PICTURE PERFORMANCES

A HISTORY FROM POWER POINT TO CAVE PAINTING

BY MORGAN FITZPATRICK ANDREWS

INTRODUCTION

I have a weird job. It involves flat stuff—pictures mostly, painted or printed on cloth and cardboard. I move these pictures around, point at them and tell stories. This is picture performance.

I'm not the only one who has this job. It is, in fact, many centuries old and goes by many names in many lands. To explain the whats and whys of this weird job, I wrote the following essay as a synopsis of picture performance from the present to the past. I originally came up with the idea for this essay in 2007 for an event in Philadelphia that featured a Japanese *kamishibai* show by "action painter" Ryoga Katsuma, musicians improvising to projections of comic strips by graphic novelist Hans Rickheit, and an elaborate shadow theater tale by printmaker/puppeteer Erik Ruin—all forms of picture performance. To introduce this concept, I played the ukulele and delivered a short slide lecture (a form of picture performance familiar to most of us living in the 21st century) beginning with a current picture of Al Gore ("our president"), then going back in time and traversing the world to end—or begin—with a cave painting—the end of human pre-history. The performative lecture gave historical context to the work that these 2-D artists

were bringing to the stage, traversing the sometimes-stringent line between the visual and performing arts. It was the seed that would germinate into a longer work.

That germination happened for me in West Bengal at a festival of Forum Theater hosted by the group Jana Sanskriti. The festival was mix of Indian folk and classical theater and "forum plays" rooted in the lineage of Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed. One thing that all these performances had in common was their use of still images—not as paintings, but as human tableaus. Actions occurred, as in western theater, only punctuated by pauses for performers to configure themselves into statuesque configurations. This was familiar to me in a lot of the puppet work I'd seen in the U.S.—not the handpuppets and marionettes or Muppets that most people in the West associate with puppetry, but the "other puppetry" exemplified by the paper mâché giants of Vermont's Bread & Puppet Theater or the miniature cardboard creations of New York's Great Small Works. I realized that all of these theater forms were rooted less in the *character* (as in Shakespeare or Henson) and more in the *image*. I went on to explain this at length in a thesis entitled *Banners, Books, Boxes, Bodies: Visual Art in Acting, Action and Activism*, put together to finish a degree at Goddard College.

What follows here is the first part of that thesis, reprinted for the occasion of the Banners & Cranks Festival—a festival of picture theater—hosted by Links Hall in Chicago in the spring of 2010. This essay is inspired by and indebted to the festival's curators, Clare Dolan and Dave Buchen and their decades of dedication to the craft of *cantastoria*, and also to John Bell from Great Small Works whose approach to performative academics led me to do this work. Much of this essay's content can also be attributed to professor Victor H. Mair whose passion for Sinology accidentally led him to write his incredibly comprehensive tome, *Painting and Performance: Chinese Picture Recitation and its Indian Genesis* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988).

For the other sections of this essay—about worldless books, toy theater, and Forum Theater in India—please get in touch. Here's my address:

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THE KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Albert Arnold Gore, Jr. stands on a stage in front of an audience of college students. Behind him is a large screen on which a series of images flash. "Our atmosphere is *so thin*," he says, gesturing at a picture of the sun setting under a narrow arc of blue sky. "The problem is that this thin layer of atmosphere is being thickened by all the global warming pollution that's being put up there." He is now standing before a photograph of factory smokestacks belching out thick clouds of orange and gray. Then the screen switches to show a giant red zigzag. "This is the image that started me in my interest in this issue," and Al Gore goes on to demonstrate how this giant red zigzag represents the rising rate of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and its relationship to rising temperatures, melting glaciers, increasing water levels, stronger tropical storms, and the eventual displacement and death of thousands of species' populations, potentially including millions of human beings.

This "slideshow," as Al Gore refers to it, is perhaps the most famous on Earth, performed in front of live audiences more than 2,000 times[1] and documented in the feature film *An Inconvenient Truth*.[2] In the film Al Gore's slide presentation about global warming is intermingled with family photos, newspaper clippings and footage of a younger Al Gore back when he was a Harvard student, a congressperson, a U.S. senator and then vice president, inevitably leading up to his final go at the presidency in which he won the majority of votes but the office was awarded to another person. At the end of this footage, Gore's voiceover reminisces, "Well, that was a hard blow. But what do you do? You make the best of it. It brought into clear focus the mission I'd been pursuing for all these years, and I started giving the slideshow again."

[1] "Al Gore is back with global warming slideshow 2.0." *Los Angeles Times*. April 9, 2008. Accessed from <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/webscout/2008/04/al-gore-is-back.html>
[2] *An Inconvenient Truth*. Directed by David Guggenheim. Paramount, 2006.

Ask most people what they would do if they ran for the most powerful office on Earth and managed to come in second. Very few would be likely to say, "Naturally I'd become a traveling slide lecturer." Slideshows were maybe something your uncle inflicted on the rest of the family at holiday get-togethers, droning on in the darkened living room behind the hum of the Kodak carrousel projector from which shone garish stills of fishing trips and excursions to the remote spot of desert where the corners of four states meet. In a more institutional setting, a slideshow was something a drivers' ed instructor or sex education teacher whipped out when a motion picture film or video wasn't available on a certain topic. Maybe you sat in the back of the classroom, listening to a distorted tape recording that fed you information, interrupted by the occasional electronic "*boop*" that signaled said instructor to advance the carrousel to the next diagram of traffic patterns or reproductive systems being assaulted by sperm. This was the sort of lecture that Al Gore delivered to an unresponsive congress in the 1980s, only his environmentalist message cautioned the entire planet rather than a room full of teenagers who hoped to soon get behind the wheel and into someone else's pants without slipping into any accidents.

After eight years as vice president (and his alleged creation of the Internet), Al Gore upgraded his old presentation from a mechanical slide carrousel to a Microsoft PowerPoint file that he projected from his Macintosh laptop, and then eventually hired a design firm to soup up the slideshow even further to run on Apple's Keynote software that could incorporate video and complex animations. In performance, three things enhanced this snazzy visual package: first, Gore's heartfelt, witty presentation of the scientific evidence on climate change—he had honed his spiel to be as entertaining as it was informative; second, his status as former vice president (and, according the majority of American voters, rightful heir to the Oval Office); third, the unpopularity of the Bush administration and its policies toward the environment—as well as its policies toward just about everything else. These elements gave rise to the viability for this slideshow to be enhanced even further into a feature film that became the third most popular documentary to ever run in theaters.[3]

What Al Gore did *with* his film may not have been possible by doing a live slide presentation that would be seen by limited numbers of people. The movie's massive distribution to theaters and DVD markets, as well as being released as a book with differing special editions for adults and children, has enabled Gore's message to reach millions of people—something that would have been difficult to do through his live presentations alone. But what Gore did *in* his film was more or less the same as the slideshow. The content was equivalent and, apart from the inclusion of newly found bits of scientific evidence, the information conveyed in the previous technological incarnations of the slideshow also differed little from the more polished Keynote version. The film came from the slideshow and the slideshow came from Gore's role as the underdog, both as a congressperson and as would-be-president. And amidst all the grand ironies enmeshed in his exodus from the executive branch of government, there is another irony buried in the history of his chosen profession: By not inheriting the U.S. Presidency, Al Gore instead ended up inheriting a traditional role similar to those played

[3] This statistic is according to box office sales at the time of its release. A smattering of other documentary films have since surpassed it in terms of dollars generated at the box office. Source: *Box Office Mojo*. "Genre Charts—Documentary, 1982–present." Accessed from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=documentary.htm>

out by sex-ed teachers, driving instructors and boring uncles—the role of picture storyteller.

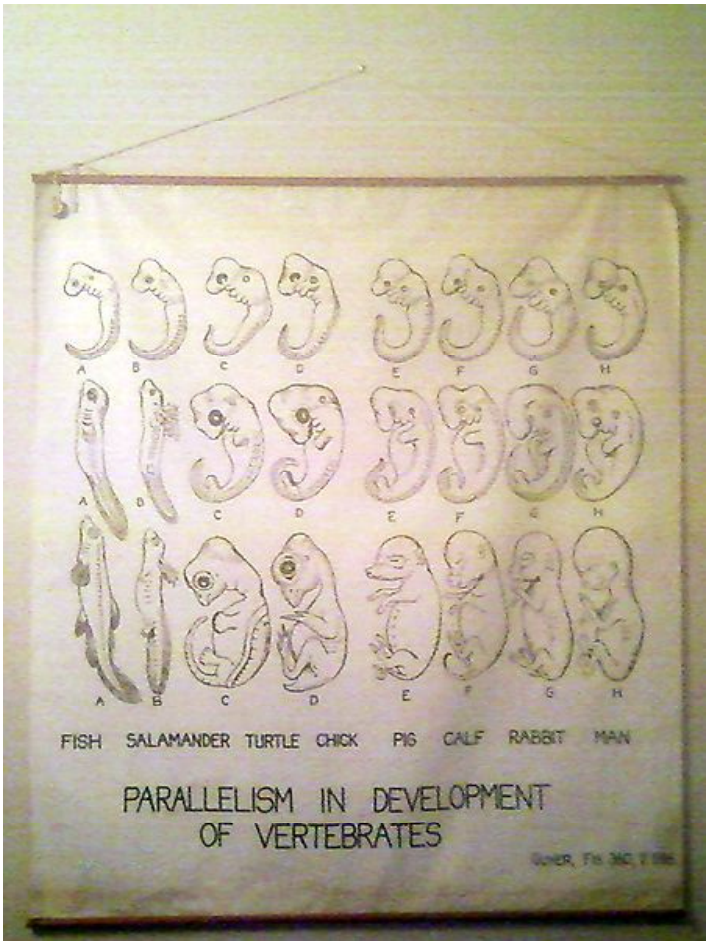
The relationship between politicians and picture storytellers is closer than one might think and it is likely that the two professions grew side-by-side[4] or, as we shall see, on opposing sides of humankind's battle to express varying versions of "truth." Just as the role of president did not come into being with the invention of television or radio, the role of picture storyteller did not come into being with the propagation of Kodak's 20th century slide projectors, or even the luminary and photographic technologies that predated them. This role, and the artform of using pictures to tell stories, dates back thousands of years.

Placards and Panoramas:

Defining Science and Making History

Prior to the advent of Keynote, PowerPoint and other forms of digital presentation software became the standard for 21st century's academic, business or social picture recitations in most of Europe and North America, the 20th century's picture presentations were under the reign of opto-mechanical devices. These instruments used a lens to concentrate a light source, which was then projected through a photo transparency and more lenses that focused and enlarged the image onto a screen. 35mm photographic positives were mounted into small paperboard frames for use in slide projectors, or printed onto 8½" × 11" acetate sheets and lain onto the illuminated square-foot-sized lens of an overhead projector (OHP). These projectors saw use in the sectors of business and education, as well as informal and casual settings, and were sometimes (and still are) used for artistic purposes, such as OHP shadow puppetry or special lighting effects.

[4] In certain cultures, such as the Mandinka of northwest Africa, storytellers bear a higher social rank than kings, for without stories that explain why the kings and their ancestors were so great, the rulers would have no legacy and therefore no power to rule. Source: Sané, Demba. "He is a Piece-of-Shit Cora Player." Talk given at the Somerville Theatre, 1992.

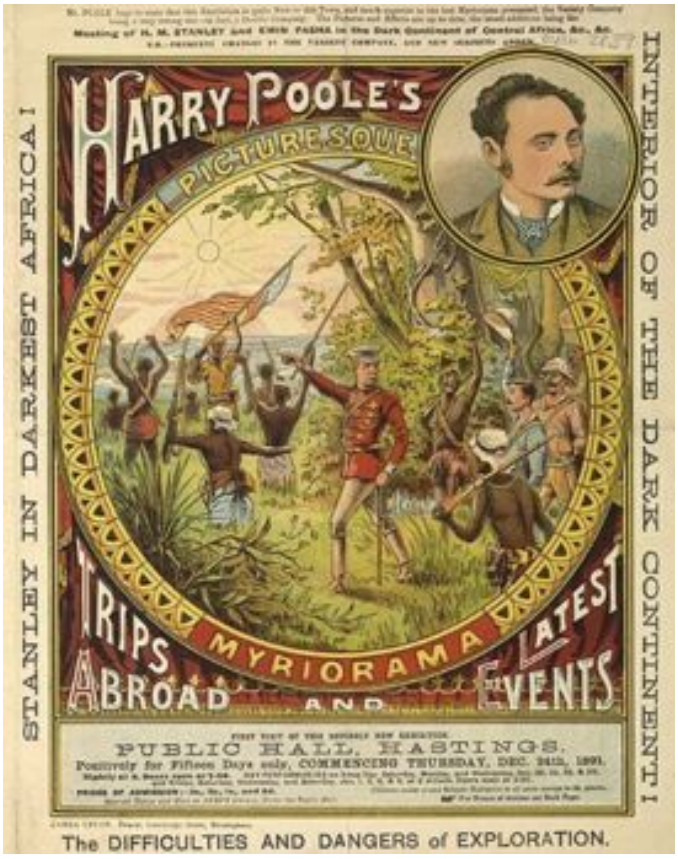


Before slide and overhead projectors were readily available in every modern classroom, educators relied on lower-tech methods of image transmission. Students in college science courses were shunted with the task of creating large diagrams and charts, the best of which would be used by their professors for years thereafter to illustrate aspects of plant or human anatomy in front of classes of other students. To demonstrate and emphasize bits of information, a lecturer could pull out one of these diagrams and point to its parts, thereby telling a particular story. In the 18th and 19th centuries this was also common practice outside of the academy proper in venues for popular science. Ordinary citizens would pay decent money to hear some expert lecture on new findings in biology or meteorology. And it was commonplace for these lecturers to use visual aids in the form of objects or placards bearing illustrations, thus laying a concrete image out for the public and lending credibility to their theories.[5]

Science wasn't the only topic covered by performing lecturers and their visual devices. Geography, travel, history and current events were also popular subjects that were frequently intertwined. Picture storytellers would often show political and geographical history in a light that catered to (or favored the position of) the audience for whom they performed. A clear example of this was the moving panorama performance found throughout Europe and the United States, and was especially commonplace in the frontier cities and towns of the American Midwest in the late 19th century.

[5] Richard Hamblyn describes accounts of this in his book *The Invention of Clouds: How an Amateur Meteorologist Forged the Language of the Skies*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

The panoramas were giant paintings measuring a couple of yards in height and hundreds of feet in length. Their canvases were spooled around two vertical rods and mounted into an elaborate proscenium frame so that only a fraction of the panoramic painting was visible to the viewer. A hand-cranked mechanism moved the painting from one side to the other, producing the effect of moving scenery within the frame, while a narrator told a story and related events associated with the panorama's imagery. One of the most famous moving panoramas was John Banvard's "three-mile" (actually only 400 yards) scrolling painting of the Mississippi River. Performed all over the U.S. and England, it took an estimated five million viewers on a virtual excursion of the mighty waterway during its lifetime.[6] Other moving panoramas showed people the splendor of Niagara Falls, Ireland, India, Africa, Tasmania or the frozen wilds of the Arctic.[7]



Though many moving panoramas gave viewers a general (albeit sensationalized) virtual experience of places that they would never travel to, many other panoramas were based on specific notable events from days gone by. Panoramas reenacted the arrival and settlement of the Pilgrims in Massachusetts, the federal procession of George Washington's newly founded government, or the coronation of King George IV in England, instilling viewers on both sides of the Atlantic with a proud sense of inclusion and even participation in their nation's history. Some panorama presentations were preceded by shorter narratives depicting

[6] Bell, John. *American Puppet Modernism: Essays on the Material World in Performance*. New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2008. p. 21.
[7] Yorkshire native George Peck returned from Tasmania with his "Panorama and Model of Hobart Town" to show the people of London and Liverpool what life was like Down Under. See: Lake, Robyn. "George Peck: c. 1810–1863." *Adventures in Cybersound*. Accessed from <http://www.acmi.net.au/AIC/PECK_BIO.html>

recent events—a precursor to the film newsreels of the 1940s and 50s that came on before the full-length movies. Panoramas even documented current events as best they could given the speed at which news traveled. A German panorama in 1812 depicted the burning of Moscow by its own citizens a mere three months after Napoleon's invasion of Russia.[8]

In the Midwestern U.S., European-American settlers were encouraged to push further westward as part of the effort to fulfill their country's ethos of Manifest Destiny. The propaganda used to spur on their colonization efforts included panorama performances of the California Gold Rush and various Indian Wars. Theater historian John Bell writes extensively about one panorama, designed and performed by John

"Minnesota Fruit," panel #26 from *The Sioux War Panorama*, depicting a land "made safe for white women and their babies." (Bell. p. 29)

[8] Naughton, Russell. "Panorama." *Adventures in Cybersound* [website]. Viewable at <http://www.acmi.net.au/AIC/PANORAMA.html>

Stevens, to boost the morale and morality of white pioneers through its rewrite of the 1862 Sioux War in the Minnesota Territory. Unlike most other moving panoramas, *The Sioux War Panorama* had scroll bars aligned horizontally so that the 222-foot canvas wound upward rather than sideways. Instead of running as one continuous stretch of landscape, Stevens depicted events in 36 separate scenes that were viewed and gestured at individually. The first of these established the authority of the American nation via portraits of the austere president Lincoln and his cabinet, all formally attired and ornately framed. This, in contrast with the Sioux whom Stevens portrayed as nearly naked and therefore barbaric in both their appearance and their actions, served to legitimize the massacre that would come later in the story, as well as the implied genocide and subjugation of all non-white people that would be necessary to expand colonial aims in the Americas. This panorama performance was so popular with audiences of Midwestern whites that Stevens made additional copies of it so that it could tour in four states at once.[9]

Though the aims of panoramas on the Sioux War and the Gold Rush are a bit more candid in their didactic propaganda toward colonial expansion, those panoramas that simply depicted far-off places had a similar imperialist agenda, propagating the notion that these places were there to be explored and exploited.[10] Regardless of its goals, the moving panorama captivated audiences with its magnitude, its mystery and the magical spell of performance that a good narrator could cast over a crowd. The proof was in the panorama—a physical object alleged to have captured all the splendor of fantastical lands through the arts of painting and storytelling. And through their propagandizing, their popular performance was a step toward the actual capturing of a land itself along with its material resources, as well as the labor and livelihood of its native people.

Another effect used in legitimizing the message of these panorama performances is the role and position of the narrator. The narrator is the only active character in the story, yet is not part of the story at all. The narrator serves more as a conduit between the image and the audience, an enlightened human being who can commune with the

[9] Bell. pp. 17-30.
[10] In other Romance languages the verb "to explore" is the same as that of "to exploit," e.g. Portuguese: *explorar*.

pictorial world. He or she speaks to these pictures and translates their truth to the spectators, who in turn accept these truths to be self evident, for the facts are right there, visible as clear images for all to witness. In the slideshow seen in *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore does this too. When he talks about the plight of polar bears in the melting Arctic Ice Cap, we are treated to a digital animation of a polar bear diligently swimming in digital Arctic waters, attempting to find a suitable chunk of digital ice to stand upon. "A new scientific study shows that for the first time they're finding polar bears that have actually drowned swimming long distances—up to 60 miles—to find the ice. And they didn't find that before." Al Gore's truth—though more inconvenient for his nation than the call to genocide proposed by his forefathers—is cemented by the 21st century equivalent to the large-as-life panorama: CGI animation.

Eventually the popularity of the spooling panorama gave way to the rise of another spooled picture medium: motion picture film. A few moving panorama troupes continued to perform in the early decades of the 20th century, but by the end of the 1920s, they had vanished from the landscape altogether.

A *dalang* performing *wayang bèbèr* ("scrolling shadows") for an audience in Bali, 1903.

Benches and Banners:

The Old-World Origins of Picture Theater

Though it popped into popularity about two centuries ago, the moving panorama was a latecomer to the game of picture performance. Similar (but smaller) forms of scrolling pictures with accompanying narration existed in Indonesia, Japan, China, India and Egypt hundreds of years before and some are still used today. Though all of these forms are related to the western panorama performance, they are more like distant cousins whose relationship we'll examine after looking at the American panorama's more immediate European antecedents.[11]

Part of the moving panorama's appeal was its mechanical nature—the simulated voyage produced by the effect of a giant moving painting. *The Sioux War Panorama* differed in that it was a series of paintings, some of which (such as the portraits of Lincoln and his cabinet) were multiple paintings within a single painting. *The Sioux War Panorama*'s grand size was designed for large audiences and added to its authority, as did the novelty of its mechanization. The fact that this pictorial narrative was hooked up to scrolling apparatus speaks to the advent of its age. Its technology could have been simpler, such as having pictures appear on the pages of a book. In order to be seen by a large audience, perhaps a giant book with pages made of painted cloth banners might have sufficed—and in fact it usually did. Such "banner shows" existed in nearly every country in mainland Europe. It is likely that among the millions who emigrated from those countries, some of them brought these banner stories with them and this method of storytelling evolved into the more polished scrolling panorama format.

Perhaps the best-known banner performance is "Die Moritat von Mackie Messer," or "The Ballad of Mack the Knife," as seen in the 1931 film adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*). The central European *moritat* (meaning "deadly deed") is a traditional form of murder ballad sung in public with pictorial accompaniment. In the opening scene of *Die Dreigroschenoper* we catch a glimpse of a woman grinding an organ while a fellow on a platform sings about the

[11] Much of this essay's information on international forms of picture theater throughout history comes from sinologist Victor H. Mair's exhaustive research collected in *Painting and Performance: Chinese Picture Recitation and its Indian Genesis.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988.

villainous Mackie Messer, likening him to a shark and speculating that he may have been associated with a host of recent horrendous crimes, including the disappearance of several wealthy men, the rape and murder of young women, and an arson that claimed the lives of seven children and an elderly person. The words are provocative in their morbid comedy of implicit gossip:

And the child bride, newly widowed
Her name is known to all of us
Raped one night as she lay sleeping
Mackie, how much was your price?

The singer removes his hat and comedically repeats the last two lines of this final verse. As he sings the *moritat*, he rolls his R's for dramatic emphasis and wields a stick at a series of paintings mounted on a stand that show someone lying dead in the street, a building on fire, or the notorious underage widow laying vulnerably in her bed, as well as the metaphorical shark that the bloodthirsty Mackie Messer is likened to. When the singer finishes one verse, he removes a painting from the stand to reveal the one behind it that provides the visual for the next verse. In the film scene, people stand transfixed and place coins on the organ grinder's box, just as they would have when watching a similar story in any market or fairground a century ago.[12]

Brecht's use of this *moritatsong* to set the tone for the dubious doings in his play harkens to the spirit of the medium. The ballad of Mackie Messer is little different from what many other German banner showpersons sang about, and Brecht's setting of a public square is typical for where these performances happened. Common German terminologies for *moritat* performances denote this: *Schildersang* (picture-song), *Marktsang* (market-song), *Strassensang* (stand-up-song) or *Bänkelsang* (bench-song), so called because the singer often stood on a chair or bench so as to be seen above the crowd.[13]

[12] *Die 3 Groscen-Oper*. [Film]. Dir. G. W. Pabst. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1931. Clip of Ernst Busch performing "Die Moritat von Mackie Messer" viewable at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgLiJ0AokT8&feature=related?>
[13] Mair. p. 123.

Puppeteer Clare Dolan revives the *Bänkelsang* tradition in her episodic *Go-Go Girl* serial in Chicago, 2001.

Bänkelsang existed in central Europe as early as the 14th century, sometimes appearing as a series of cloth paintings that were revealed one at a time as in *Die Dreigroschenoper*, and sometimes as multiple panels on a single piece of fabric. Other versions came as thin wooden boxes that opened into diptychs or triptychs with small series of relief images carved into the wood. Regardless of the specifications, the *Bänkelsänger* gestured at the images and sang the story, usually accompanied by an organ, guitar, accordion, lute or other instrument. Sometimes the *Bänkelsänger* sang and played the instrument while another person pointed to the images, sometimes (as in *Die Dreigroschenoper*) the *Bänkelsänger* was the gesturer while another played the instrument, and in other cases a singer-performer could do everything if the instrument could be played with one hand (such as a crank organ or hurdy-gurdy), leaving the other hand free for gesticulation.

Typically a *Bänkelsänger* traveled about, visiting any number of outdoor markets, public squares and fairgrounds in various villages and towns. The *Bänkelsänger's* stories were not sanctioned by any sort of authority; rather they sensationalized national headlines and the affairs of local people, making these stories into a form of entertainment that hedged the terrain between news and gossip. Like other street performers they earned their living through busking, supplemented with sales of cheaply printed broadsheets called *Neue Zeitung* (new newspaper). The broadsheets were basically take-home versions of the show replete with typeset text for the literate and pictures for the illiterate. Certain publishing houses specialized in the printing of *Neue*

Zeitung and it was common practice for *Bänkelsängers* to commission poets, jesters or teachers to write their songs for them, their main profession being the performing of their stories.[14]

Germany was far from the only place to have a bench-singing culture. Switzerland called them by various Germanic names and in French-speaking areas one was simply known as *le chanteur* (singer). France named them *le chanteur de cantiques* (singer of songs), *le chanteur en foire* (fair singer), *crieur de journeaux* (newspaper crier), *marchand de crimes* (merchant of crimes) or even *marchand de complaintes* (merchant of complaints). The Flemish called them *liedjeszanger* (song-singer), the Swedes *marknadsängere* (market singers) and in Czech country a *krámarský zpevák* (venal singer) sang a comedic *kramářská píseň* (venal song) while pointing to a board subdivided into panels. Violins, hurdy-gurdies or bagpipes accompanied Hungary's

16th century Dutch oil painting depicting a *liedjeszanger* performing a *moritat.*

[14] Mair. p. 126-27.

képmutogatás that illustrated classical love stories, educational tales, or the Hungarian Revolution of 1848. In the 18th century Russian banner epics that dealt with myths and told the stories of saints and heroes were known as *b'ilin'ii* and the people who performed them earned their living by selling "cheap pictures" called *lubochnye kartinki*.

On the other side of Europe, Spain had its *cantores de ferias* (fair singers) who performed *retablos de las maravillas* (tableaus of marvels), which inspired Miguel de Cervantes to author his comedy *El Retablo de las Maravillas* in the late 16th century. Cervantes organized his play around a fictitious picture-telling session in which two charlatans enter a village boasting of a show that does not actually exist. They tell the villagers that their *retablo de las maravillas* cannot be seen by those born out of wedlock, nor by anyone descended from Moors or Jews. Of course no one can actually see the nonexistent show, but each person pretends that they can see the *maravillas*. Meanwhile each person is convinced that that all the other villagers can see everything that the pretended *cantores* describe, the root of the villagers' collective consciousness of individual deception being the fear of admitting their new self-revelations of hidden bastard and/or Semitic status.[15] Cervantes' depiction of the villagers' deceptors is in line with the social perception of itinerant picture storytellers as being generally disreputable, often associated with "magic, swindledry, skullduggery, quackery, charlatanism, puppetry, and even acrobatics."[16]

One of the oldest and most far-reaching traditions of European traveling picture theater comes from Italy. Stemming from the ancient Greek *aoidoi* (singers or bards) who wrote and sang classical epic poems such as those attributed to Homer and Hesiod, the church deacons were singing while pointing at illustrated scrolls called *praeconium paschale* (exalted chant) by the 12th century. The practice of *cantambanco* (bench-song) was in vogue from the 15th through the 19th century, around the same time as its Germanic cousin. By the 20th century Italians were calling it *cantastoria* (singing story), the name that by which it is most widely known in the U.S. today.[17]

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[15] Cervantes, Miguel de. *El Retablo de las Maravillas*. Text in Spanish accessed from <http://www.csdl.tamu.edu/cervantes/english/ctxt/comedias/retmar1.html>. Summary in English by Alex Fuentes accessed from <http://spanport.byu.edu/classes/span439vh/Elretablo.html>.

[16] This brilliant list comes courtesy of Mair. p. 122.

[17] The American preference of the word *cantastoria* seems to have mainly been propagated by scholars of folk performance rather than folk performers.

Members of the Bread & Puppet Theater perform their *cantastoria* "The Foot" in the early 1980s.

Little is known about many of these forms because of their low status, either as art or across social strata in general. *Cantastoristi* operated outside the dictum of church or state, spreading speculative quasi-news and folkloric legends that ran counter to the imposition if ideological monopolies, in the some ways similar to how Al Gore's slideshow and eco-political agenda would later run counter to the imposed ideological monopoly of the Bush Administration. But Gore still benefited from an exalted political status and access to wealth that the average *Bänkelsänger* or *cantastorista* could not fathom. In olden Europe, picture performance was the voice of the common people, made in the common people's media of rustic art, music and speech, designed with the illiterate masses in mind. It was an artform flavored by local affairs and culture while surpassing the ever-shifting borders of nations, thus manifesting itself internationally. Likewise backlash against banner shows was similar internationally: whether called upon or not, a constable would see to it that such gatherings around the spreading of heresy and hearsay were stopped and the perpetrators arrested. It is for this reason that the medium was so portable—the *cantastorista* and the *Bänkelsänger* could simply roll up their pictures and run away.

Just east of Europe, some picture showmen found other ways of dealing with the authorities. The typical 13-foot wide Persian *parda* (meaning sheet or curtain) hung from the external wall of some building in a busy street or bazaar. One or two bearded folk-

priests, called *parda-dar*, stood dressed in fezzes and purple robes, pointing a cane at their colorful illustrations. They sang and wept along to the story of the great hero, painted large in the center and surrounded by smaller images from his life and exploits. In the corner of the *parda* there was always a depiction of a sheriff, so in case an actual policeman did arrive on the scene the *parda-dar* could flatter him indirectly by way of the image. This tactic worked well enough to make it a standard feature in all *parda*, but unfortunately the *parda-dar* didn't have the foresight to paint an ayatollah on their banners, for the *parda* fell silent under the repressive fist of Iran's Islamic Revolution.

A *parda-dar* performing *parda* on the street in Iran.

Wandering Picture Showpersons:

Common Traits and Roots

The cultural manifestations of picture storytelling are remarkably similar throughout the world characterized by a number of distinguishing traits:

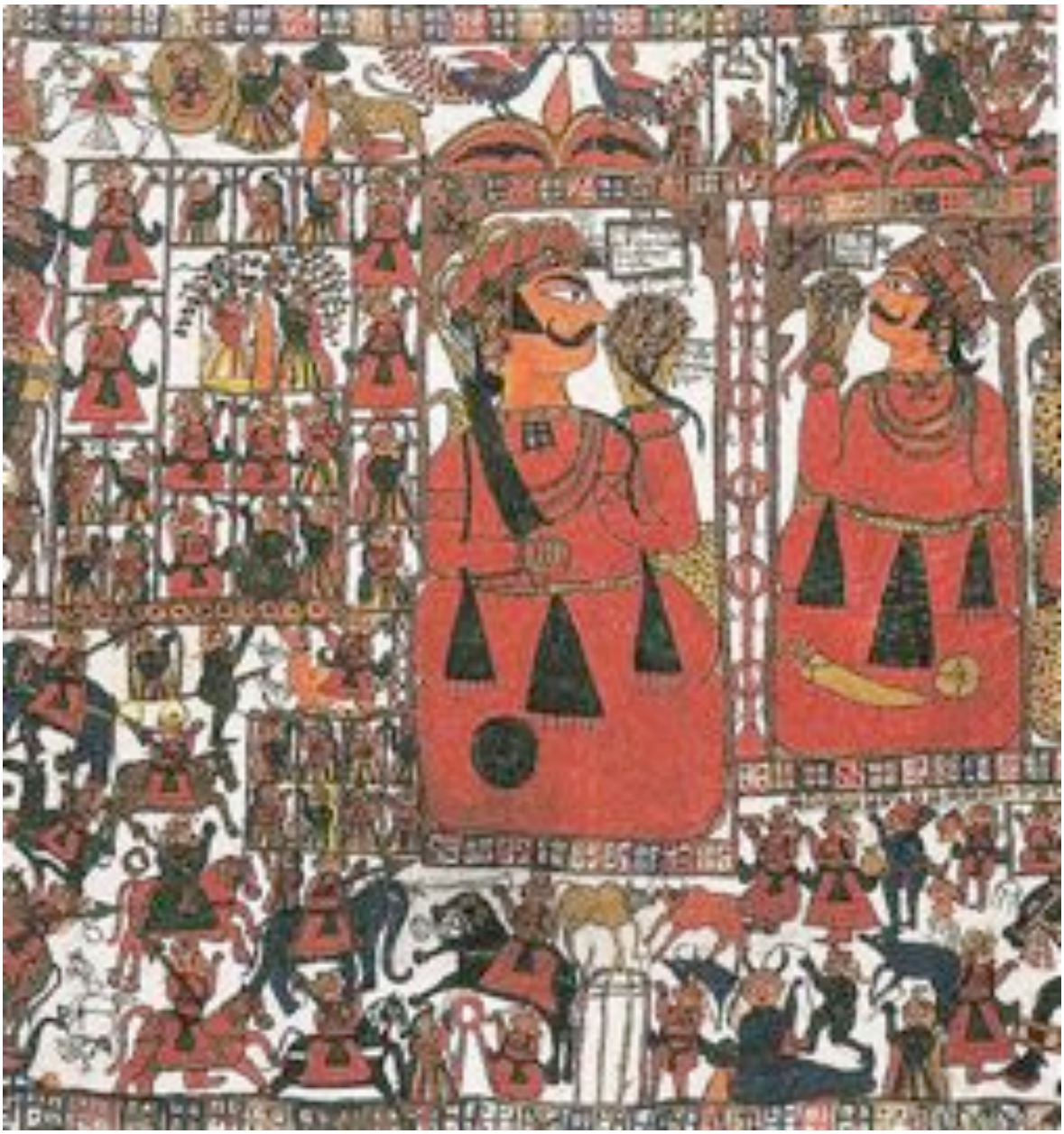
1. **THE IMAGE**: Whether painted or drawn onto cloth or paper, or rendered on a wooden surface as a flat illustration or raised relief, sometimes the image appearing chopped up into panels, other times as a continuous painting.
2. **THE SUNG STORY**: Intoned in rhyme with an often affected and emphatic speech style.
3. **THE DIRECTING OF ATTENTION TO THE IMAGE**: Usually with some sort of pointer, sometimes with the hand alone.
4. **ITINERANCY**: Whether the storyteller tours from door to door, square to square, market to market, village to village, or state to state, this is a traveling profession.
5. **THE STATUS OF THE STORYTELLER:** Picture storytellers usually rank low on the social scale or manage to linger outside of hierarchal systems entirely, much like the rank of the fool in a pack of playing cards.[18]
6. **THE MESSAGE:** Like the visual and musical aspects of the art, tales are often one of a folkloric nature, timeless and disregarding whatever regimes and religions may be in power at the moment.
7. **REPRESSION**: All of the above adds up to storytellers and stories being seen as unsavory with regards to the law, therefore drawing the attention of authorities who wish to stamp them out or at least harass them a little.

There are other elements shared by many picture storytelling traditions, such as accompaniment by a musical instrument, availability of take-home mementoes and

[18] cf: The role of the Joker in Theater of the Oppressed, discussed in Chapter 4 of this study.

manuscripts, the occasional inclusion of dolls or other movable figures, and the artform's association with puppetry. The ubiquity of all these factors and the extreme similarity in performative aesthetics point to an obvious assumption: that all these forms of picture theater share a common ancestor.

Scholars have traced the origins of most forms of picture theater to India. Around the 6th century, low-level Brahmins would paint pictures of deities and heroes and sing songs about their lives and deeds. Over time these paintings became more complex,



incorporating multiple images that reflected the various undergoings in the story, and the

Rajasthani *paṛ* painting with the large hero at the center and small scenes from his life depicted all around.

storyteller would direct attention to each image by illuminating with a lamp or pointing to it with a wand. These forms are still present in modern-day India under a variety of names depending on the region. In the northwestern Indian states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh it is known as *paṛ* or *paṛa*, meaning "long cloth" (from which the Iranian *parda* derives its name and lineage), and the storyteller is called *paṛ bhopo*. At harvest time in the village, the *bhopo* works the harvest as does any other farmer and then takes up his performative duties during festival season. The *bhopo* and his wife (called *bhopī*) travel around the countryside and perform for village crowds, sometimes accompanied by a larger troupe of performers who add additional singing voices, percussion and sometimes serve as audience plants who interact with the *bhopo* in ways necessary to facilitate the performance as a conversation between audience and *bhopo*. The *bhopo* sings the stories and literally has hundreds of songs at his disposal. He accompanies himself on a fiddle or stick zither while pointing at the wide *paṛ* with a pointer made from peacock feathers (presumably because the feathers do not mar the paint on the *paṛ*). The *bhopī* also sings, but her main function is to hold an oil lamp that illuminates the portions of the *paṛ* referred to by the *bhopo*. In civic life, the *bhopo* also serves as a sort of folk-priest, maintaining a small shrine near his home and performing divinations, healings and other functions for his community.[19]

Another Indian form of picture theater that spans all the way from the northwest where *paṛ* has its stronghold, to as far southeast as Andhra Pradesh, is the similarly named *paṭ*, also called *paṭa*, *paṭacitra*, or the Bengali *citrkār*. The *paṭ* appears as a long rolled painting about two feet wide and up to 50 feet long, divided into panels that depict images from popular mythology, the lives of saints, heroes, noteworthy women and prostitutes. Many *paṭ* stories also focus on themes of social injustice, inevitably ending with the wrongdoer plummeting into the fires of Hell. The *paṭ* is sung by a *paṭuā* who performs at a crossroads or village square, or even on the doorsteps of strangers' homes, hand-rolling the scroll to reveal each scene as he sings. Sometimes the *paṭuā* supplements a *paṭ* performance with hand-painted figurines of characters in the story, and he might sell cheap takeaway editions of his scrolls. Wear and tear leads to a *paṭ* scroll needing to

[19] This also holds true for the integration of other sorts of artists, musicians and actors in most Indian villages. See the chapter on Jana Sanskriti, later in this thesis.

be recopied onto new scrolls. Unlike the *paṛ bhopo* who typically hires someone else to furnish his visual material, the *paṭuā* paints these scrolls himself. Effort is made to keep the stories the same over many generations, though through the recopying of scrolls and handing down of songs, small mutagenic cultural alterations are bound to seep in.

The itinerant nature of Indian picture theater encouraged its propagation into the rest of Asia bolstered on by two factors: The first was the spreading of religious doctrine sponsored by many of the stories, leading to eastern Asia becoming a bastion for Buddhism, as well as the otherwise uncanny fashion for Hindu folktales present in what is now the predominantly Muslim nation of Indonesia. The second factor was that it was normal to enlist a *bhopo*, or other such folk performer, as a spy—their status as entertainers enabled them to cross borders more easily and even enter into palaces and other high security areas where they were enlisted to perform their function. It is possible that the practice of hiring a picture showperson on as a spy became, at certain times, so commonplace that it added to the amassed mistrust of their profession.[20]

Nearly 2,000 years ago stories from the Vedic Sanskrit epics of the Mahabharata and Ramayana traveled to the Malaysian/Indonesian archipelago where they formed the basis for the *wayang* lineage of theatrical traditions. *Wayang* is the word used for any type of theater, and literally means "shadow," the implication being that theatrical performance is shadow of reality. Some forms of *wayang* literally are shadows, such as *wayang kulit*, or "leather shadows," that feature intricate shadow puppets tooled from animal hide. *Wayang tal* ("leaf shadows") and *wayang klitik* ("little shadows") are similar, but with shadow puppets fashioned from palm leaves or wood. Other forms, such as *wayang golek* and *wayang topeng*, use three-dimensional rod puppets or masked dancers, and *wayang wong* or *wayang otang* ("human shadows") present people dancing and acting without the use of masks or puppets at all, yet still earn the customary *wayang* label, for the theatrical world is essentially a shadow of the non-theatrical world. And naturally there are types of *wayang* that fall into the pan-global pantheon of picture theater.

The earliest probable ancestors of Indonesia's famed animated shadow puppets are *wayang karèbèt* ("fluttering shadows," a form of picture theater painted on the leaves

[20] Mair. p. 27.

of a book) and *wayang bèber* ("unfolding" or "unrolled shadows"). Akin to the western moving panorama, a single *wayang bèber* story is painted on several scrolls measuring about twenty inches high and around three yards in length. These stories are often derived from the semi-historical canon of texts, *The Panji Romances*, set in 12th and 13th century Bali and Java. The *wayang* performer, called the *dalang*, sits surrounded by the audience and unrolls each scroll while speaking or singing the story set to the music of a *rĕbab* violin. The thin scrolls are illuminated so that the images are visible from either side. Like the *bhopo*, the *dalang* in all forms of *wayang* plays a shamanistic role in a socio-religious ritual of communion with the shadow world of ancient folklore and legends. But another form of scrolling *wayang* that has no *dalang* on site—called *wayang gambar hīdup* ("living picture shadows") or *wayang gelap* ("dark shadows")—largely rnded up replacing *wayang bèber* in the last century. In the West we call it cinema.[21]

The influence of Indian picture theater also spread northward and eastward with Buddhism. In Tibet it was called *ma-ṇi-pa* and involved a lot of mimery on the part of the storyteller. In central northern China and Mongolia, big banners called *pao-chüan* were hung up on outdoor walls for New Year's festivals and temple fairs and a reciter stood on a table with a pointer in one hand and a precious scroll of text in the other. *Pien*, a Chinese Buddhist term meaning "change" or "transformation" or "strange happening" evolved as a form of literature through picture scrolls that bore great similarity to their *paṭ* ancestors. All of these forms of picture theater inhabited a niche somewhere between the sacred and the secular. The messages were of a religious nature, but the bearers of these messages were more or less ordinary peasants who were generally regarded as beggars with a shtick. These picture stories were a common sight throughout China until the communist takeover of 1949 and the subsequent Cultural Revolution that mandated that such scrolls and paintings be destroyed. Even now many people are afraid to perform them.[22]

Chinese *pien* scrolls made their way through the Korean peninsula and over to Japan. Where they became known as *etoki* or "explanation by pictures." *Etoki* first appeared in Japanese temples around the 10th century as painted hanging scrolls that a

[21] Mair. p. 58-59.
[22] Mair. p. 10.

low level priest, called the *etoki hōshi*, pointed at with a feather-tipped stick. As in the Chinese and Indian antecedents, these religious *etoki* demonstrated pictures of hell and told of temples and the deities worshipped therein. Non-ordained nuns called *bikuni* also performed, as did wandering low-ranking samurai. There were also *uta bikuni* ("singing nuns") whose work as *etoki* performers allowed them to travel freely (something that women were not permitted to do) and even engage in additional other means of making money. The frequent repute of *uta bikuni* as prostitutes probably added to the stigma (as well as the lustful enthusiasm for) the *etoki* profession.

Over the years *etoki* ran the gamut of picture theater styles: some scrolls hung vertically, others horizontally; some were chopped into panels, others not; some were compacted into booklets, other expanded to include tableaus of dolls. Out of *etoki* emerged the 20th century practice of *kamishibai* or "paper drama" in which the performer slid foot-high cards in and out of a proscenium frame housed within a miniature three-doored cabinet. Starting in the 1920s "Uncle Kamishibai" became a familiar sight on the Japanese street, bicycling about the town and selling sweets to children. His sales were followed by a series of three short stories told from the box on the back rack of his bicycle, each typically made up of about ten cards. Uncle Kamishibai permitted the children who'd bought candy from him to stand in front and he often left his third tale unfinished so that the kids would be prompted be present (with coins in hand) for his next

A portion (about 10%) of an *etoki* scroll. Half the area shown would have been visible at one time. Images on the right precede those on the left in the story.

visit. But around the same time picture theater was disappearing in China under the tyranny of a new regime, it was also disappearing in Japan, but at the hands of an entirely different sort of tyranny. In 1950 there were an estimated 23,000 *kamishibai* performers in Japan with 6,000 in Tokyo alone, until another box that told stories with pictures knocked them into obsolescence: television.

Ultimately these forms of picture storytelling did not disappear entirely from the cultures from whence they once flourished; many of them simply evolved into other forms of media. One major factor that made the role of public picture storytelling obsolete is that a greater portion of the world became literate. Accessibility to printing and the availability of books made it possible for people to hold their own picture shows in their own hands, and parents throughout the world went on to become picture showpersons in their own right, reciting illustrated tales from storybooks for their children at bedtime. Similarly, Japan's *etoki* evolved into another literary tradition that was to become immensely popular in Asia and eventually catch on in Europe and even the United States: *manga*, known in English as comic books.

"Uncle Kamishibai" with his theater and sweets cabinet on the back of his bicycle.

From Cave to Classroom:

Modern Methods of Outmoded Forms

Puppeteer Beth Nixon performs a *cantastoria* about symbiotic relationships between species as a metaphor for mutual aid among human beings.

Admittedly, the genre of picture theater is a bit obscure. It was at various times and in various places quite common, just as its descendents (picture storybooks, comics, PowerPoint presentations, etc.) are in widespread and familiar use today. Regardless, there are still people preserving and performing various types of picture theater as it was performed in centuries past. In 2008 a festival of "krankies" (colloquial name given to panorama performance) was held in Montpelier, Vermont, and the planning of a *cantastoria* festival is underway for three weeks of performances in Chicago in the spring of 2010. In the hyper-interactive information glut of the 21st century it is easier for people to know about even the most esoteric of pastimes and we are more likely than ever to revive an outmoded custom and even create an artistic cult around it.

Lindsy McCaw and a kranky featured at 2008's Kranky Festival in Montpelier, Vermont.

This small resurgence in picture performance is due in part to its propagation by Vermont's Bread & Puppet Theater, a group that has incorporated thousands of performers in its nearly 50 year history. Bread & Puppet founder Peter Schumann first made scrolling kranky performances with Puerto Rican *independistas* in New York City in the 1960s and executed them on the street on top of metal trashcans. Schumann has painted hundreds of radically political and metaphysical *cantastorias*, sometimes making more than 30 in a single weekend. His images are rough—rustic blockprint figures or simple icons brushed on with black housepaint and filled in with other colors (or not) that dance upon rectangles of cloth, paper or cardboard. The accompanying text is equally as basic and abrupt, with a logic all its own, usually delivered by a single central narrator whose flanked by a chorus of other actors that punctuate the narration with songs, shouts, claps, whistles, dances and other choreographed actions. Bread & Puppet's *cantastoria* choruses are incorporated into puppet plays, pageants and street demonstrations all over the world, and some are reprinted as booklets with limited runs in a tradition not unlike

the *Neue Zeitung* of yore. This is no coincidence: born in Germany in the 1930s, Peter Schumann often saw *Bänkelsang* at the fairground of his youth until the Nazis put a stop to it. Part of Bread & Puppet's mission has been to revive it and the other folkloric and avant-garde arts that were all but wiped out by fascism.[23]

Whereas Bread & Puppet relies on a minimalism of images and words, another New England-based art movement thrives on minutiae and intense detail in its own approach to picture recitation. The Beehive Collective began making "portable murals" in 2000. These incredibly detailed pen-and-ink drawings appear as banners that, through the advent of digital printing, can be sized to fit the wall of an ordinary classroom or big enough to mask the entire façade of three-story building. The take-home editions of these murals are six-foot posters whose intricate codices of insects, vertebrates and mechanical contraptions explain the complex topics of biotechnology, international trade agreements, or paramilitary wars that perpetuate systems of colonialism in Latin America.

Initially the Bees, as they call themselves, blew square-inch segments of their posters up to 1,000 times their original size and made a giant "flip book" of flippable banners that took audiences on a tour of the multilayered allegory of their elaborate posters. These picture presentations are even less scripted than the most improvisational picture storytelling traditions of yore, for they incorporate a popular education model by inviting the audience to help tell the story based on interpretation of the images and individual experience with the subject at hand. "What is this ant doing? What do you think that represents?" In this way the information amasses into a collective narrative, and the story grows new layers and gradually

[23] Andrews, Morgan. "When Magic Confronts Authority: The Rise of Protest Puppetry in North America." Appearing in *Realizing the Impossible: Art Against Authority*. San Francisco: AK Press, 2007. p. 185.

changes over time, though the image may remain the same.[24] The Bees have toured these presentations all over the Americas and put posters onto the walls and into the hands of thousands of people (including a rather befuddled Fidel Castro). Though initially handmade, the Beehive, like Al Gore and so many others, have since caved in to the purported convenience of picture presentation software and the portability of the laptop.

Previous page: The Beehive Collective's *Plan Colombia* poster (2002) with detail pictured here.

[24] Though outside input sometimes leads to changes in the image. The Beehive's 2002 *Plan Colombia* poster underwent several revisions for its 2003 printing, while the 2004 design for their *Plan Puebla Panama* poster has undergone so many alterations through collective visioning in its formative stages that five years later the bees are only beginning to add ink to the drawing.

While so many have sunk into the ease of the digital age, there are many who still yearn for preciousness in the picture as an actual object. Despite the cathode ray assassination of Uncle Kamishibai and his bicycle, *kamishibai* itself still survives in Japan primarily as a classroom teaching tool, and has even cropped up in elementary schools and libraries around North America.[25]

At the other end of time's spectrum, it seems impossible to have a picture and *not* tell a theatricized story about it. Imagine a painter depicting a bison hunt on the wall of a cave some 15,000 years ago—Is it likely that this artist finished this work and walked away? Or was it something that people gathered around, pointed at and told stories about night after night, year after year, by the light of many fires?[26]

The late theater theorist and pedagogical practitioner Augusto Boal wrote about the early cave painting in terms of theatricality:

> When a man hunts a bison he sees himself in the act of hunting; which is why he can paint a picture of the hunter—himself—hunting the bison. He can invent painting because he has invented theatre: he has seen himself in the act of seeing. An actor, acting, taking action, he has learnt to be his own spectator.[27]

Boal proposes that the aesthetic space of theater is an "imaginary mirror" in which one (a human being) can see oneself, as well as an imagined self in the act of doing something else, plus all the other things in the situation that are not the self. In the instance of the cave painting, a man sees himself in the cave, imagines himself outside that cave hunting the bison, and also imagines the bison and the way that the bison behaves. He can recreate that which is not there by painting it on the wall of the cave, and also by reenacting it in the cave, becoming himself as the hunter with spear in hand, becoming the bison and pantomiming the movement of hooves and horns, all the while knowing that he is neither of these things but a man reenacting events by the light of a fire in a cave. To his audience his ability to recreate these things in such vivid detail surely

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[25] This type of *kamishibai* tutorial can be seen in Isao Takahata's popular *anime* film *Pompoko* (Toho, 1994), and the website kamishibai.com is a resource for classroom *kamishibai*.

[26] Noted puppeteer and CalArts professor Janie Geiser supports this theory in an interview for Los Angeles Public Television: Wills, Holly. "Auotmata's Cantastoria." KCET [website]. Accessed from <http://kcet.org/local/blogs/blur_sharpen/2008/12/automatas-cantastoria.html>

[27] Boal, Augusto. *The Rainbow of Desire: the Boal method of theatre and therapy*. London: Routledge, 1995. p. 13.

endeared him to his community, even exalted him to the status of shaman or folk-priest as has occurred with other picture performers in numerous cultures throughout the world.

Because traditions of storytelling were initially oral and pictorial, the keepers and conveyers of such stories were given special status. Over time, and with the scaling up of civilization, certain versions of stories became cemented into doctrine and those wanting to mandate that doctrine took steps to remove their competitors. Hence, fundamentalist Islam banned musical instruments and representational art, dictating that the only music should be devotional song and the only art should be devotional Arabic script. When the Third Reich rose to power in city after city in Germany, among the first to be evicted were the Modernist architects, designers and artists because their artistic and architectural visions led to a different story than that concocted by Hitler.[28] This was followed by a conversion of puppeteers and *Bänkelsängers* to spread messages that fell in line with Arayan values, but more often the Nazis destroyed the art and persecuted the artists who


Cave painting, Lascaux, France, 15,000 to 10,000 B.C.

[28] This is discussed more in Chapter 4 of this study. Also see the film *Architecture of Doom*. Dir. Peter Cohen. First Run Features, 1989.

made it.[29] And in the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution of Mao's Chinese Republic, *pao-chüan*, *pien* and all the other ancient folk arts contradicted the mandate espoused in his Little Red Book, so were summarily destroyed and their practitioners punished. That these forms of storytelling—and the arts incorporated in them—were so frowned upon and suppressed by regimes throughout the world only speaks to their power and potential to threaten the ideological stranglehold imposed by the status quo.[30]

And what of the image? Couldn't the storyteller simply be an actor alone, not needing to rely on the complexities of objects to convey a message or tell a tale? Of course, the actor in the cave could just play out the parts of hunter and bison without the advent of any two-dimensional visual aids, relying solely on the "imaginary mirror" of

A Bread & Puppet *cantastoria* with volunteer chorus.

[29] For an account of the Nazis' use of puppetry see Hanne Tierney's "Puppetry in the Third Reich" in *Puppetry International,* Issue No. 9: *Propaganda!* Spring/Summer 2001. For an account of the Nazi repression of puppeteers, see Ronnie Burkett's Keynote Address to the Puppeteers of America 2007 National Festival, reprinted as, "On Puppetry Organizations and Whether We Even Need Them" in *The Puppetry Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 4. p. 17-23.

[30] Compare this to my own firsthand account of repression and persecution of puppeteers as recorded in *Realizing the Impossible*, p. 181-82, 203-05.

theater to express an idea. But the image makes the mirror a little less imaginary. It still requires the use of imagination on the part of the viewer—to put the image and its symbols together with the story—but the image opens a door into a potential reality. The picture performer is the gatekeeper to the mirror of reality presented in the image, like the Indonesian *dalang* who serves as an interface between the two worlds of light (reality) and shadow (fiction).

A story can be told and its words can ring in a listener's ears, but an image dances before one's eyes long after a person has stopped looking at it. In performance, the image is also an object that people can rally around. The market-goers might not stand and listen to a full *moritat* without the banner pictures to look at, the children might not linger to hear the sweet-seller's stories without having a little picture box to peer into, and attendees at a lecture—whether about science or auto safety or the tentacles of corporate globalization—might glaze over in a fog of disinterest or misunderstanding in lieu of a slideshow, be it on cards, posters or digital projections.

I can tell you a story with words alone and convince you of its weight, but are likely to believe me on such flimsy evidence? Do you believe that the polar ice caps are melting? That Mackie Messer might have killed several people? That a subculture of wandering storytellers employed songs and pictures the whole world over to tell their tales? True, they are just pictures, not events witnessed by your very own eyes, but they allow space for people to draw their own conclusions, to read meanings into things and make some decisions for themselves. In seeing a picture performance we are able to take in what we hear and what we see and check these two sensory sources against one another, even if both of these sources come from the same presenter. At the same time their author suggests and relates a version of events and the picture performance is, to some degree, a zone of conversation. That degree of conversation is greater is some instances, such as the back-and-forth interaction in a *paṛ* performance, or the pedagogy of a Beehive Poster Presentation.

I once helped two friends to make a *cantastoria* that was performed with the entire audience acting as the chorus. I directed people to flip the banners, to say key phrases and make noises on instruments, to lean in and listen to a leaf, a potato, and finally a dollar bill that was destroyed before their very eyes. In this instance they entered

into a magical world like the villagers in Cervantes' charade. How they perceived its motives and whether or not they agreed with its message was entirely up to them—like passengers on a roller coater: some might have fun, while others get scared or bored or sick. We each have different experiences even though we all went on the same ride.

There are other methods by which picture performers convey their messages with images. Some work on a small scale suited for an audience of one rather than a crowd. Some also incorporate the use of three-dimensional objects to create images or break the flat painted image up into many moving parts. I discuss these forms and their relationships to one another in the rest of the thesis of which this essay is a part. Presently all of these forms have been usurped by wave after wave of technological advances in communication via the internet. In the past decade so many have arisen and then fallen into obsolescence in favor of something more streamlined that one can scarcely keep up. But when the e-dust settles—if it ever does—there will still be storytellers, pointing at pictures and telling their tales.

A *cantastoria* workshop performance in Korea.