

RESEARCH ARTICLE

**A HUMUMENT: A VISUAL-VERBAL OSMOSIS IN PROGRESS****TANIA MARY VIVERA**

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary popular literary texts use heterogeneous semiotic modes in the communication and progression of their narratives. Multimodal artifacts in texts include a combination of the multiple semiotic resources including text visual interplay for meaning construction and cultural intermediation. 'A Humument: A Treated Victorian novel' is an altered book by British artist Tom Phillips, first published in 1970. It was created over W.H. Mallock's 1892 novel 'A Human Document'. Phillips drew, painted, and collaged over the pages, while leaving some of the original text to show through. The final product was a new story with a new protagonist named Bill Toge whose name appears only when the word 'together' or 'altogether' appears in Mallock's original text. The first version of all 367 treated pages was published in 1973 and since then there have been four revised editions (5th Edition 2012). The present paper studies the integral semiotic constituents which make this multimodal novel a text-visual osmosis. The treated pages of the novel generate a dynamic, synaesthetic reading experience which evolves artistically, linguistically and culturally over the several editions. The readers are offered a series of relationships between text and image; between Phillips and Mallock (parts of Mallock's painted-over original are still just readable); between the legible and the obscured; between 1892 and 1973 and 2012. A Humument exhumed from the 1892 Victorian novel is a distinctive non linear text and is regarded as a seminal classic of postmodern art which conforms and transforms itself incessantly.

Keywords: Multimodal fiction, multimodal semiotics, post 9/11 narrative, altered texts, Tom Philips

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The fundamental shift in contemporary communication practices due to the proliferation of new media has consequentially affected the making and evolvement of popular texts. The popularity of

a text is closely linked to its utilization of new media artefacts and its exhaustive manipulation of the various multimedial modes available and popularized by and for the readers. The systematic

and recurrent integration of non verbal elements in narration has been the core of popular multimodal texts. In multimodal literature, these multiple modes are used as semiotic resources carrying their own semantic load and they become an integral part of the narrative world and meaning construction. Adopting a multimodal semiotic approach is beneficial to the study of popular texts because multimodal texts call for new systems of analysis proficient in conceptualizing and describing the interactive rapport between the different modes and in artistic texts, meaning is a deliberate choice revealed through the visual verbal osmosis created in the text.

Contemporary multimodal discourse studies are spearheaded by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) who extend the basic ideas of M. A. K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics and his view of language as a social semiotic to encompass the analysis of texts that are more than purely verbal. Their aim is to develop a grammar of multimodality that will provide a consistent common methodology and metalanguage for dealing with all the different semiotic modes and their interaction in multimodal texts. Meaning in hybrid texts are seen as a series of choices from the semiotic resources available to the author and when applied to texts such as Tom Phillip's *A Humument*, this form of analysis explores how multifarious images and semantically encumbered text collage in the book and rather than simply illustrate a story, trigger a deeper understanding of the narrative which the overt written text fail to communicate alone.

A Humument (2012, 5th Edition) is the life work of British artist and collagist, Tom Phillips who is incessantly recreating the 19th Century novelist W. H. Mallock's work of fiction, *A Human Document* (1892), which Phillips bought for three pence in a shop in England. The book gets altered each time a new edition is brought out and the pages are in a constant state of flux. The Fifth edition on which the current study is based has multifarious word clusters and intricate art work. Tom Phillip's work is primarily artistic and *A Humument* is, as Phillips describes, "research conducted in the labyrinthine house of memory of one's own mind: As I sieved through my past I found that the seeds of all that obsesses and

concerns me in my art and life were all sown much earlier than I had guessed. (*The Portrait Works* 78)

In the book, art and text have been so elaborately imbricated that rivers of text and collage of art work run juxtaposed to each other. The discursive subjectivity and endlessly transmogrifying intertextual dynamic enunciates it as anti-formalist and *avant-garde*. *A Humument* is "palimpsestically intertextual" (Wagner-Lawlor, 1999). It keeps Mallock's background text constant while re-shifting the text and visual content in radical new ways. It highlights strings of original text through connecting text bubbles which can or may be read in disarray. The rest of the original text is effaced with drawings or illustrations but the pages carry the original writing leaving its shadow to be read over the graphics. The text is highly textured, "the original text sometimes entirely submerged, sometimes subtly emerging, sometimes jutting through the surface of the new text" (Wagner-Lawlor, 1999). This emphasizes the materiality of the text and the rhetoric propinquity between the past and the present, between 1892 Victorian aesthetics and modern day erudition. The text is in perpetual and successive conversation with the past and the variform artistic editions of the present and such discursiveness becomes synchronic and diachronic simultaneously.

Each edition of *A Humument* is in conversation with previous editions both as distinct objects and every edition is the apotheosis of all its predecessors. Phillips's story was in fact always present, just lying await to be uncamouflaged. The pruned authorship converted the conservative *A Human Document* into a teeming world of sex, humour and flippancy that might have been a misrepresentation of Mallock but Tom Phillips confesses that the new ideas were throbbing inside the text waiting for him to 'release' them.

A Humument presents the spasmodic love story of Irma and Toge glimpsed in elliptical, non-linear fragments: "more like a pack of cards", Phillips (2012) notes, "than a continuous tale". Bill Toge, the "forced protagonist of the novel, condemned to appear and be part of the story whenever the word

'together' or 'altogether' occurs," (Palmieri 2012) is a dreamer squirming in the shadows of the elusive love and happiness. He experiences the horror of 9/11 and the rise of social media amidst the progression of his ping-pong game like ricocheting life.

Page 4 (Figure 1) bellows "nine eleven, the time singular, which broke down illusion" (A Humument, 2012). On the lone page where the words 'nine' and 'eleven' appear as a kind of grim conjunction, Phillips has constructed a page commemorating the September 11 attacks. These grim numerals loaded with meaning remained incognito for the more than a century between the original Victorian text and Phillip's previous editions but takes on a gruesome parable in the latest edition.

The artistic canvas on the top right side of the page is a recreation of the painting traditionally attributed to the Spanish artist, Francisco de Goya that shows the giant Colossus in the centre of the canvas walking towards the left of the picture. The picture reflects the preponderance of war, rape, torture, cannibalism, and a telling commentary on the inhumaneness of man. The original painting shows the giant adopting an aggressive posture as he is holding one of his fists up at shoulder height. But Phillip's artistic rendition fuses the New York skyscape featuring the Twin Towers and the Empire State Building with the dark valley containing a crowd of people and herds of cattle fleeing in all directions which occupies the lower part of the original painting. The giant is also seen peering mortiferously at a building -reminiscent of the Big Ben or the Empire State Building- held in his fist.

The lower right of the page features a postcard of King Kong fiercely clutching the World Trade Center and proudly calling out 'I Love New York'. Kress and Van Leeuwen's studies on layout and composition of images (Reading Images, 1996) states that elements at the bottom of the page are often associated with reality, while those at the top are generally associated with the ideal. For something to be ideal means that it is presented as the idealized or generalized essence of the information and the real presents more of a subjective, selective perception

of the consequences of the event. Following this multimodal schema, the top canvas is an artistic rendition of the world under extremist siege and the lower half contradicts this invasion with the pronouncement of unity and security which is more of a 'created' consensus in the wake of uncertainties. The choice of the two giants and their extreme postures also reflect the dogmatic polarity of the two groups. The accompanying Roman numerals make a twinning palindrome and their non-Arabic symbolism is representative of the artist's espousal. Thus this page is a metaphor of cultural, artistic and eternal congruency –"classical mythology joins medieval poetry together with an early 19th century Spanish painting, a late 19th century English novel and an early 20th century American film, linking 20th century architecture to a 21st century disaster." (Phillips 2012)

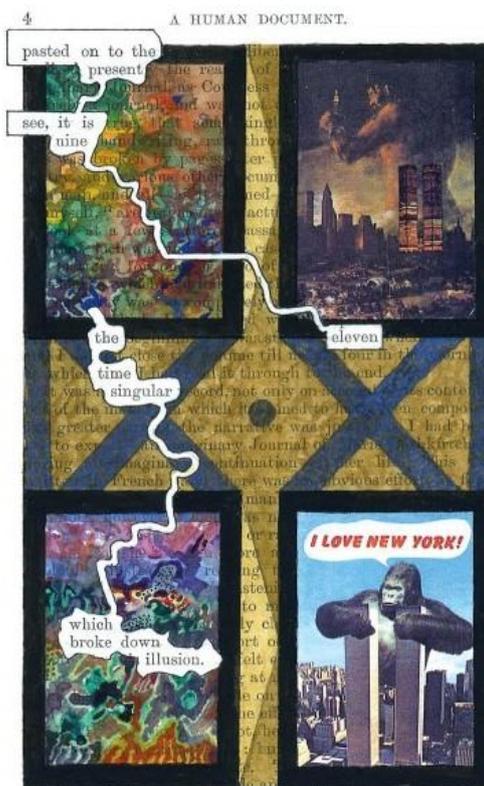


Fig 1: Page 4, A Humument 2012

Even words such as 'Bush' have taken on a politically charged agenda under the keen eye of Phillips. Page 266 has the satirical text: 'bush- remember- bush-bush- remember that bitter name- remember him-that rude-stare-at- destiny' amidst pictorial collaged images from American romance comic books,

representational of Phillip's political vexation and civic witticism.

This is the first edition of the book where it is possible for a character to check her facebook profile on an app to find pictures of Bill Toge. The changing nature of language and the seduction of technology is evidenced in phrases such as 'her book now in the app of this volume' (A Humument, 9) and 'text him now' becoming an integral part of A Humument's narrative. A Humument's incarnation as an iPhone app brought out in 2010 attests to the book's ability to move from the nineteenth century into the twentieth, and from the twentieth into digital infinity. The app has an oracle feature, like rolling the dice with random access to aleatoric pages and cryptic advice for the digital patrons. The idea of an oracular use of A Humument modeled on divination books like I Ching and the Sors Virgiliana, was envisioned by the author early on but was technologically made possible only after forty years of its inception.

A Humument is both collaboration and a collision: between language and the visual, and between Mallock and Phillips. The stately conservative Victorian prose of Mallock has been brandished with acerbic raillery. 'Hi poetic people', Phillips hollers on page 136 (A Humument 2012), against a background of avid cinema-goers wearing 3-D glasses. The eroticism repressed by A Human Document is 'exhumed' by A Humument. Mallock's delicate narrative with romantic undertones takes a graphic revelation in the altered text. The phallic symbol in page 244 extending to the margins of the page is a celebration of physical desire in total exposure to the Victorian subtlety.

A Humument is a true manifestation of its creator's musings. James Kidd reviews "Longevity has lent the project gravity. There are persistent notes of wistfulness and meditations on ageing. Phillips is past the age of seventy-five - and yearning for things, people and places past." (Kidd 2012). Page 233 calls out in lyrical stance 'The glimmering shores of yesterday receding'. (A Humument 2012). Page 259 has Mallock singing the Beatles' line 'I believe in yesterday'. A Humument is an autobiography of

sorts, a reflection on growing old and years passing by - 'memory, turning seventy, renewed, with a muse of quaint treated news'. 'At last,' the text exclaims over a portrait of Phillips in cricket whites painted over the self portrait on page 50, 'welcome! my own myself.' (A Humument 2012)

The self reflexiveness of the text extends to the author's signature disseminating visually and verbally throughout the text. Page 44 (Humument 2012) is a drawing depicting a brick wall, with the words "(Tom) WAS HERE X" scrawled across it. This declaration of identity overtly manifests a system of self preferentiality that has pervaded the text and echoes the trope of intertextuality in art and the associative cross fertilization of image and text.

The ongoing-ness of the project transforms its aura almost entirely: the work isn't an objective to be completed, but an aperture into the infinity of change. The project is not about the exhaustiveness of meaning but an artistic work in progress, a symbol of its fleetingness. The text follows Kress's argument that (2010) the resources used in communication are 'constantly remade ... in line with what I need, in response to some demand ... they are never fixed, let alone rigidly fixed.' The author deems the full variorum edition 'a dream or a posthumous project'. He might even retain the option of the leaving the still unaltered pages of the original document alone there by stalling this extant artistic work. He confesses that this would bring his artistic creativity and his eventful life to a screeching halt, as his life work and his life, for him, are one and the same.

A Humument is a work in progress and unlike science, art does not fail by disproving nor does it disappear with erasure, but remains an infinite source of enlightenment and pleasure just as this popular classic of postmodern art.

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