

A Reflective Journal through Spread Reading

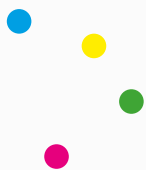
This reflective journal serves as a repository for the diverse and entangled experiments through graphic communication design I've undertaken so far. Through the thought-provoking lens of Ursula K. Le Guin's 1986 essay, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," my writing draws upon and frequently references the metaphors she presents. These metaphors, detailed below, serve as guiding principles for the exploration of analysis and reflection of my practices:

A carrier-bag narrative: a narrative, most likely non-linear, that focuses on collecting and sharing experiences, relationships, knowledge and insights, which emphasises cooperation, process, and interconnection rather than conflict, conquest or the pursuit of definitive solutions.

A container: a metaphorical bag or vessel that holds and carries the contents of a story. In this journal, a container is also perceived as a tangible form that facilitates the gathering and sharing of experiences, insights, and relationships within the narrative.

"The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" will serve as touchstones for the analysis and interpretation of my work, along with the many other creative references I've drawn upon. By reading the "spreads" randomly composed, I look forward to uncovering previously unnoticed connections among them, with one enquiry on the back of my head: How do images and text caption each other, and how they encapsulate personal, collective, and shared narratives?

(Click a dot to get started)



**What as container?
How does it shape the
relationship between the
elements held?**



Heroes are powerful. Before you know it, the men and women in the wild-oat patch and their kids and the thoughts and the songs of the singers are all part of it, have all been pressed into service in the tale of the Hero. But it isn't their story. It's his.

**If change the form of the
'container', how does it
reforme the understanding
of the image?**

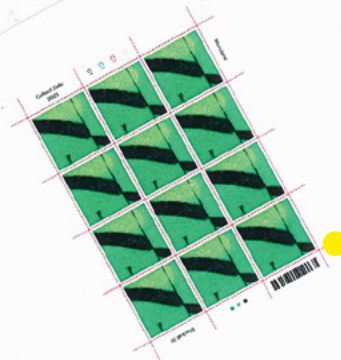
Or any other
context



"Not just the bottle of gin or wine, but bottle in its older sense of container in general, a thing that holds something else."
"...A leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container. A holder. A recipient."

"If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it's useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a net woven of your rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair..." and then later it or share take it out and eat it or wear it or store it up for winter, in a solid container... if to do that is human, it's not what it takes, then it's not a container, it's just a container after all."

"If, however, one avoids the linear, progressive, Time's (killing) arrow mode of the Techno-Heroic, and redefines technology and science as primarily cultural carrier bag rather than weapon of domination, not pleasant side effect is that science fiction can be seen as a far less rigid, narrow field, not necessarily Promethean or apocalyptic, but a mythological genre than a..."



**How can it be divided into
smaller sub-systems?
How do they differentiate
from, yet construct the
narrative of the whole?**



David
Company

**How do texts affect how
we read the image?**





“If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it’s useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, ...and then later on you take it out and eat it or share it or store it up for winter in a solid container or put it in the medicine bundle...if to do that is human, if that’s what it takes, then I am a human being after all. Fully, freely, gladly, for the first time.”

Ursula Le Guin’s metaphor highlights the diversity of containers we utilize — bags, baskets, and more — each unique in name and material. The shape of these containers influences how we later use what’s inside them. I envision a handful of rice in a pocket as a snack for later, a tightly tied sack as a winter food reserve, and a delicate earthenware jar as a gift for the neighbors.

This interplay between content and container parallels how graphic designers, like us, manipulate visuals to guide audience interpretation of images.

Consider typography, for example. A font is a fusion of image and message, a series of symbols imbued with their own meanings. When type designers craft a font, the aim is in many cases to visually align the text’s message. A visual caption of the message.

In a similar vein, the text can lend meaning to its visual form, particularly when that form has a source or connection to something else. In this case, the text is captioning the visual form of a typography.

Take this case: the polystichum fern, no bigger than a handspan, unfurls its petite fronds in a feathery pattern along its stem. This is what Anna Mills perceived, or what I believe she perceived. She transformed this visual into an ampersand ‘&’, capturing her interpretation of the plant. Maybe she sought to encapsulate the leaf’s shape or the emotions it evoked.

However, regardless of her initial aim, the fronds’ curling and the growth action became synonymous with “&”, representing “and, plus, also”, at least for those who view the symbol similarly. Not as “no, stop” or “Oregon”. Through this, she conveyed her personal narrative of inclusion found in the polystichum’s form.

“Heroes are powerful. Before you know it, the men and women in the wild-oat patch and their kids and the skills of the makers and the thoughts of the thoughtful and the songs of the singers are all part of it, have all been pressed into service in the tale of the Hero. But it isn’t their story. It’s his.”

‘Their’ story—the bits and pieces that sculpt the world of the story, the seemingly insignificant fragments and nuances that are often overlooked. To uncover ‘their’ story, we might begin by deconstructing the hero’s narrative, a method I explored in my crop-montage experiment with the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

The initial objective of the experiment was to collect cultural symbols from the film and use them to reshape the narrative. However, the final product can also be interpreted as a dismantling of the hero’s tale and a reconstruction of ‘their’ story. The cropping process focuses on collecting recurring symbols: tea cups and gos, hydrangeas and bamboo. Each of these symbols has profound symbolic meanings within Chinese culture. Moreover, in film, they serve to enrich the background and subtly illuminate the relationships and destinies of the characters, all in service of the hero’s story. When these extracted elements are laid out on a map, the spotlight shifts from the protagonists to these items and objects, with the hero’s story acting as a connecting thread. The narrative remains, but to truly grasp its essence, one must delve into the significance of these symbols. What is the implication of a Go set positioned behind two tea cups? Why do these two individuals wear distinctly different headgear?

Moreover, this approach disrupts the temporal dimension of the film, facilitating a narrative that unfolds concurrently on a single plane, without a predetermined sequence. This yields a distinct viewing experience. A similar, though more intricate, narrative structure can be found in Hieronymus Bosch’s oil painting, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. This grandiose triptych is richly detailed, inviting viewers to forgo the search for a clear hero or linear storyline, and instead immerse themselves in each minute detail to decode the story woven within the canvas.

Intriguingly, I discovered another version of this triptych, but within a different container: a jigsaw puzzle. This format ingeniously shapes the way we engage, or better engage with the image. Le Guin argued in her essay: “I said it was hard to make a gripping tale of how we wrested the wild oats from their husks, I didn’t say it was impossible.” A narrative devoid of a hero’s journey may feel less captivating or even directionless—where does one even begin? The jigsaw puzzle version of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* ingeniously provides the audience with a mechanism as a tangible incentive to inspect each nuance of the painting; after all, the objective is to piece the puzzle together, right?

Similarly, my crop-montage experiment sought to provide the audience with a compelling reason to delve into the image: to extract a narrative from the entire map with a frame and subsequently interpret it. While the execution may have been a bit rough around the edges, its underlying intention resonates with that of the jigsaw puzzle. It could, in fact, be deemed a crucial consideration in the endeavour to craft a carrier-bag narrative, one that incorporates an engaging and relatable mechanism to motivate the audience to willingly invest time and effort in unfolding the tale piece by piece.

NEW MOON



TED KOOSER

NEW MOON

How much it must bear on its back,
a great ball of blue shadow,
yet somehow it shines, keeps up
an appearance. For hours tonight,
I walked beneath it, learning
I want to be better at carrying sorrow.
If my face is a mask, formed over
the shadows that fill me,
may I smile on the world like the moon.



New Moon

CHENGLIANG HONG SHIYUAN



NEW MOON

NEW MOON (Heb. with Aviv, Rosh Hashanah's
beginning of the month, the first day of
celebration on a par with the observance of
the festival, declaring "Also in the day of your
gladness, and in your appointed seasons, and
in your new moons, ye shall blow with the trumpets over your burnt-
offerings..." (Lev. 10:10). A special Mussaf sacrifice was ordered for the day.



Blossfeldt Inspired Ampersands

01



Blossfeldt Inspired Ampersands

04



Blossfeldt Inspired Ampersands

02



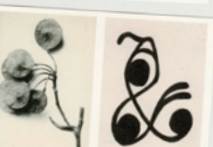
Blossfeldt Inspired Ampersands

05



Blossfeldt Inspired Ampersands

03



Blossfeldt Inspired Ampersands

06



07



08

“They show, they don’t tell. They describe but they don’t explain.”

So claimed David Company regarding his publication *Rich and Strange*, which features a found press photograph taken on the outdoor set of a film shoot. The book presents enlarged details of the photograph: African shacks, rickshaws, a nervous producer, a cameraman, scattered props... The narrative it weaves is akin to the type Le Guin envisioned, a canvas that holds an assemblage of elements in a flat, parallel composition, devoid of a progressive arc or a predetermined destination.

The author didn’t choose to caption each individually cropped image in the book, perhaps extending an invitation for the audience to ascribe their own interpretations. Or perhaps he did caption them, with the book’s title ‘*Rich and Strange*’ serving as a collective label. In my endeavour to unearth the richness and strangeness within the images, I ultimately discovered that ‘*Rich and Strange*’ was merely the full title of the movie where the complete photograph was captured. A ‘Ohhhh, that’s why’ moment, albeit one that left me still grappling with the essence of the individual images spread across the pages.

And so, the question arises: does it truly embody the carrier-bag narrative as defined by Le Guin? Each element seems meticulously orchestrated to culminate in that final moment of epiphany. Despite its intricacy, to me, it still mirrors a hero’s journey, a narrative anchored by the surprise that lies in wait at the culmination. The individual images faded into obscurity.

This approach starkly contrasts with the likes of *The Last Days of W* by Alec Soth and *Tarot Cards*, where a collective title, either of a book or of a card, encapsulates the entirety of its components. This observation compelled me to revisit my previous image-cropping practice—a narrative stitched from the mundane memories of London life, with all the snippets captioned by the title ‘*Mundane*’. This experiment might have left the audience in a state of confusion, as they grappled with the abstract imagery, their sole guide being an abstract caption provided. The mundanity they sought remained elusive.

With this reflection, I am inclined to revisit and more carefully recaption my collection of cropped images, drawing inspiration from Company’s intention of his book: to show but not tell, to describe but not explain.

I have a collection of Tarot cards that have always fascinated me with their mysterious, rich, and performative images. The idea that these cards could tell stories—stories of the future or stories of fate—captivated the younger me, and as someone deeply passionate about storytelling, I dedicated time to study these images, decode the symbols, and interpret the narratives within a spread.

Despite realizing that I wasn't gifted to see the future or destiny through these cards, my fascination with them remained. Tarot cards operate on multiple levels, embodying a carrier-bag theory of fiction: Their storytelling is non-linear, their methods are not confined to a single purpose, and they are not representative of a single hero.

For example, the Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot deck, which is the most well-known today, is an eclectic mix of various mystical traditions, as described in *Iconic Tarot Decks: History, Symbolism, and Design*:

“The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn’s teachings and the symbolism in this tarot make this deck essentially an eclectic mish-mash of Hermeticism, Kabbalah, Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, Greek mystery religion, Christian mysticism and astrology. In that, it reflects the late nineteenth century’s cultural passion for all forms of mystical thought, and in itself reflects what the Renaissance tarot was, too – a visual feast of all that we are and seek in life and beyond.”

If we randomly select a card from the deck, the High Priestess, for example, it's not hard to spot traces of pluralism in its imagery. The black and white pillars standing on either side of the priestess are reminiscent of Solomon's temple, symbolizing the duality and balance of existence. At her chest, the white cross represents sacrifice and the union of opposites, a powerful Christian symbol. The new moon cradles the feminine, intuitive, and mysterious aspects of life, commonly found in various forms of mysticism, including Hermeticism. Lastly, the pomegranates draw from Greek mythology, specifically the tale of Persephone's descent into the underworld, encapsulating the cycles of life, death, and rebirth.

These captions have shaped my understanding of the High Priestess card, reflecting the inclusive nature of Tarot cards that integrate symbols from diverse occult cultures.

● This prompted me to revisit an experiment I once conducted, where I attempted to isolate the symbols from the Tarot and explore their symbolic meanings in the digital age. The experiment manifested as a booklet, with symbols isolated from the Tarot and captioned with a collection of fragmented images from a search engine.

However, what if, rather than isolating, we expand the inclusivity of Tarot cards by annotating them with diverse sources, just as Waite included multiple mysticisms in one card? What if, instead of relying on brief snippets from the internet, we introduced a comprehensive booklet that consistently accompanies a Tarot deck, providing in-depth explanations of the symbols? In the spirit, here is a reimagined caption for the symbol of New Moon from the High Priestess:

Blackall St.
11 May 2023



Just a short walk from Old Street Tube Station in Shoreditch, I find myself standing at the beginning of Blackall Street, a small alley no longer than 200 meters. On one side, the back door of a five-star hotel stands, with shimmering clean floor-to-ceiling windows shielded by a lush expanse of bamboo, whose authenticity—real or fake—is obscured by its verdant beauty. On the opposite side, the backdoors of various small shops from the neighbouring street present themselves, their grey roller shutters obscured by layers upon layers of vibrant graffiti and posters. A common sight in Shoreditch. Yet that day, I found myself pulled into the depths of the alley.

I was on the hunt for patterns, or “compositions”, inspired by the work of Japanese graphic designer Takada Yui. Yui is known for cutting 5-centimetre rectangles out of cardstock and using them to isolate interesting shapes and figures from the crowded and chaotic landscape of sports newspapers. Some of his compositions are intriguing, while others remain enigmatic. With my iPhone as my frame, I attempted to emulate his technique, carefully observing the wall paintings and posters, trying my best to focus solely on the visual compositions rather than the content itself. However, the unexpected and peculiar contents often captured my attention.

A cassette tape poster that had a Spotify QR code printed on it, with the title “a playlist for you”. A poem, starting with “I know I am a nerdy romantic...” My boyfriend, too, made some discoveries of his own. He found symbols that he believed to be Elvish from *The Lord of the Rings*, and excitedly attempted to decipher their meaning. He also spotted a sticker of David Mitchell, a comedian he quite enjoys, plastered on a pole.

At that moment, I found exactly what I had been searching for, something different: a “7”. It was a green mural that spanned the entirety of a brick windowsill. The protruding sill sliced the black and green strokes apart, causing them to offset each other and blur into the shape of the number seven on my phone screen. One might not be able to see the seven but I did. In fact, I once went back but never found it again. It was mine.

I adjusted the angle and pressed the shutter button. I can still recall that moment: the sky had already darkened, and my boyfriend was using the flashlight on his phone to illuminate the wall as he rambled on about David Mitchell. The aftertaste of the orange soda I had for dinner lingered in my mouth.