

Dodds, Nick ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6852-5995> (2019) From Prose to Panel: Negotiating authenticity and visual modality in the comic-book adaptation of a literary memoir. In: ILLUSTRATION AND ADAPTATION International conference organised by TIL and ILLUSTR4TIO, 10th & 11th October 2019, University of Burgundy, Dijon, France.. (Unpublished)

Downloaded from: <http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/5172/>

*Usage of any items from the University of Cumbria's institutional repository 'Insight' must conform to the following fair usage guidelines.*

Any item and its associated metadata held in the University of Cumbria's institutional repository Insight (unless stated otherwise on the metadata record) may be copied, displayed or performed, and stored in line with the JISC fair dealing guidelines (available [here](#)) for educational and not-for-profit activities

**provided that**

- the authors, title and full bibliographic details of the item are cited clearly when any part of the work is referred to verbally or in the written form
  - a hyperlink/URL to the original Insight record of that item is included in any citations of the work
- the content is not changed in any way
- all files required for usage of the item are kept together with the main item file.

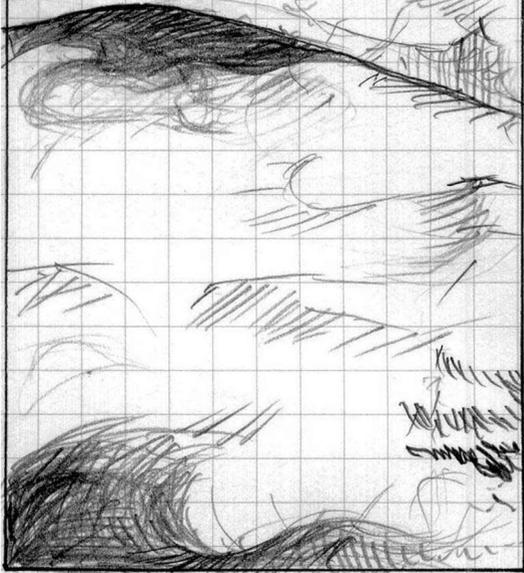
**You may not**

- sell any part of an item
- refer to any part of an item without citation
- amend any item or contextualise it in a way that will impugn the creator's reputation
- remove or alter the copyright statement on an item.

The full policy can be found [here](#).

Alternatively contact the University of Cumbria Repository Editor by emailing [insight@cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:insight@cumbria.ac.uk).

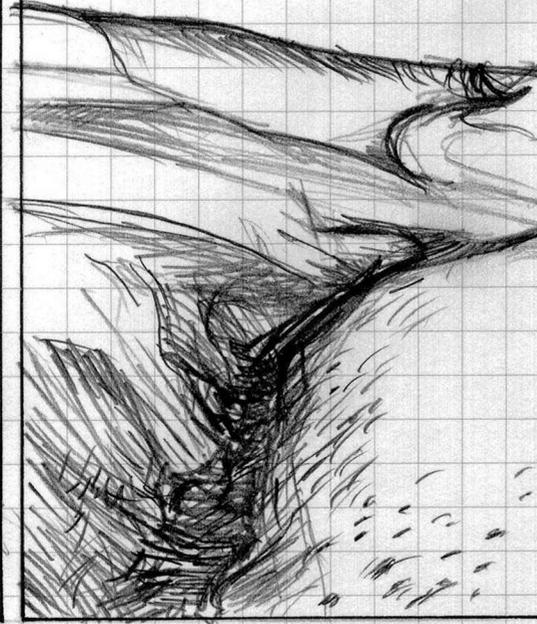
I can see those shadows now  
as when a boy I watched them  
creeping over the landscape.



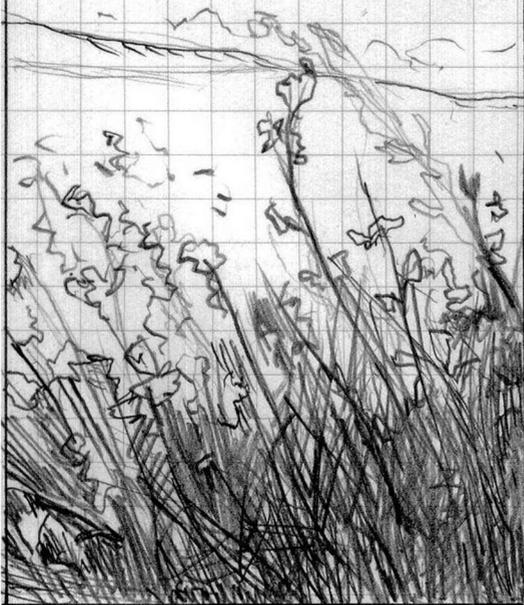
Then there are the sharp contrasts  
of light and shadow.



The dark gloom of the hollows.



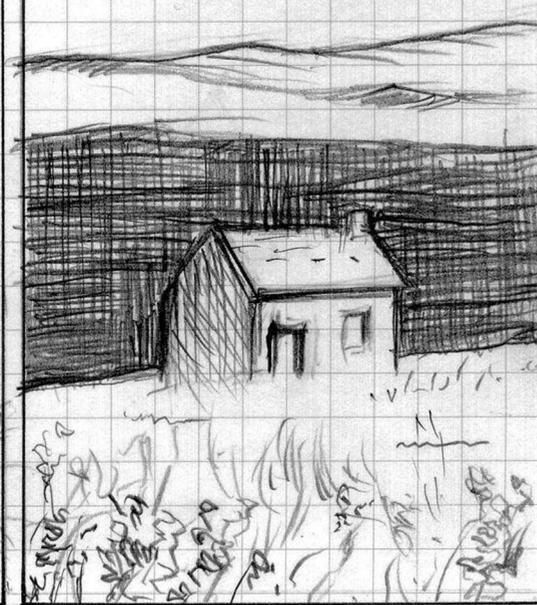
The lavender colours of the  
heather when in bloom.

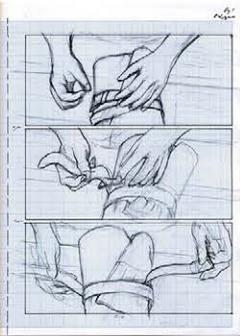


The greens of the pastures ...



... and the whitewashed walls  
of the homesteads.





**From Prose to Panel:  
negotiating visual  
modality and  
authenticity in the  
comic-book  
adaptation of a  
literary memoir**

**Nick Dodds**  
(nick.dodds@cumbria.ac.uk)

**NICK DODDS: ILLUSTRATION AND ADAPTATION CONFERENCE PRESENTATION**

Illustration & Adaptation International Conference  
10th – 11th October, University of Burgundy, Dijon.

***From Prose to Panel -  
negotiating visual modality and authenticity in the comic-book adaptation of a literary memoir***

**SLIDE 1: Introduction Slide:** Opening comments and approach to presentation.

**SLIDE 2: Overview of Project:** Adaptations have an overt connection to a prior text or original source which is manifest in the narrative of the adapted text and, in a published work, often signaled to the reader via the peritext and framing of promotional copy. As Linda Hutcheon points out, the term ‘adaptation’ has a dual meaning and refers both to the finished artefact or product of transference and the process and method of re-creation (Hutcheon, 2013:7-8).

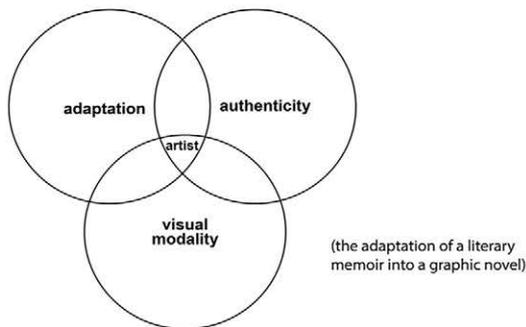
This presentation will focus on the process of adaptation, specifically the challenges faced by the artist in recasting a literary memoir into the hybrid medium of a long-form comic-strip – illustrated with visual examples and proto-page artwork from the project in hand.

**SLIDE 3: Pilgrimage from Nenthead:** This subject relates to my current project: provisionally titled The Checkweighman - the graphic novelization of Pilgrimage from Nenthead, a literary memoir penned by my great-grandfather Chester Armstrong (and published by Methuen in 1938).

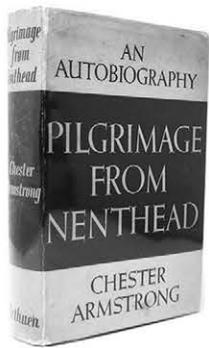
The entirety of Chester’s working life was spent at Ashington Colliery in Northumberland. Hence, Pilgrimage from Nenthead is cited as a prime example of working-class memoir in various academic accounts on British labour history (Rose, 2010:466). However, there is scant reference in the book to Chester’s daily routine as a surface worker at the colliery. Instead, the author presents a detailed self-examination of the inner life of the mind and the triumph of art and ideas over religious doctrine and material circumstances. It is the juxtaposition between the restrictive pit environment and the liberating force of imagination that forms the main narrative thrust of the graphic adaptation.

The adaptation presents both opportunity and difficulty in regard to translating the written word into the uniquely codified form of the comic-book, particularly in regard to visualizing Chester’s world view and the sociopolitical landscape of late 19th century British life. The chief aim here is to investigate how the transportation from a literary mode to a predominately visual mode reshapes the narrative, with particular focus on the role of the graphic artist in the handling of real-life testimony and staying ‘true’ to the tone and content of the original text.

**Presentation of current doctoral  
research & studio practice**

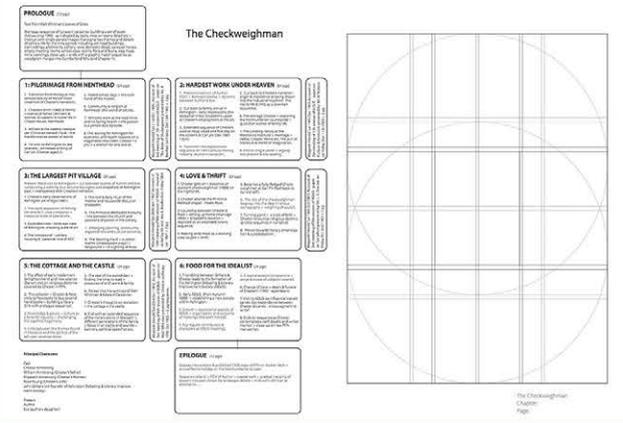


**Pilgrimage from Nenthead**  
by Chester Armstrong (Methuen 1938)



Chester Armstrong & family c. 1920

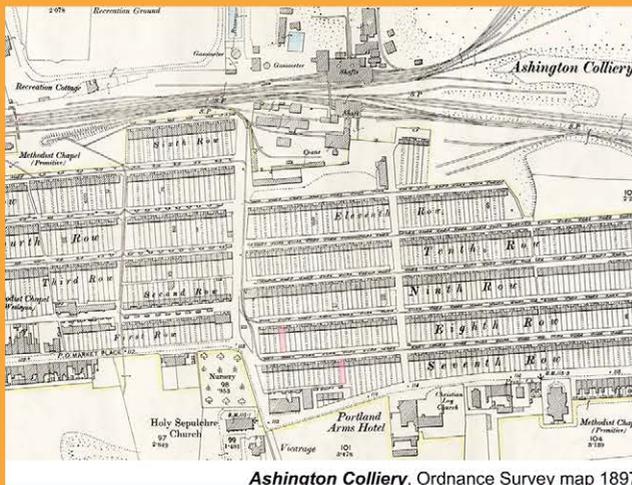
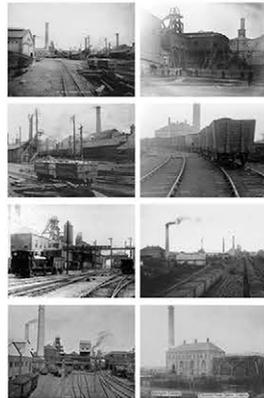
## early issues ... mapping out the adaptation



## Theme 1: memoir as social history

### Key themes from *Pilgrimage* text

- childhood in *Nenthead*
  - move to *Ashington Colliery* (1881)
  - working for the A.C.C
  - the mining community
- 
- deals with the exterior world
  - issues with re-creation?



Ashington Colliery, Ordnance Survey map 1897

**SLIDE 4: Early issues – mapping out the adaptation:** Early on – after much notetaking and several false starts at an initial written script I came to the realization that this approach was not working, as it was difficult to mentally scope-out the whole project and the story plotlines. It also meant that the visual elements were being pushed further and further back in the creative process – it felt more productive to work on the text and visuals in tandem.

To address this, I identified the key themes and events in Chester’s memoir and mapped them onto a basic Story Arc Infographic, comprising six main chapters (24 – 28 pages apiece) book-ended with a prologue and an epilogue. The creation of a story-arc was useful in visualizing the project as a whole and providing a much-needed framework, although flexible enough to allow for future editing or rearrangement as the work progresses. A design choice made early on was to utilize a standard nine-panel page grid as a template, to provide a “metronome giving measure to the narrative’s shifts and fits” (Spiegelman, 2004: n.p.) but also to make the drafting process easier to handle and amend.

**SLIDE 5: Theme 1: memoir as social history:** In some respects, *Pilgrimage from Nenthead* presents as a conventional literary memoir. Events in the early chapters are told chronologically and recount Chester’s parentage and upbringing in the lead-mining town of Nenthead, situated in a remote part of East-Cumberland and idealized in the text as an “object lesson in the study of social politics” (Armstrong, 1938:10). The family migrates to the colliery town of Ashington in November 1881 for reasons of economy and to preserve the health of Chester’s father William. The upheaval is obviously a palpable shock to the adolescent Chester who likens himself to a “plant that is torn up and placed in new soil” (Armstrong, 1938:52). Along with his father and two elder brothers he soon commences his working life as a surface worker for Ashington Coal Company (A.C.C). He is 13 yrs old. The family’s arrival coincides with a period of increased coal production both locally and nationally, to service industrial growth at home and empire abroad. The fortunes and dominance of the A.C.C forms the immediate backdrop to Chester’s narrative, not mentioned by name but by inference only.

The Ashington Coal Company, supported by the local landed gentry and run by wealthy, influential partners began operations in the late 1860’s effectively monopolizing employment (as well as town planning and municipal affairs) in the locality until the nationalization of the coal industry under a post-war Labour government in 1947. To some historians, the privatized British coal industry of this early period represented a “grotesque parody of the social structure of the country as a whole” (Pollard, 1984:11). Recalling his boyhood introduction to pit-life, Chester is stark in his assessment of the fate awaiting him as a life-long colliery worker, he writes;

“The early stages of getting into the industrial harness were painful in many ways, the sense of absolute impotence being the most acute. There was a painful numbness of mind in the realization of this wholesale system of compression; a revulsion of feeling at having to submit slavishly to drastic compulsion; and that sense of utter bewilderment consequent on being abandoned to such a fate.” (Armstrong: 66-67)

As a document of social history, the book deals with family life, the rapid expansion of Ashington as a booming colliery town in the late 1890’s as well as the habitual aspects of community living and the vibrancy of local associations. This raises a phenomenological dimension in regard to the adaptation. Chester wrote the memoir in his late sixties, in retirement from the colliery, and as such the text is a witness account of a life lived in a particular location and circumstance. Even accounting for the fallibility of memory, his testimony is uniquely framed by his own first-hand experience which is impossible to replicate. The historical material evidence available to the adapter of a true-life account is always partial and fraught with omissions, silences and crossings-out. As Hilary Mantel argues, “history is not the past – it is a method we have evolved of organizing our ignorance of the past” (Mantel, 2017:4).

**SLIDE 6: Establishing an authentic ‘story-world’:** The facts, such as they are, in the *Pilgrimage* narrative can be corroborated by government records, historical accounts and the study of town maps from the period covered in the adaptation. A study of Ordnance Survey maps of Ashington published in 1866 and 1897 show a remarkable development in the expansion of colliery housing, municipal buildings, public recreational spaces as well as the emergence of a flourishing high street with shops and businesses to service the growing working population. The pit is prominently situated at the head of the town. Looking at the 1897 map we get a sense of the parameters of Chester’s exterior world – his home in the 8<sup>th</sup> row, the daily walk to work, key sites of religious and leisure activity. Establishing an authentic ‘story-world’ is a key driver of the adapted graphic work – a backdrop that reflects the period and tone of the original text, whilst acknowledging that any attempt at accuracy is compromised by informational gaps and content that is altered as a consequence of transportation across media forms.

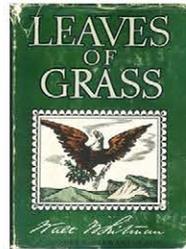
## spatial orientation – imagined simulation



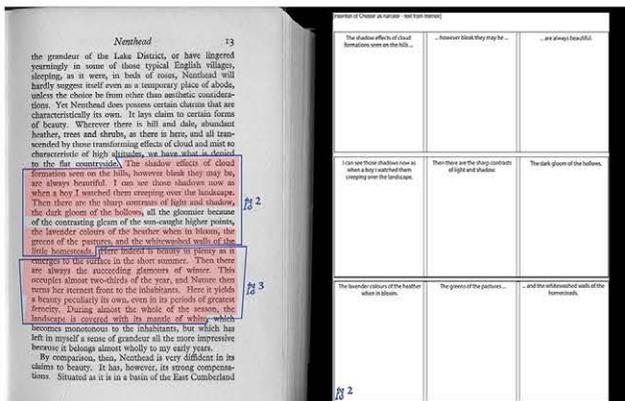
## Theme 2: knowledge as empowerment

### Key themes from *Pilgrimage* text

- politicalisation of the working class
- autodidacticism
- rationalisation & enlightenment
- **Ashington Debating & Literary Society (ADLIS)**
- visualising the interior world?



## Recasting a literary text into a comic book



**SLIDE 7: spatial orientation – imagined simulation:** Cut to present-day Ashington - some of the architectural fabric from that time still exists but the world, both in physical and anthropogeographic terms, that Chester wrote about is long gone. The former Armstrong family home in the 8<sup>th</sup> Row is still there, as are some of the town churches and municipal buildings, but the pit has long been decommissioned and the site like so many former industrial townscapes, remodeled as a business park.

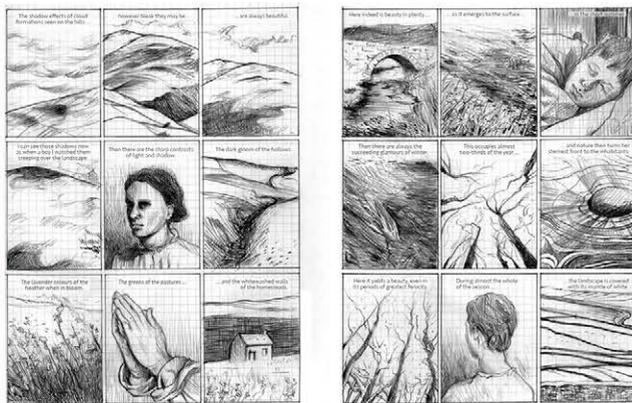
In early stages of the project it was important for me to read around Chester's text to contextualize the narrative and underpin the visualization of the graphic work. To build an understanding of the story-world has meant locating a variety of documentation, including; family records, social-history accounts, archived newspaper columns and photographic referents in regard to Nenthead and Ashington for the relevant time period. It has also meant naturally visiting the town of Ashington, walking around and sensing the ghosts under the ground ... which I have done with my daughter Eve pictured here (who features in the narrative). In the final analysis however, no matter how thorough this process of retrieval is, it can only provide restricted access to the exterior details of a true-life account. The visual depiction and rendering of historical events and scenes from a present-day vantage point involve reconstruction from existing materials (which are partial and unstable) and imagined simulation (where no prior evidence exists).

**SLIDE 8: Theme 2 - knowledge as empowerment:** It is important to note that *Pilgrimage From Nenthead* is more than an eye witness account an industrial town in a bygone age. The memoir has the tone of a confessional and there is greater prominence in the text given to the inner world of the mind, to the distillation of the political, the social and the spiritual. The memoir traces Chester's scepticism towards organised religion, from the sense of humiliation felt at his boyhood baptism (in Nenthead) to a profound questioning of the key tenets of methodism in adulthood, in particular the concept of original sin of which he writes, "the whole scheme of redemption was based on the erroneous conception that human nature is primarily evil" (Armstrong, 1938:45). The pivotal episode in the book concerns Chester's renouncing of religious doctrine. Interestingly, the text reveals nothing about how this decision affected relations with his deeply religious family (notably his pious father) – an example of a gap in the original narrative which will need to be addressed in the adaptation.

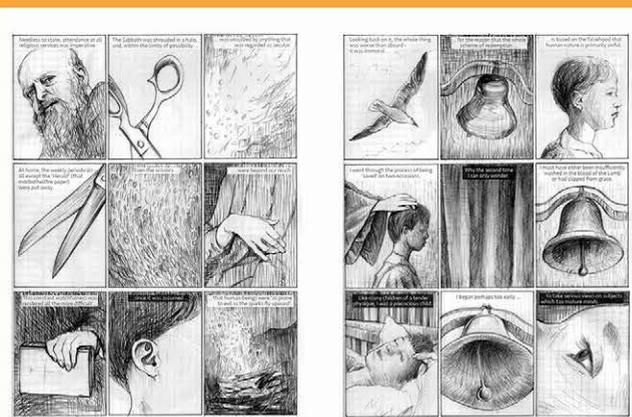
Chester is a voracious reader – an autodidact with the desire to construct an alternative belief system forged from contemporary literature and sociopolitical writings. The book details his personal journey of discovery via the works of Thomas Carlyle, Joseph Mazzini, John Ruskin, Richard Jefferies, Edward Carpenter and the poet Walt Whitman of which he has a particular affinity for (Chester considered Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* as holy writ). His passion for literature and politics was eventually taken into the public sphere. In 1898, aged 30, Chester co-founded the Ashington Debating and Literary Improvement Society (ADLIS) with fellow miner John Gillians, which had a modus-operandi to debate social and philosophical issues and dissect the keynote modernist works of the day (Armstrong: 121-173). Fortnightly meetings were held in the town's Harmonic Hall and the minutes published in the Morpeth Herald - the Herald archive provides a fascinating insight into the society and the time period. It follows that 'knowledge as empowerment' is another key aspect in the original *Pilgrimage* text, to be explored and enlarged further in the adapted work.

**SLIDE 9: Recasting a literary text into a comic book:** Overall, *Pilgrimage from Nenthead* is a mix of the public and the private, the factual and the confessional, the political and the psychological - all of which, makes for a challenging task in adapting the narrative strategies from the written memoir into visual and iconic vernacular of the graphic novel.

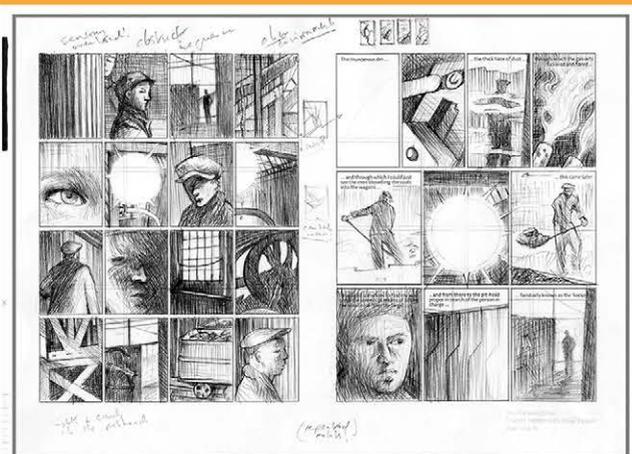
The re-mediation of a literary text into the distinct modality of the comic book (albeit where the textual content can often factor strongly in the narrative) offers both potential as well as restraint in terms of what the format can and cannot do. The published graphic work shares an obvious commonality with the novel in that it is a portable medium, printed on paper-stock, arranged and bound sequentially into pages which allow the reader to consume the narrative at their own pace; to skip ahead or backwards, to re-read passages, to leave and return to at will. The plotting of a comic book will often arrange or divide key events similar "to a chapter boundary in a novel" (Kukkonen, 2013:80) although the spatial schema and visual elements are inextricably fixed into the page design of the graphic work.



Chapter 1 roughs pages 2/3 (text > images)



Chapter 1 roughs pages 20/21 (complex bleedings of past & present)



Chapter 2 roughs pages 34/35 (cinematic montage)

Being told a story is not the same as being shown it. A written text is dependent on the readers ability to understand and process language, to locate meaning and formulate ideas in their imagination which are based on their prior knowledge, experience or interconnection with the world. Linguistic passages are scanned by the reader in sequence from the top to bottom, verso to recto, to direct and propel the narrative forwards. In a comic book however, the inclusion of drawn images and pictograms (eg sound effects and character emotions) moves the reader from “imagination to the realm of direct perception” (Hutcheon, 2013:23) but still some distance from the optical verisimilitude of the cinematic work. Whilst acknowledging the impact that contemporary digital forms have had on the creation and synthesis of image-based media - the photographic image can still be argued as ‘iconic’ or bearing the closest correspondence to the real-world, due in part to a mechanical process of capture and reproduction. In comparison, the hand-rendered illustration presents as a more “fluid and variable” form, occupying a point of reference between visual abstraction and realism dependent on the style or plane of expression of the graphic artist *and* the viewers ability to read meaning into the codified representation of the drawn image (McCloud, 1994:28 -36).

In approaching the opening chapters of the adaptation I have followed a similar developmental process. Firstly, the basic design of each page (page structure and panel borders only) was developed in tandem with the selection and configuration of Chester’s text. Whilst careful to maintain the tone of the original, the text has been lightly edited to remove repetition or to fit the spatial layout – this has been a reductive process. This has allowed me to control the internal rhythm of the textual narration – in effect, to find the poetry within the text - and utilize strip-ellipses and page-turns as pregnant moments and mini-cliffhangers in the story.

**SLIDE 10: Panel roughs – first chapter pages 2/3:** The pages shown here continue the adaptive process shown in the previous slide – with the introduction of visuals which are taken from the first chapter, titled *Pilgrimage from Nenthead* which covers Chester’s upbringing in a titular remote lead-mining community.

The chapter starts with a ‘flyover’ sequence of the Cumberland moors and the landscape before Chester’s narrative begins to assert itself.

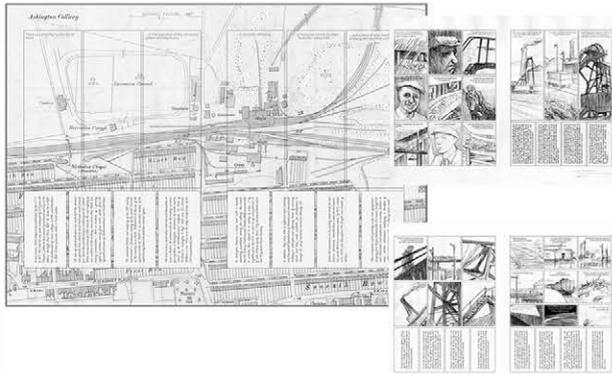
Note how the relationship (or anchorage) between word and image diverts at points – which has the effect of expanding the narrative or creating a sense of emotional ambiguity.

**SLIDE 11: Panel roughs – first chapter pages 20/21:** Later in the chapter – as a Chester begins to question religious belief. These scenes are intercut with scenes from the present.

The comic-book is an ideal medium for showing temporal dislocation or montage, as scenes from the past, present and future can be spatially aligned on the same page. This encourages the reader to find meaning in their interrelationship, to consider the “complex bleedings of past and present ... a blending that allows the present to be productively continuous with the past” (Gardner 2008:18).

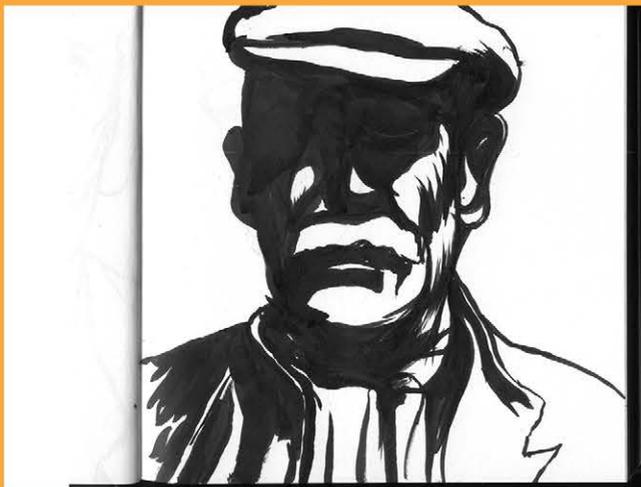
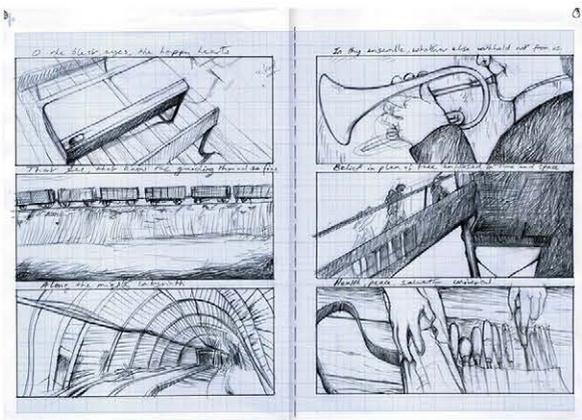
**SLIDE 12: The cinematic montage – second chapter pages 34/35:** There are few instances where Chester writes with what can be considered as a cinematic viewpoint – which is perhaps indicative of the time of writing. The framing of human experience via a filmic unconscious is arguably a key marker of any present-day visual adaptation of a historical work. The comic-book borrows heavily from cinematic time-space or scene-setting constructs, yet diverts from “these structuring elements, holding forth possibilities of simultaneity and polyphony” (Dittmer, 2010:223).

## mobilizing the past – authenticating the text



Chapter 2 roughs pages 40 – 45 (intervention in the narrative)

## the potential of the comic-book adaptation



**SLIDE 13: mobilizing the past – authenticating the text:** As Mantel argues, when dealing with historical material, “the writer must try to work authentically” (Mantel, 2017:6).

One of the creative choices faced here is how best to mobilize any auxiliary historical or contextual material in the textual and image content of the final adapted work – whether to adopt a light-touch approach (concentrating on the consistency of period detail in panel visuals, for example) or alternatively, exert a more explicit or substantive intervention in the narrative. The latter may include the addition of expository passages (not included in the original source) to help situate the story for the reader; or the insertion of actual or facsimiles of historical documents, as referents of realness (maps, diagrams, photographs and so on) to authenticate the text.

**SLIDE 14: the potential of the comic-book adaptation:** The visual modality of a comic-book is distinct from other pictorial story-texts and offers, I believe, real potential in the adaptation of a literary text and the depiction of exterior and interior worlds.

Comics encourage active participation from the reader to affect closure, to read into the negative spaces and imagine the parts of the story that are not shown. Although the preordained panel framework indicates order and structure, there is an inherent instability in the spatial and temporal elements of a comic-book, a dissonance between image and text that can be mobilized by the graphic memoirist to reflect meaningfully on the fragmentary nature of true-life experience.

**SLIDE 15: end slide**

## References

- Armstrong, C. 1938. *Pilgrimage to Nenthead* (London: Methuen)
- Auster, P. Karasik, P & Mazzucchelli, D. 2004. *City of Glass, The Graphic Novel* (London: Faber & Faber)
- Dittmer, J. 2010. *Comic Book Visualities: A Methodical Manifesto on Geography, Montage and Narration* (Journal compilation - Royal Geographical Society pp. 222 - 236)
- Hall, V. G. 1993. *Aspects of the Political and Social History of Ashington, a Northumberland Coal Mining Community 1870-1914*. Phd Thesis. (London: London School of Economics and Political Science)
- El Refaie, E. 2012. *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press)
- Hutcheon, L. 2013. *A Theory of Adaptation*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Abingdon: Routledge)
- Kukkonen, K. 2013. *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels*. (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell)
- Mantel, H. 2017. *The Day Is For The Living*. Reith Lectures radio transcript. (London: BBC)
- McCloud, S. 1994. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (HarperCollins)
- Pollard, P. 1984. *The Hardest Work Under Heaven - The Life & Death of the British Coal Miner* (Hutchinson)
- Rose, J. 2010. *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*. 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press)
- Spiegelman, A. 2011. *MetaMaus* (Viking Press)