

# SHOWING SAYING: ON SPEECH BALLOONS

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## Foreword

This paper brings together theoretical, historical and practice-based research gathered through the course of 2011. In part, it is a collection of ruminations, preoccupations, truths and tales examining the speech balloon, and its dear, yet distinct relative, the thought balloon. It also forms a brief commentary of the work produced during an artist's residency, completed by Lizzie Ridout at the Women's Studio Workshop in Rosendale, NY, USA in 2011/12.

## Principles & certitudes

The speech balloon, a universally recognised graphic device, is employed as a means to represent both spoken and thought words, most commonly in comics. This is achieved through the use of a form, frequently bubble-like, typically within which is placed typography. On occasion, image may also be used. Traditionally a thought balloon is distinguishable from a speech balloon by a cord of bubbles attaching the principal bubble to the thinker's head.

Speech and thought balloons are simultaneously both a pictorial and a textual device. Initially, we read the words (or images) cradled within the balloon and comprehend their meaning. But our understanding of this meaning is also reinforced by both the choice of typography employed and the structure that the words are contained within. The visual properties of the type, images and balloon may all illuminate further what the character is speaking, thinking or doing.

## On physicality

Freud was not wrong when he wrote in “The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious” that “words are a plastic material with which one can do all kinds of things”.

Speech and thought bubbles come in many guises. Some are formal, orthodox in attitude, the suit-wearers of the species. Others are rotund, doltish even, bloated – but confidently so. And still others are susurrate – breathy, ethereal, poised to disintegrate and, in form, rather similar to an exhalation on a cold winter’s day. The visual conventions are manifold.

Most commonly, a speech or thought balloon is devised from an outline to define the form, and the surface itself. The boundary line differentiates between what is happening *within* the bubble form, and what is happening *beyond* it, in the comic frame. Those boundaries may be angular, beveled, indistinct or blousy as required and desired by their creator.

Two things have held my interest in terms of the creative possibilities of these devices:

i) The fact that uttered and imagined words and images take up no literal physical space in our reality, and yet in a comic reality they do. If we push this line of enquiry harder, we may question further this physicality. Are both speech and thought balloons essentially flat? May they not also be considered a container? This term suggests volume, mass and solidity. So, if speech/thought balloons are receptacles of information, do they have dimensions? Are they solid or filled with air? Are they transparent or are they white? And what of the contents? Are these also three-dimensional? Do the words float, or are they hung?

ii) Although spoken words are on some level understood by all who can make sense of the language, thought is different. It is perceived exclusively by the thinker, and in the case of a comic, also by the audience. The thought balloon makes manifest what would otherwise never be witnessed.

David Carrier (2000) describes the interplay of the speech balloon and the comic frame as a:

theater with a soundproof glass wall between actors and audience, and with the spectators reading the dialogue from supertitles. Seeing a play in such a theater would be like reading comics.

## **An intermittent & mercilessly edited account of the history of visualising words**

Of course there is an extensive and complex history of visualising spoken or thought word in a variety of ways, and the form that we now recognise instantly has experienced various permutations over the centuries. Here, I have extracted some key examples of early speech balloons that have perhaps best examined the nature of the physicality of speech and thought.

Within European history, text has been used in painting as a vehicle for adding meaning to the image, often where the gesture, stance and expression of the subject, and object-symbolism may not communicate all. In Renaissance art scrolls billow and unfurl across the canvas. Some quite literally snake out of the subjects' mouths, clearly representing speech. Others are visual devices that act as an outside narrator to the story, adding important information that cannot be communicated through image alone. They are all as imagined as the speech bubbles in contemporary comics.

But words, either religious texts or meaningful maxims, were included in paintings via actual, palpable objects. These items might be engraved (grand carved columns festooned with flowers and ivy or ornate stone urns for example), printed (a book casually left open on a desk or idly poised in the lap of the sitter) or handwritten (a folded note clutched by the subject or a sheath of papers stacked casually in the foreground).

Completely independently and far preceding the Europeans, in South America there is compelling evidence to suggest that the Mesoamericans also developed sophisticated written systems to visualise spoken words, songs and music. Images and objects discovered at many archeological ruins depict humans and animals with questionmark-like forms leaping from their mouths. Similar to the ribbon-esque scrolls previously mentioned, the 'banderole' or 'speech scroll' employed by the Mesoamericans is potentially more abstract in its nature than its European relative. The tongue-like shape darts from the direction of the speaker's mouth and may link the speaker to a series of other images. If our latter-day translations of these devices are correct, these images are glyphs, figures used as symbols to represent words, sounds and ideas. It is suggested that the manner in which these speech scrolls are decorated, may give information about the tone of the words or the identity of the person speaking them.

Thomas Rowlandson's "The Loves of the Fox and the Badger, or the Coalition Wedding" is an adroit example of a strip demonstrating the full gamut of techniques available to the artist in the late 1700s for exploring the interplay between text and image. The piece, a satirical illustration

poking fun at the troubled coalition between Charles James Fox and Lord North after Fox's Commons victory in 1782, uses a frame format, captions, scrolls, text-inscribed objects and speech and thought bubbles containing both typography and image. In this instance, the contained image, surrounded by radiating lines, suggests a dream.

Continuing the practice of using objects to display narrative, in the late 1800s Richard F. Outcault famously created "The Kid", a yellow nightshirt-cladded street urchin, who speaks to the newspaper-reading audience via his clothing. The speech balloon in this case, is humanoid and certainly in terms of the comic strip, a living and breathing speech/thought balloon.

Winsor McCay remains, I suspect, unprecedented as the most sophisticated boundary-pusher of the pliable side to speech and thought balloons. Not only this, several of his works test the concrete possibilities of the comic strip as a whole. "Little Nemo in Slumberland", published between 1905 and 1914 in, first, the "New York Herald" and then, later, the "New York American", presents Little Nemo in a series of dream states, in which alternative universes are depicted. An appropriately nightmarish scene shows a series of ever-expanding speech bubbles taking over the entire frame and the characters within it.

Most recently Peter Brookes, a political cartoonist, brilliantly transformed words into a physical weapon. His cartoon, published in "The Times" on 29<sup>th</sup> April during the 2010 UK election campaign, documented what must probably be one of the biggest political gaffes of recent times. Gordon Brown, after discussing Labour's immigration policies with longstanding Labour voter Gillian Duffy in Rochdale, UK, returns to his car and, whilst still connected to his microphone, is clearly overheard telling an aide that Duffy is a "bigoted woman". Brookes' comic strip depicts, in the first frame, the words "bigoted woman" in a traditional speech balloon, poised over the form of Gordon Brown. In frame two, Brown is clasping the speech balloon and pulling it towards himself. In frame three, Brown is forcibly stabbing the speech balloon's mouth-piece into his own stomach, ultimately impaling himself with the very words "bigoted woman". It takes just three images for Brookes to mutate a passive, visual convention that we identify with the cartoon and comic world, into a physical form that is capable of inflicting bodily harm – akin to the damage that those two words caused Brown's political career.

The cartoon exposes our own vulnerability in the face of words and their capacity to turn on us when least expected. Whilst most spoken words are uttered then slip away unnoticed, there are always some that will return to plague us.

### **A residency for creating words, without using words**

Late in the summer of 2011, I packed my bags and temporarily left my home and my lecturing position at Plymouth University on a brief quasi-sabbatical. The intention was to spend two months working with the Women's Studio Workshop on a funded artist's book residency. I wanted focused time to produce a book – or rather 50 of them – making tangible my varied musings on the speech balloon. Those theories, I had decided, required placement into a practical context. I was curious to see how paper and ink, as image, might alter, validate and enhance what was at that time merely indistinct thoughts and a set of large-scale graphite drawings, cut-paper pieces and sculptures. Furthermore I wanted to see how my one-off pieces might be translated into multiples.

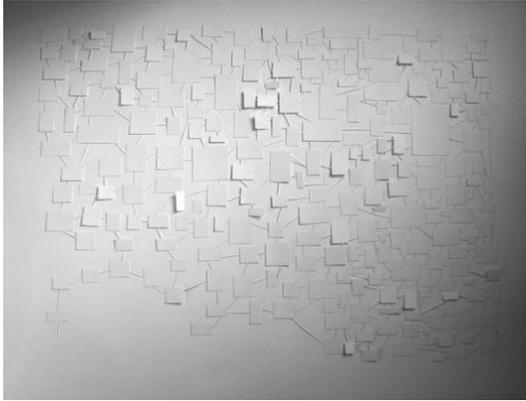


Fig. 5-6: Lizzie Ridout, *Soliloquy* [After Bakhtin] 2011, Cut paper, 120 x 100cm  
Image © Lizzie Ridout

“Ways to talk and yet say nothing, or ways to not talk and yet say everything” is the publication that emerged from this collaboration with the Women's Studio Workshop. I say collaboration: I went armed with theory and proposals; WSW helped me shape this diaphanous pair into something palpable and coherent. Without their commitment to my project and their determination to help me solve the inevitable range of problems that one comes up against in such print-based undertakings, it would not have been resolved into the form it exists in now.

The Women's Studio Workshop was established in 1974 and has since gone on to be the largest publisher of artists' books in the States. WSW offers artists paid and unpaid studio and book-art residencies, internships

and education programmes. Its publications are held in repositories across America, Canada and the UK including the following, who have committed to acquiring every past and future WSW edition (amongst upward of 200 other libraries and institutions): The Library of Congress, Yale University, Rochester Institute of Technology, Vassar College, Indiana University Bloomington, University of Delaware and Virginia Commonwealth University. It has had the continued support of the National Endowment for the Arts since 2002 and is also a recipient of funding from the New York State Council on the Arts – a State Agency and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

The publication “Ways to talk and yet say nothing, or ways to not talk and yet say everything” started out as a series of studies examining a collapse in communication between two people through the use of the speech balloon. Later, however, the project became more focused on linguistic theory and semantics.

Jackendoff (2001) in his essay “Language in the Ecology of the Mind” reports that language is a pairing of “expressions” and “messages”. “Expressions” being the ‘outer’ or ‘public’ element to language – the utterance or gesture that is tangible to or can be perceived by the person being spoken to. The “message” is the ‘inner’ or ‘private’ aspect of language, therefore the thoughts or concepts that the speaker transmits to the addressee, via the aforementioned expression. In order to convey a message, one needs to do more than just mentally represent it, one needs to be able to express it to the listener, too. Accordingly, a speaker will make a mental representation of what they wish to say, and then this in turn is converted into a series of expressions or movements of the tongue, teeth and lips. From this, a series of noises occur which are then converted by the addressee from expressions back into mental representations, and so finally back to a concept.

Many of my early drawings explored this connection between brain and mouth: the interrelation between the message and the expression of the message. And also the intrinsic potential for disparity between the two. After all, there is a difference between knowing what you *want* to say and then also being able to *say* it. Further inconsistencies may lie between what is *uttered* by the speaker versus what is *understood* by the listener.

Philosophers such as Mikhail Bakhtin with theories on spoken and thought words and Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionist principles also particularly informed this early body of drawn, printed and sculptural works.

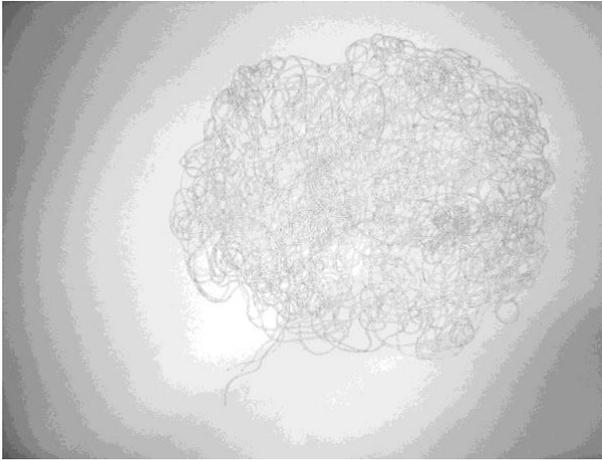


Fig. 5-7: Lizzie Ridout, Soliloquy [After Bakhtin] 2011, Cut paper, 120 x 100cm  
Image © Lizzie Ridout

Mikhail Bakhtin (1952) wrote extensively about the “utterance”: its boundaries, its length, its intonation and the speaker’s “speech plan”. His work also concerned the connection between the speaker and the listener, and beyond this, the speaker and the community. Bakhtin proposed that whilst our words belong to us, they also belong to everyone else, including all who came before us. As a result, whilst we may feel that our words are our own, they have been heavily influenced by all with whom we have made contact and those who surround us, and therefore do not truly belong to us, or, indeed to anyone.

Jacques Derrida’s methods of critiquing established language theory by turning words, theories and frameworks inside-out and over on their heads have also played some part in how this work and the resulting publication has unfolded. The work attempts to draw attention to linguistic conventions whilst simultaneously deconstructing those same conventions. The speech balloon is one of these conventions. As a visual code that we readily use to represent speech, there is always potential to further explore its usage, meaning and associated past.

“Ways to talk and yet say nothing, or ways to not talk and yet say everything” takes a selection of my early drawings and concepts and by utilising a variety of print media (amongst them etching, silkscreen and letterpress) language’s idiosyncrasies are further explored, often via titling that adds a clue to the interpretation of an individual piece’s meaning or justifies the employment of a particular media.

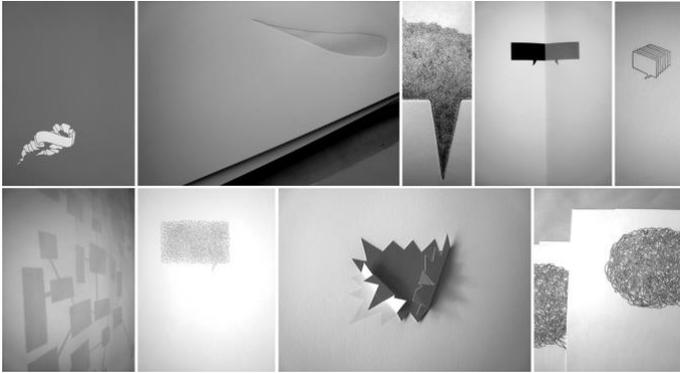


Fig. 5-8: Lizzie Ridout, *Compilation of pages from Ways to talk and yet say nothing, or ways to not talk and yet say everything*, published by Women's Studio Workshop, 2012 (Top line from left to right: *Surrender* / *Shadow of a Whisper from Beneath 1000 Pages* / *Flee* / *Dialogue of the Deaf* / *Our Speech is Filled with Others' Words*.

Bottom line from left to right: *Soliloquy [After Bakhtin]* / *Excoriate* / *Deleted Exclamation* / *Imbroglia*)

All images © Lizzie Ridout

Thus, whispers are printed with dry, white carbon paper, suggesting a fleeting, chalky shadow of words on a page. Words that are somehow almost hanging in a half-life, or tucked away, best forgotten and slowly dimming over time.

A soliloquy is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “an act of speaking one’s thoughts aloud when by oneself or regardless of any hearers, especially by a character in a play”. My silkscreened version of the soliloquy meanders across a large sheet, initially slowly, as if in doubt, then finally squeezing itself into every available space. The viewer is also a participant in this private address through their own act of handling the paper and the necessary unfolding of it, in order to reveal this ever-proliferating piece of diction.

The multiple nuances of single words are explored through visual means and paper is treated accordingly. *Excoriate* means both to censure or criticise severely and also to damage or remove part of the surface of something. Thus, the surface of the page is shot-through with tiny holes, obliterating the flat, calm, white with a flurry of miniature assaults.

The final resulting portfolio of prints takes various combinations of paper, ink and press and uses these to add tenor to the monologues,

dialogues and colloquies from both emotional and theoretical perspectives – without ever revealing what has actually been uttered.

### On where this leaves me

As much of my early investigations into the use of speech balloons attest, these forms continue to hold scope for enquiry into *how* we speak (and think) and how diverse the solutions are for articulating this in the visual world. There is a multitude of recognised visual conventions that come with established codes of interpretation attached, e.g. the use of uppercase letterforms to suggest shouting, or trembling lines to infer whispers. As previously mentioned, these rules have also been played with, and teased out, by numerous illustrators and artists. And yet, there will always be potential for further consideration into how speech balloons may be used as communicative devices, as a means to infer tone, cadence and the subtle significations inherent in speech itself. Yes, comics are potent forms in which to do this. But equally so is the *removal* of the speech balloon from this context that we are accustomed to viewing it within. Once isolated, it can be dissected and deconstructed to examine not just the expressive qualities of the utterance itself, but on a more poetic level to be rumination on the philosophical and internal workings of language itself.

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