

Storying Our World

David Haley – Comics – TNoC Roundtable

In 1985, in a crowded Kolkata spice market, a man cleared a space by chanting and then sat on the floor. From a large cotton sack, he pulled some scrolls. He continued to chant and the gathered crowd waited in anticipation while he decided which scroll to use. Eventually, he pulled a thread to release a scroll. He rocked up onto his haunches and chanted loudly as he unravelled the scroll, pointing to a hand-painted image. People in the audience (now six or eight deep) interacted as subsequent images were revealed. The sequence of images told the story of a man and his family having problems with people in his village, as the rains persisted to fall. Eventually, the man, his family and his livestock were on top of a hill, while others drowned. The final frame of the story saw a helicopter fly in to save the man, his family and animals. This was a latter day rendering of Noah, with the ark transformed into a helicopter. Bengal is no stranger to flooding, but in 1985 few people knew about the climate emergency. They did know that deforestation in the foothills of the Himalayas was not a good thing and that floods were becoming more frequent and more devastating. Through his Bengali folk-style comic, this Phart storyteller/artist was effectively prophesying what the Rio Earth Summit made public in 1992.



Phart storyteller – photo: David Haley 1985

As far as we know, people have storied (made and told stories) their world in words and pictures since Paleolithic times, over 47,000 years ago. The making and telling of stories, as one integral act is an important process to understanding the dynamic processes of neurological development and 'fundamental culture' (Machado de Oliveria 2021, Morin 2006). This is how our belief systems are formed.

We may speculate that, orally, 'In the beginning there was the Word...' and graphic pictures certainly predated written text, possibly accompanied by some forms of performance to celebrate the natural world, rights of passage and great events (Boal 2008). Then things changed irrevocably about 5,000 years ago with the 'Fertile Crescent' / 'Cradle of Civilization', when people changed their agricultural and trading practices, became sedentary and invented cities. They, also started to develop picture sequences that became text and by 3400 BC, were being collected in city-state libraries, like that at Uruk in Sumaria.

We can then fast-track through Alexandria, Ancient Greece, Rome, China, the European Middle Ages and the invention of the mechanical printing press to comics of Europe, America and Japan of the 20th Century.

The important thing throughout this history, was the story; a sequence of moments or incidents that in a linear or circular fashion make some sort sense to tell us something. The combination of pictures and text, evokes two of our senses simultaneously. The form, the making and the telling, provide the means of creating and communicating that emerge as another thing. As the English artist, David Hockney repeated as a mantra in his film, *A Day On The Grand Canal With The Emperor Of China: or surface is illusion but so is depth*, "The way we depict space determines what we do with it" (Hockney 1998). And comics generate their own space, or multiple spaces within each medium they appear. And as we know, 'the most moral act of all is the creation of space for life to move onwards' (Pirsig 1993).

Not childish, but childlike, these multi-dimensional, multi-perspectival worldviews allow dreams to pass through what society and formal education teach us to believe is reality. They expand the possibilities of our ontological existence to experience pre-modernity understandings of being in the world. In this sense, they make way for the possibilities of humour, serious comedy, lampooning and the paradoxical insights of Trickster (Hyde 2008).

It's time for diverse superheroes to story our planet into many futures beyond modernity's monoculture, be they from Gotham City, Kolkata, or our own home towns.

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