...] Nevertheless, becoming aware of one's cultural dynamics constitutes a difficult assignment because it triggers the observer to undergo changes that are affective, behavioural or cognitive in nature" (Pop 2016: 91).

It is worth mentioning that the talented illustrator Lene Ask is able to give life to its sketches, by giving them the right colour, the right appearance and even name them. For instance, the fact that there are names on the buildings in the book, helps the reader to observe easily a set of details which are necessary in the understanding of the text, when reading is performed visually. "Barbara Stafford has suggested we call 'visual competence', a kind of baseline skill (like the ability to read) that is necessary, but far from sufficient, condition for the more advanced and specialized skills we might want to call *visual literacy* – that is, connoisseurship: rich, highly cultivated, and trained experiences and techniques of visual observation. [...] One has to possess visual competence in order to *read* a text (unless it is written in Braille), but hearing is perfectly adequate as a threshold for normal competence in a natural language" (Mitchell 2009: 13-14). Therefore, Lene Ask, through her illustrations and pictures, creates a clear visual field full of impulses which gradually develop the reader's visual competences in order to understand and interpret the whole novel. For example, the reader is aware that Marit is living in Bleiken, because in the book this name is on the railway station where the protagonist waited for the train to Oslo.

⁵ "Faren din var godt likt selv om han var kristen".

⁶ "Gud signe maten. Amen"

When she arrives in Oslo, in the background is written Oslo Sentralstasjon (Oslo Central Station).

The final part of this graphic novel is also full of importance in the sense that Marit's feelings towards her mother are gradually changing from hate to love and care. After her father died, her mother was lonely in Bleiken, a village situated at 80 kilometres from Oslo. Martin, the best friend of Marit visited often her mother. He tried to mediate the conflict between them who were not so close to each other. The death of her father affected her a lot because they used to walk together, go hiking together, decorate the Christmas tree, go to pick forest berries, which were all beautiful and unforgettable experiences for a child. Whenever Marit wanted to talk to her mother she was yelling at her and sent her immediately into her room. The open end of this graphic novel portrays Marit, Martin and her sick mother, together at Bleiken. Reidun suffered a stroke and she could not talk anymore and Marit was taking care of her. Thus, the graphic novel *Neste gang blir alt riktig* (*Everything Will Be All Right Next Time*) ends in an optimistic tone and the characters are portrayed into a brighter light full of hope and new beginnings. With respect to the messages the pictures send to the reader, there is a concrete line between darkness and light, winter and spring, the life in the city and the life in the countryside. The end of the book begins with an illustration of a tractor sowing seeds on the moist field. "In graphic narratives, the combination of text and pictures – [...] is the vital element of storytelling. [...] In graphic narratives, word and image correlate and compete in a plethora of ways" (Thon and Stein 2013: 197). It is also important to remark that "[...], literature provides personal enrichment because it encourages the individual to interpret *self* and *other* in diverse contexts of social and cultural exchange" (Pop 2016: 96).

Concluding remarks

All things considered, the graphic novel *Neste gang blir alt riktig* (*Everything Will Be All Right Next Time*) presents the difficulties and the life experiences of the main character Marit and her interior changes that occur as a result of her interaction with different people from different social classes and cultures. In light of these events, the talented illustrator and narrator, Lene Ask, creates a substantial Norwegian universe where she sets the emphasis on different and important cultural and social aspects which can define the Norwegian society. Thus, the story from this graphic novel is used as background in order to point to the specific things related to the Norwegian culture and civilisation and several intertextual elements. For instance, Martin is willing to borrow and read a book from the library and that book is *Markens Grøde* (*Growth of the Soil*) by Knut Hamsun (1859-1952), the Norwegian writer who was awarded the Nobel Prize

in Literature, in 1920. In addition, the librarian also recommended the book written by Lars Monsen (b. 1963), the Norwegian journalist and adventurer. Besides, in one of the previous scenes, the reader can notice a TV-programme broadcasting by NRK (Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation). Moreover, the accent is also placed on the fact that Norway is a multicultural country where religious and cultural tolerance are strongly supported and promoted among the population. In this sense, there is a very high level of complexity of this graphic novel. Furthermore, it can be interpreted from different perspectives beginning with its interpretative features which combine both the close reading technique and the visual literacy concept and ending with its cultural and social features which offers the reader the possibility to explore a small but significant part of the Norwegian society and culture.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ask, Lene. 2012. *Neste gang blir alt riktig (Everything will be all right, next time around)*. Oslo: Jippi Publishing House.
- Elkins, James. 2009. *Visual Literacy*. London/New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis e-Library.
- Gjellstad, Melissa. 2010. "Picturing Family Histories: Torill Kove and Lene Ask". In *Scandinavian Studies*, pp. 439-464.
- Hayn, A. Judith, Kaplan, S. Jeffrey. 2012. *Teaching Young Adult Literature Today – Insights, Considerations, and Perspectives for the Classroom Teacher*. United States: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers.
- Holen, Øyvind. 2019. "Lene Ask" in *Store Norske Leksikon (Great Norwegian Encyclopedia)*, https://snl.no/Lene_Ask, accessed on the 3rd of July, 2020.
- Ireland, Susan, Proulx J. Patrice. 2019. "The Transgressive Mother in Nancy Huston's Bad Girl: Classes de literature". In *Horrible Mothers. Representations across Francophone North America*. Edited by Loic Bourdeau. University of Nebraska Press, pp. 133- 147.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. 2009. "Visual Literacy or Literacy Visualcy". In *Visual Literacy*. Edited by James Elkins. London/New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis e-Library, pp. 13-29.
- Ørjasæter, Tordis. 1997. "Barne- og ungdomslitteraturen" ("Children's and Young Adult Literature"). In *Norges Litteraturhistorie (The History of Norwegian Literature)*. Edited by Edvard Beyer. Oslo: Cappelen, pp. 571-736.
- Patterson, Carrie. 2019. *Visual Literary Skills – How to see*. USA: The Teaching Company.
- Pop, Raluca. 2016. Developing Cultural Awareness and Positive Attitudes towards Other Cultures in the Context of Learning the Norwegian Language and Literature. În Teglaș, C. (coord.), *Dinamica limbajelor de specialitate, tehnici și strategii inovatoare*. Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință. pp. 90-97.
- Thon, Jan-Noël, Stein, Daniel. 2013. *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels. Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH.