

# THE COMICS GRID

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# Moving between worlds: *The Arrival*

by Christophe Dony

In comics, a ‘[crossover](#)’ usually refers to the mixing of different fictional worlds and characters within a single narrative. The trend has enjoyed considerable popularity in superhero texts, often engaging various titles or story arcs in an epic-like narrative.

The combination of various persona and settings in crossovers inevitably complicates spatio-temporal relations, sometimes raising questions of dis/continuity. Interestingly, the problematising of space and time inherent to the idea of ‘crossing over’ also finds resonance outside the realm of these fantasy and escapist storylines, particularly in comics engaging with postcolonial notions such as dislocation, transnationalism, and cross-cultural encounters.

[Shaun Tan](#)’s silent graphic narrative *The Arrival* (2006) provides a relevant example of this latter category. In many ways, it functions as a ‘crossover text,’ by which I mean a malleable form that is able, to varying degrees, to engage with spatio-temporal fragmentation, dis/connection, and dis/continuity.

The book can be located in the tradition of migrant narratives, travel writing, and diasporic fiction. *The Arrival* indeed reflects on the notion of belonging and comments on the effects and consequences of exile. It portrays the sea voyage of a father leaving his country and family for an unidentified Promised Land. After having crossed an unknown ocean, the protagonist arrives in a nameless country and finds better prospects for his family thanks to other migrants who welcome and help him. In the process, however, he experiences the distress of departure, bewilderment, and an overwhelming confusion in relation to space and time.

More specifically, *The Arrival* develops a whole vocabulary of spatial and temporal displacement which does not aim at containing or defining migrant subjectivity, but rather conveys manifold migratory histories and pasts that articulate cultures in transition and transnationalism.

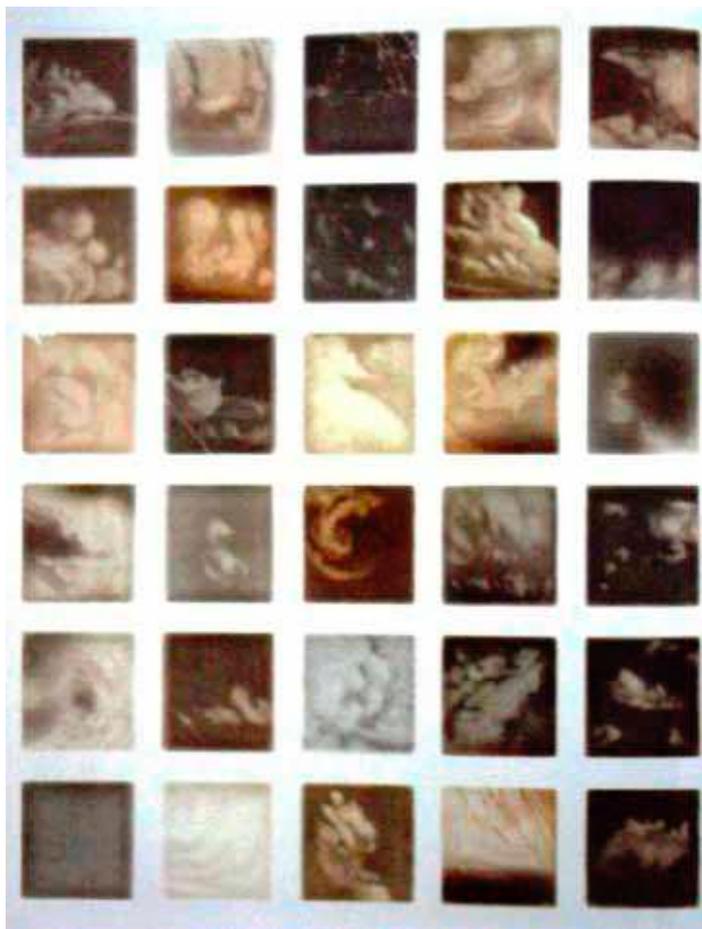
One of the strategies specific to comics that Tan employs to convey this problematising of space and time is that of ‘braiding’. ‘Braiding’ is one instance of what [Thierry Groensteen](#) labels ‘[general arthrology](#).’ In *The System of Comics* (2009), Groensteen opposes ‘restrictive arthrology’ to ‘general arthrology.’ He suggests that while the first concept is concerned with the relations between panels and their narrative interactions on the page, the second focuses on the meanings that can emerge from relations between panels at a distance. ‘Braiding’ is one example of general arthrology which, via the repetition of a specific panel arrangement, for example, connects narrative moments at a distance to reference a previous scene, sentiment, or atmosphere.

In *The Arrival*, one instance of braiding works towards a polyphonic understanding of diasporic fiction and conveys a chorus of migrants’ memories. This braiding engages with references to other

migrants' histories, pasts, and (re)locations, and therefore evokes the spatio-temporal fragmentation inherent to the 'crossover.'

This is visible in the episode where the protagonist, after having embarked on the ship that will bring him to the new land, looks at the clouds from the deck of the vessel. Graphically, this lingering gaze at the sky is represented on a double splash page which contains equivalent panels in size and shape depicting various types of clouds. This very specific layout is reproduced nowhere else in the book but on the cover-flaps in which portraits of migrants from different ethnicities and times are depicted in a similar way and format.

Interestingly, Tan explains in *Sketches from a Nameless Land* (2010) – a sequel companion book to *The Arrival* – that the migrants' portraits galleries on the cover flaps of *The Arrival* are directly inspired from actual photographs of migrants from the Ellis Island archives. In addition to using archival photographs, Tan also included a reworking of his father's passport picture on the cover-flaps. In so doing, the author affirms the importance of the personal and the familial into the collective. He brings different histories into relief, proposes different kinds of narratives, mixes the personal with the historical, and intersperses his (post)memory with that of other people.



Clouds: Tan, S. (2006) *The Arrival* (Melbourne: Lothian Books) (no pagination)



Portraits: Tan, S. (2006) *The Arrival* (Melbourne: Lothian Books) (no pagination)

The consequences of this visual crossover are manifold. First, it thematically and historically connects the protagonist's journey with that of other migrants from former times and as such establishes a disruption of place and time. A switch of **focalization** also corroborates this link between the protagonist's story and the fate of the various migrants depicted in the cover flaps.

Whereas before this episode, Tan made use of external focalisation (that is, the character was enclosed in the panels), the images of the clouds are represented without characters in the frames. This switch of perspective thus suggests that the clouds may reference the protagonist's gaze, or that of any other migrant portrayed in the cover flaps. This ambiguity, once again, reasserts the importance of plurality that permeates throughout *The Arrival* as it mixes the personal and the collective.

Secondly, the braid attests to the mobility of migrants and diasporic subjects, their fluid identities, and their ability to call into question the myth of harmonization generally associated with globalization. Their movements from the margins of the book to the center of the narrative obviously challenge the binary conception center/periphery long held in Western discourses. In fact, the mobility of migrants and the multiplicity of voices that the braid articulates work towards a conception of the global which is multi-faceted and plural rather than monolithic and universal. The fragmented

layout of these pages corroborates this claim, suggesting that a whole (the page, the global) can only be thought of in terms of its various parts or fragments (panels, localities).

Finally, the braid also compels the reader to cross over between the pages of the book and therefore to literally move in time and space, a condition that is not only characteristic of an increasingly deterritorialized world, but also of 'crossover' comics.

## **REFERENCES**

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