

## Illustrated Stories using Signs and Symbols Case Study of Alternative Media for Visual Storytelling

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### السرد البصري للقصة

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#### Abstract

This paper discusses a new possible way of non-verbal tangible storytelling through a number of prototypes of student's work. The paper forms an initial study of a larger research that focuses on investigating the art of visual storytelling using a 'pictographic language' of different signs and symbols, and employing of different objects/materials to serve as alternative mediums for storytelling. Thus, the paper will present three issues for investigation.

These are: firstly, the types of narrations used by the students; secondly, the most favored chosen signs/symbols that were selected to tell the stories; and, finally, the relationship between the stories and the objects chosen for displaying and presenting them.

#### Keywords:

Digital Design, Illustration, Visual story telling.

#### الملخص

طريق السرد المادي البصري غير اللفظي باستخدام تناقض هذه الورقة وسيلة جديدة لرواية القصص عن عدد من النماذج من تنفيذ الطلبة. تعرض الورقة دراسة أولية لمشروع أكثر شمولية يركز على اختبار فعالية فن السرد البصري للقصص باستخدام " اللغة التصويرية" بالإشارات والرموز المختلفة، وتوظيف مواضيع/ مواد لتكون وسائل بديلة لرواية القصص. وبالتالي، تعرض الورقة ثلاث قضايا للدراسة، وهي: أولاً، أنواع الروايات التي يستخدمها الطلبة، وثانياً، الرموز/ الإشارات الأكثر تفضيلاً لرواية القصص المختارة، وأخيراً، العلاقة بين القصص والمواضيع المختارة للعرض والتقديم.

## **Introduction**

Creating narratives is considered to be a universal human activity that started from prehistoric times and can be witnessed through a hand painted pictures found in Lascaux caves. People have searched for ways to give visual form to ideas and concepts, to store knowledge in graphic form to bring order and clarity to information (Meggs, 1983). The basic primitive pictures (pictographs) were not only an elementary way of recording thoughts, but it was a method for preserving the knowledge and the experiences for further generations, that took form of a storytelling.

The developing nature of this art is only stresses that visual storytelling is increasingly becoming the most effective way of finding order among the chaos. It gives us the tools to process, to look and to learn. But where the industry goes from here is, as ever, as exciting as it is uncertain. Thus, in the hands of skilled visual storytellers, we are starting to see a combination of disciplines being applied to tell different aspects of a narrative. Text, photography, computer-generated and hand drawn illustrations are all being applied at various times by individual designers and publications (Gestalten, 2011-Visual Storytelling). Especially nowadays, in our digital era most of the internet content whether info graphics, casual games or video clips, all are 'placing a premium on visual storytelling', alongside to the most popular devices such as cellular phones, musical devices and others, which in their role are developing and adapting more easier and faster ways for transmitting and reading stories (Basulto, 2010). Accordingly, today, non-verbal stories could be told in various ways, even using a 'pictographic language' of diverse signs and symbols.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The research is focusing on investigating the art of non-verbal visual storytelling using semiotic approach. It also examines how different tangible objects could be assigned to perform a new task and serve as alternative mediums for displaying stories. This was conduct through visual examples of students work.

## **Problem of the Study**

The concept of storytelling and its diverse forms is a subject of interests not only for visual artists, graphic designers, and illustrators, but more and more specialist from other fields such as journalism, business, and education indeed are also looking for new ways of expression, exploring alternative techniques and innovative methods in order to reach the message to more audience in the most artistic and creative way.

### **Practical Importance of the Study**

1. Using 'pictographic language' in storytelling to present alternative mediums –artistic way of expression- for visual illustration of social and cultural issues that people easily could relate to.
2. Encouraging artistic applications of visual storytelling to be used beyond the field of advertising, and adopting them in education, journalism, and even in business sector.
3. Cheering possible trends in visual storytelling provoked by the new mediums to be used in the field of visual communication and social media.
4. Adopting formulated alternative mediums for visual representation of written literacy, instructions and/or other, for example;
  - a. Retelling old and/or forgotten stories in new multicultural language of signs and symbols.
  - b. Illustrating of poems and quotes in visual structure.
5. To engage the observer in visual communication and allowing fully participate in the realization of meanings.

### **Methodology of the study**

The study took form of an experimental visual research; the students were introduced to the Science of Signs (Semiotics), and accordingly were assigned to illustrate stories using signs and symbols in relation to a text and/or sound anchorage, and present them on various materials and objects that would serve as alternative mediums for displaying those stories. This project was given to the second year student of German Jordanian University in Theories of Visual Communication module. Then, through studying, examining, and analyzing the resulted prototypes of student's work the researcher was aiming to emphasis that this method of presenting data could be a possible alternative approach for visual storytelling.

### **Questions of the study**

By studying and examining the resulted prototypes three main questions formulated to be investigated;

1. What types of narrations are used by the students?
2. What are the most favored signs/symbols that were selected by most of students to tell the stories?

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3. What is the relationship between the stories and the chosen object/materials that students preferred for displaying and presenting their stories?

## **Theoretical Background**

### **Visual Narration/ Storytelling**

Our world is full of images, living and breathing, that hold the power to hypnotize, educate or entertain, through color, beauty, and art or just simply by movement, this is the experience of life, and life itself is a visual storytelling, and when we delve into the unique art forms that provide a catalyst for creating our own worlds and lives, realism is by far one of the most important elements (Caputo, 2002).

Narrative art is the name given to visual art that conveys a story. The most common instances of narrative or –story- art might be found in children's books, although the subjects of narrative art have most often been religious or historical. It focuses to represent events taking place over time. These events may, however, be compressed into a single image that implies something that has already happened or is about to take place. Narrative artwork can be depicted in earlier artworks as in paintings; the technique of continuous narrative was used frequently in Renaissance period. A good example of this can be found in the large devotional panel by Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi. As well as in sculptures, like as in Column of Marcus Aurelius, Emperor's campaigns against the Germans and the Sarmatians 180-185 A.D., Rome, the column shows several military battles where the Romans were triumphant, the same soldiers and military commanders are shown over and over again. Objects such as trees, rivers, horses and architecture help separate and frame each scene.

In those examples, the continuous narrative is presented in a way to tell an entire story within one artwork, the same characters show up repeatedly in order to give a timeline of events in the story. Often the same groups of characters are shown right next to each other in the same painting or sculptural frieze.

But as far as children's books, usually narration rely heavily on the written words to express meaning. Some experts feel that pictures do not do a good job of telling a story, because stories are told over time and pictures are seen all at one time. This may be an arbitrary view however, since this study is focused on how to tell stories in pictures of signs and symbols.

### Signs and Symbols in Storytelling

The field of art and design has borrowed a lot from Semiotics (the study of signs) especially when it comes to the idea of the relationship between text and images. Semiotics was proposed in the early 1900s by Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss professor of linguistics, and at around the same time Sanders Peirce, an American Philosopher, was developing a parallel study of signs. Both saw the sign as central to their studies, they focused on the relationship between the components of the sign that enables us to turn signals in whatever form they appear into a message which we can understand. According to Peirce, the meaning of sign will be affected by the background of the reader, and the meaning of words can change depending on who reads them (Crow, 2010). He created a theory that saw the reading of signs as part of a creative process, on which I personally agree and would like to examine, however, in Europe; Ronald Barthes- a follower of Saussure- took the theoretical debate forward. To him the science of signs takes much more than the construction of words and their representations. Images, sounds, gestures, and objects are all part of system that has semiotic meanings. As Peirce, Barthes pointed out that there was a significant role to be played by the reader in the process of reading. Moreover, according to him on the relationship between text and images, he describes text as a parasitic message, designed to quicken the reading with additional signifiers, in other words, the addition of text can be a powerful method of altering or fixing the meaning of an image/sign.

In fact, the implementation of a 'pictographic language' in storytelling has already started to grasp attentions of artists and designers such as Stephen McCarthy, a London-based graphic designer who's reinterpreted a whole newspaper namely, 'The Sun' in pictographic content, in his project 'Pictograms: The Newspaper' the main story of each page were turned into pictograms and reprinted (one pictogram per page) resulting concise, and comical images that briefly cover topics—such as phone sex, XFactor, child abuse , etc... (designtaxi.com). Some more examples would be a 'Book from the Ground'; by Xu Bing, he's considered to be one of the major and greatest Chinese contemporary artists and printmaker. He describes his book;\_"Book from the Ground is a novel written in a 'language of icons' that I have been collecting and organizing over the last few years. Regardless of cultural background, one should be able to understand the text as long as one is thoroughly entangled in modern life". Additionally, John G. Rives, an American performance poet, storyteller, and author, is also popular for using sign language in poems, his famous story of

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mixed typography and emoticons that shows 'how typography can convey much more than words', was presented on TED talks.

### **Objects and Materials**

When thinking about objects and storytelling the first thing would accrue to our mind is how almost every object whether a found one, or purchased could have its own story to tell. 'The relationship between objects and stories is one with a rich history. People use collections of books, movies, artwork, and other objects to communicate and define their identities and personalities'.

### **Design Process**

#### **Working methodology of Students +examples**

This project was focusing on enabling the students to utilize world wide signs and symbols towards telling a story in a more modern pop culture that people could relate to.

**Firstly, each student had to select a story of her/his interests, they had to be looking for narration, and by this it doesn't need to be a fairytale, narration could be found in poems, jokes and even songs.**

The students had to focus deeply on exploring different types and forms of narrations, and analyzing the structure of the story, before determining on a preferred narrative form.

*Examples of the chosen stories:*

- One of the stories was inspired by a local Jordanian clothing brand called (Jo Bedu). This brand name which started by Tamer al Masri and Michael Makdah comes from the admiration and respect for the Bedouin heritage and wisdom. And it is aiming to promote Arab pop culture in artistic humorous way, while remaining truthful to the reality of contemporary Arab society. The story demonstrates a modern attitude of two characters interacting with each others in a funny way. And was chosen by the student because she wanted to stay true to the identity of the local society.
- Another story was inspired from different civilization; the student was interested in exploring a different culture than her own. Her choice was Australian Aboriginal culture as they were very popular in art. Their art has been produced for thousands of years and much of it relates to telling

stories/(Dreaming)<sup>1</sup> that reflect their life, to preserve the law and customs in addition to maintain the knowledge for survival and attachment to their land. Therefore, the student chose to reflect the nature of this culture through a poem entitled 'the Elder', as much of Aboriginal poetry is often expresses how Aboriginal people feel today, their poems are about the challenges that they share with non-Indigenous people but also about problems specific to their lives.

- One more student chose to illustrate a summary of a famous novel and popular movie series, Harry Potter. According to the student, this novel in a way summarizes her own childhood, it was the first novel to be read, and for this reason, she experienced a kind of intimate relationship with the story. Another reason for choosing this particular story was her big interest for the underlining meanings and various symbolic references that occurred there. She explained that the elements of the story are symbolic themselves, and in a much deeper level some symbols could only be understood by Harry Potter fans. So for her, the challenge was to communicate this amazing story -that itself is full of symbolism-, to people who have no idea who Harry Potter is, by using familiar and recognizable signs and symbols. But, since this is a very long story, the student decided to communicate the idea of Harry Potter story in a faster way. Therefore, she chose a song that summarizes the whole novel.

**Secondly, the students had to find appropriate signs/symbols from any category, and select the suitable ones for telling their chosen stories.**

They investigated how different signs/symbols from various categories could be combined in one narration.

**Examples:**

- The approach of utilizing various signs and symbols from so diverse categories and combining them all together was used to illustrate a story to

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<sup>1</sup> . The Dreamtime (or Dreaming) is a term used to describe the period before living memory when Spirits emerged from beneath the earth and from the sky to create the land forms and all living things. The Dreamtime stories set down the laws for social and moral order and establish the cultural patterns and customs. The Dreaming, as well as answering questions about origins, provides a harmonious framework for human experience in the universe and the place of all living things within it. It describes the harmony between humans and all other natural things.

bring awareness against drug abuse. As one of the students used a mixture of road signs, safety signs and symbols, toilet signs, and American Indian symbol (dream catcher) to narrate a story about two young teenagers falling in love, they started experiencing new things together such as drugs that led them thinking they were existing in a colorful exiting world, but only later realized they were prisoners of their own created fantasy:

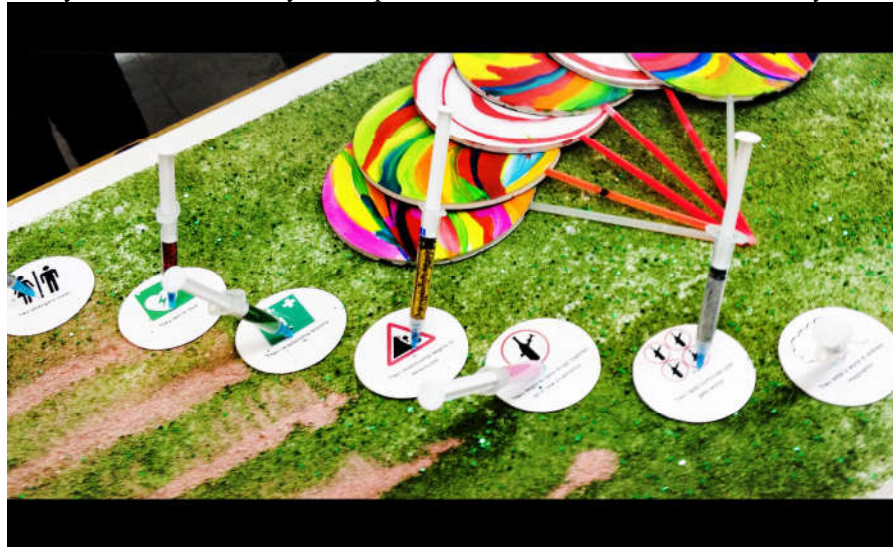


Fig.1

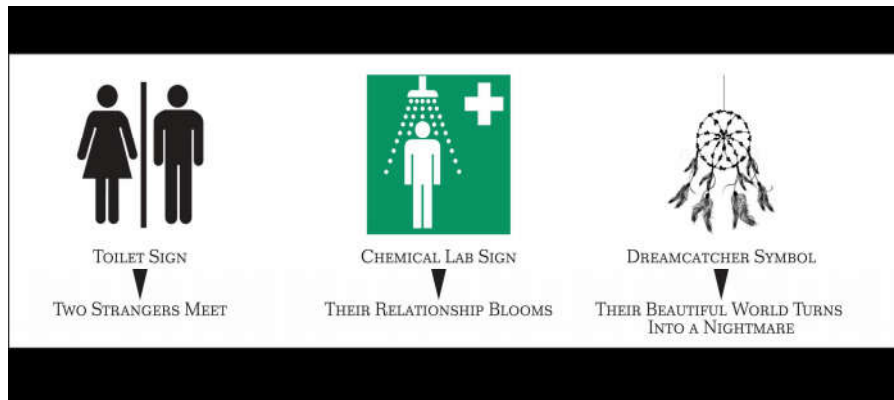


Fig.2

- Another example would be an imaginary story inspired by the famous horror movie series (Final Destination). The story is about a guy waking in the morning feeling dizzy, after having his breakfast he goes to work. On his way, sitting in a train he gets a headache, his vision starts to blur he sees lights turning on and off, then, as if the earthquake hits the train and somehow causes fire, suddenly it all reverses to the moment he entered the



train and the whole scenario starts over. And that's when he realizes he had a Déjà-Vu.

Hi usage of signs and symbols was related to the story and the location where the events took place, for this reason, his general selection was the train station signs in addition to some road signs and other symbols that were adopted to fit the story line successfully.

Moreover, it was necessary to understand the relationship between form and content, since a sign is considered to be an image, this image could be interpreted differently and that could result in influencing the meaning of the sign. Therefore, the text could play a significant role in clarifying the meaning.

Examples:

- Figure ( 3 ) is a fragment of a story that was inspired from daily life incidents of Jordanian youth and their restricted actions as a result of the cultural and social rituals. The story talks about a male and a female who loved each other, but faced social and economical difficulties to keep their love alive. This story is a reflection of our reality issues but was presented in a sarcastic manner.

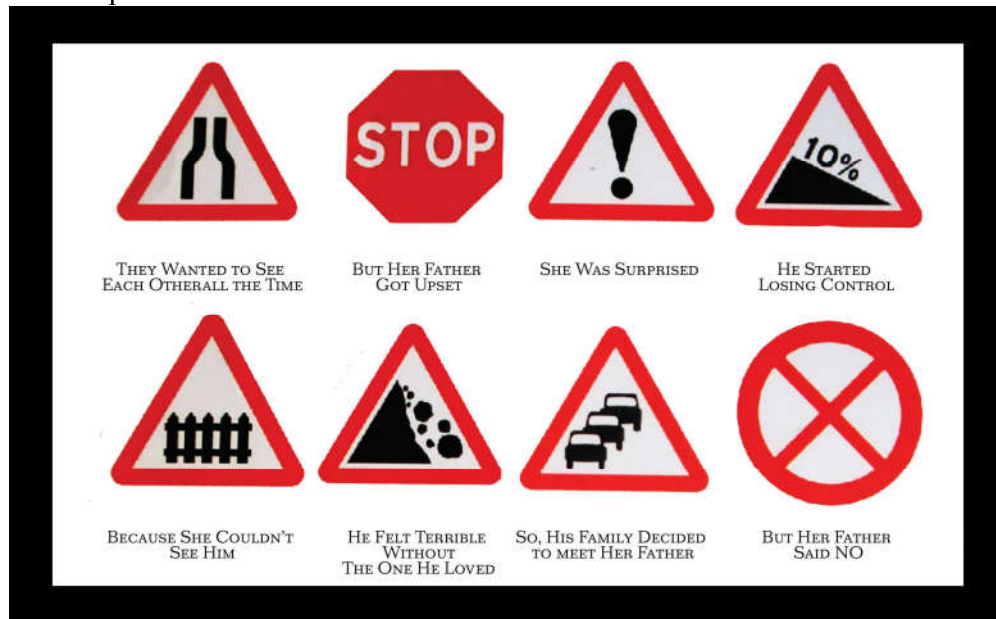


Fig.3

The connection between verbal and visible representation are attached to meanings and struggles that emerge within a culture and its political structure. Therefore, the relation between text and image was concerned

with personal understanding and interpretation of the local culture and its social values.

- This example (Fig.4) is a fragment of the aboriginal poem – discussed earlier- entitled the Elder:

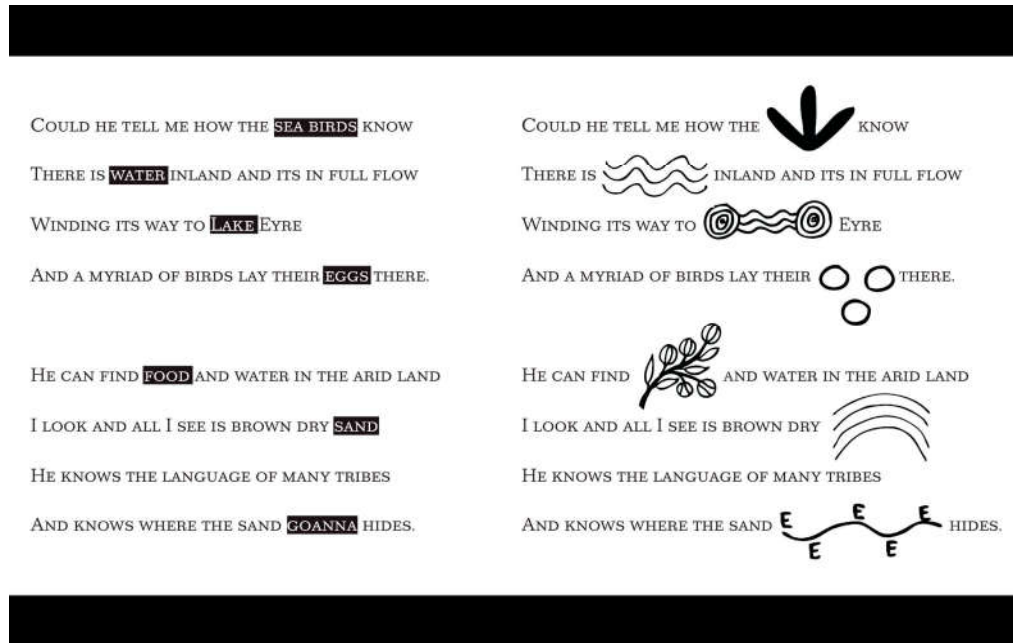


Fig.4

In every line of the poem the student underlined the word that refers to natural material like: animals, plants, water, humans ... and replaced it with the aboriginal symbol. As a result, the symbol served as a complimentary image to the rest of the poem line.

- Figure ( 5 ) is some of the Mayans<sup>2</sup> symbols that were employed by a student to illustrate a story about the circle of life.

<sup>2</sup> . The Mayans inhabited parts of South America; their civilization was rich with art and science. They developed a complex writing system consisting of hieroglyphs with hundreds of distinctive signs or glyphs in the shape of humans, animals, supernatural, objects, and abstract designs. These signs are either logograms ( to convey meaning) or syllabograms ( to indicate sound values) are used to inscribe words, phrases, and sentences.



Fig.5

Looking at the symbols themselves without having previous background knowledge on what they represent and mean, one could never be able to make sense of some of these shapes because mostly they never represent the indexed thing. Thus, Barthes anchorage theory was implemented here; by adding text under the images/symbols simply added a meaningful reason/explanation.

- The example bellow (Fig.6) demonstrate how one sign could be utilized differently depending on students own interpretation, sometimes it was even repeated in the same narration but had different meaning:

TRAFFIC SIGNS



FALLING ROCKS

IN ONE STORY (CINDERELLA), IT INDICATED:  
( THE PRINCE FELL IN LOVE WITH CINDERELLA )

IN ANOTHER STORY ABOUT JORDANIAN YOUTH, IT INDICATED THE OPPOSITE:  
( HE FELT TERRIBLE WITHOUT THE ONE HE LOVED )



STEEP HILL UPWARDS

THIS WARNING SIGN HAS BEEN USED IN THE SAME STORY TWICE, ONE IT INDICATED:  
( HE STARTED LOSING CONTROL )

WHILE THE SECOND TIME:  
( HE HARDLY HANDLED THE SITUATION )

Fig.6



The students experienced objects and materials as communication tools because their chosen stories/ narratives had to be illustrated on them not by them. This helped to identify the aesthetical function of used objects/materials that lays in their potentials for narration.

The selected objects could be categorized in two sections; the first one is already existed everyday objects such as: Pepsi cans, matchboxes, disposable plastic cups and plates, syringes, and even edible options like eggs.

Examples:

- Figures ( 9 and 10 ) show how edible items such as eggs could be utilized and operated as a storytelling device.

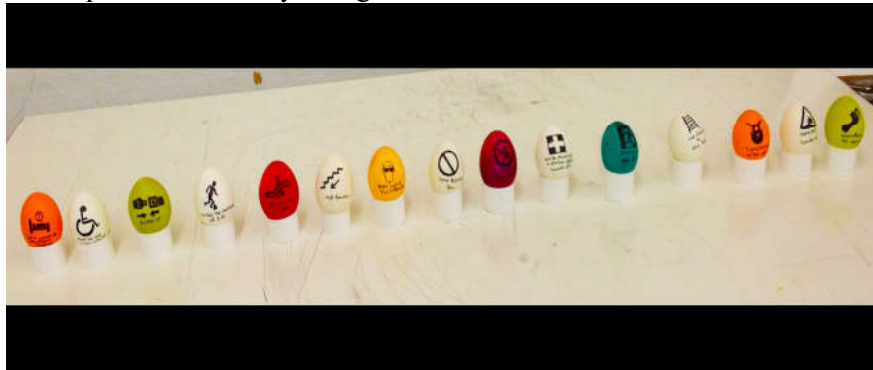


Fig.9



Fig.10

The student used eggs for the display because of their direct connection to the story since eggs represent birth, life, clarity and peace; her chosen story indicates same meanings and sends a message of hope as it talks about how disable people struggle in a society that treats them differently.

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- In the next example (Fig.11) the student used disposable plastic plates and cups; the theme of this display was (party) which is related to the ending of the story, where the readers would be transferred into a happy and hopeful mood.



Fig.11

- In This image (Fig.12) the student used matchboxes to present her story, the text was written inside.



Fig.12

The second category was distinction to be of handmade objects mainly made of paper.

Examples:

- Figure ( 13 ) is an image of an accordion folded book with popped up story.





Fig.13

- The following image (Fig.14) demonstrates how the student illustrated her story using (Jo Bedu) symbols and displayed them on handmade cardboard t-shirts clipped on a laundry line. The cardboard t-shirts were replica of (Jo Bedo) real t-shirts.



Fjg.14

Each symbol presented a scene from the story, but instead of describing each scene with words, the student adopted (voice over) technique to immerse the audience deeper in the world of the story, since the used local dialect will only accentuate the symbols and what they stand for.

- The next example (Fig.15) displays a story of birth, education, marriage, and rebirth illustrated with Mayan Symbols:



Fig.15

It is obvious that this student as well thought of a display in relationship to her story that indicates a circle of life. While her story is about how a man is born, how he develops through life, educates himself, and starts a family, she used a circular shape cardboard wheel<sup>3</sup> for narration, because as her story that ends and begins from the same point (birth) the circular shape is continuous and never ends.

Footnote how she did it.

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<sup>3</sup>. Methodology of the cardboard wheel: the student cut two circular cardboards, on the first one (the lower) she drew the symbols, on the second one (the upper) she cut out a window and then placed two cardboards on top of each other, so when the upper circle is rotated one could be able to see the symbols through the window.



- Figure ( 16 ) shows a story of Dr. Suess' Riddles on a table lamp made from transparent paper/slides:



The story was printed on transparent slides to transmit light, since Dr. Suess' stories are preferable at bedtime and most children usually keep a low light on during the night, this table lamp could serve as light source and a bedtime story at the same time.

### Results and Findings

- The results showed that implementation of a 'pictographic language' in modern cultures can be a fast, convenient and modern way of telling stories. As this approach demonstrates that pictographs can communicate easily in a joyful way, since even the most serious signs and symbols could be transformed into a lighter friendlier ones for a deeper meaning and emotional impact.
- The stories that were selected by the students varied from real life stories, jokes, poems, novels, and even folk songs. As in all these forms the element of narration was absolutely existed. Some students though, chose to portray their own society, focusing on presenting local stories while others turned into borrowing from ancient civilizations and other cultures.
- Through studying and examining diverse signs and symbols from various categories in order to answer some previously mentioned questions such as: How Pictographs could be used in narration? The students were able to appreciate how those signs and symbols surrounding us can play a

magnificent role in making a statement, and/or advertise a true story that may have a social and cultural impact.

- The students were able to understand how a same sign can be utilized and perceived differently by everyone, depending on ones own perception and experience.
- The most preferred signs that were used by most students were the traffic signs, and the main reason behind the popularity of this category was that they were easy to recognize as we regularly come across them on a daily bases.
- A sign is considered to be an image, but this image could be interpreted differently by different viewers as there are some main conditions that could influence the reading process or in other words could influence the meaning of the sign, such as: social circumstances, previous knowledge of signs, culture, and finally the sequential combination of other signs. But here is where the text could play a significant role in clarifying the meaning.
- Besides understanding the semiotics and the uses of signs/symbols in general, the students as well required a fully understanding of the cultural and social values of their everyday environment and their community, in addition to study of other cultures.
- The results also revealed that the aesthetical function of used materials and objects lays in their potentials in narration; most of the displays complimented the idea of the chosen stories and selected signs/symbols accordingly. Their uses for narration only stressed their sustainability as most of them were giving a second chance for living after they lost their initial value and/or became waste. It could be said that they served as alternative mediums for storytelling.

### **Conclusion and Future Work**

This research –as mentioned previously- is only an initial study about alternative mediums for visual storytelling, but it provides a fine base for advanced experimentations in the future. It demonstrated capability of signs and symbols in illustrating wherever been confined to verbal narration, they could be adopted to retell old or forgotten stories, and even present and promote special local and cultural concerns. Moreover, the research brought focus on the unlimited possibilities of tangible objects and their potentials in narration, by revealing their aesthetical function it only opened more doors for recycling.

Thus, the resulted prototypes of student's work could be described as combination of art, design, and literature; they visually illustrated social and cultural issues that people could easily relate to in a fresh innovative way. And as it appears that, 'a successful visualization is the same as any successful story, because it informs, it makes the readers think about the world around them, and about our own lives. It stirs emotions, it encourages action, it equips us and inspires us. It enriches our world in tiny ways that we may never understand".

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