Shaping pictures: picturebook narrative from an illustrator's perspective

Overview

This paper examines ways in which simple geometric shapes can be used to represent character and create the impression of a pictorial narrative. I take a design-based approach to constructing books, focusing on the schematic, and often using unchanging, immobile stencilled shapes for the ›characters‹. The extent to which character with minimal or non-existent body and facial animation can be constructed through this kind of formal, design-based approach is examined. I focus on the use of shapes as characters, the portrayal of action and the depiction of tempo, or rhythm in a picturebook. The practical work I discuss is based chiefly on a picturebook I made based on the fairy tale *The Wolf and The Seven Young Kids*, by the Brothers Grimm.

Introduction

In the opening sentence of a paper which examines the interplay between creation and interpretation, Wolfgang Iser (1984) describes tackling such a task as ›formidable‹. While Iser is chiefly discussing literature, the gap between creation and interpretation and the daunting nature of examining this gap is also applicable to art and design. In his discussion of the use of ›narratology‹ to explore children's literature, Peter Hunt observes that the appeal of narrative, ways of storytelling and what makes us turn a page is relevant to both the practitioner and the theorist (Hunt 1990, p. 46). According to Gérard Genette's (1980) ›systematic theory of narrative‹, ›narrative‹ focuses on *how* the story is told (as distinct from ›story‹ which refers to the content of the narrative). Taking a practice-based approach allows for an exploration of ›how‹ the images, text and structure of the book are constructed from a narrative point of view. Looking at work in progress and failed attempts can provide new insights; for example, it is not uncommon for artists to work intuitively, with many decisions happening on a subconscious level. This way of working is described by Donald Schön as the »professional knowing of the practitioner«: implicit knowledge developed as an intuitive process (Schön 1984). An understanding of one's subject becomes a tacit knowledge, which by its nature is often hard to articulate and thus left unspoken.

In the broader context of art history, W.J.T. Mitchell describes the relationship between the artist's role in both theory and practice as a complex one. In the twentieth century, art movements were often centred around a theoretical or ideological standpoint presented in a manifesto, generally written by artists (Mitchell 1989). Yet while the same individual can be both a theorist and an artist, the interchanging or interweaving of practice and theory is initially difficult to achieve. Schön suggests that, »reflective research requires a partnership of practitioner-researchers and researcher-

practitioners« (Schön 1984, p. 323). Michael Biggs (2004) suggests that practice-based research should include an outline of its relationship to the experiential content found in practice. In this paper I attempt to examine the creation of a book, taking into account the perceived gap between theory and practice, and using the discourse of scholars of children's picturebooks, applied from the practitioner's perspective. I hope that through adopting a systematic framework, a discussion of why an image ›feels right‹ will begin to emerge. One tentative hope of this approach is that it will help to facilitate future discussion between theorists and practitioners.

Academic discussions about images are often situated in an interdisciplinary context (Herbert 1995; Mitchell 1995). Mitchell (1994, p. 11) describes how »Linguistics, semiotics, rhetoric, and various models of ›textuality‹ have become the lingua franca for critical reflections on the arts, the media, and the cultural forms«. Interdisciplinary approaches are also not uncommon in practice-based research projects, where practitioners draw on a number of frameworks in their research (Rust et al. 2007). However, while the diverse and interdisciplinary nature of practice-based research can offer alternative interpretations and insights, the interdisciplinary traits can make it hard to fit practice-based research into a traditional research context (Barrett/Bolt 2010). In this paper, I will be drawing on a number of different theoretical approaches in my discussion of my practical work.

Frameworks for approaching picturebook design

The variety of literature which analyses how images are read demonstrates the complexity of the topic. A semiotic approach can be seen in the work of Perry Nodelman (1990) and Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott (2006), for example, who examine the ways in which picturebook images can be interpreted or read. Drawing on Nodelman's (1990) semiotic approach and also Rudolf Arnheim's (1974) work in visual perception, Jane Doonan (1992), offers a further series of case studies examining how to read picturebooks. Speaking as practitioners, Molly Bang (2001) and Scott McCloud (1994) use a method of visual expression to demonstrate some of the ways in which an image can be constructed to form a particular affect.

As an illustrator, a formalist approach, which focuses on compositional elements such as line, colour and shape in the creation of images, seemed an appropriate starting point for my project. William Moebius' theory on graphic codes in picturebooks includes a discussion of line and colour, position and size, perspective, and disposition of objects on the page (Moebius 1990). This ›grammar of images‹, which investigates how illustrations work, is typically applied to the analysis of a published picturebook. I will explore these frameworks from the perspective of an illustrator, focusing on how

the elements listed above are used in the creation of an image and documenting the process of creating images for a book.

Narrative

A structural emphasis suggests that a narratological approach could be a useful framework for exploring the way in which a story is structured, rather than its content. According to Monika Fludernik, a narrative is: »[...] a representation of a possible world in a linguistic and / or visual medium, at whose centre there are one or several protagonists of an anthropomorphic nature who are existentially anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal-directed actions (action and plot structure)« (Fludernik 2009, p. 6).

While several narratologists stress that narrative theory is applicable to visual images (see for example Bal (1997) or Fludernik (2009)), narrative theory remains predominantly text based (Fludernik 2009); a point that Wendy Steiner (1988; 2004) and Magdalena Sikorska (2010) emphasise in the opening sections of their applications of narrative theory to visuals.

From a narrative perspective, the use of a fairy tale, in this case *The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids*, offered the flexibility of being able to assume a level of knowledge of the story on the part of the reader, as described by Marie-Laure Ryan (2004), who discusses how a well-formed mental image of a fairy tale can aid a viewer in allowing them to recognise the plot, a point she exemplifies with reference to the ballet *Sleeping Beauty*. A similar observation has been noted in relation to Warja Lavater's (1974) *Blanche Neige, une imagerie d'après le conte,* in which presupposition of knowledge of the story allows that while there is no text, there is intertext in the telling of Snow White (cf. Higonnet 1990, p. 47). My choice of a fairy tale allows focus to be placed on ›how‹ the story is told without telling the story.

Shapes

The role of narrative and discourse in relation to abstract shapes is an interesting area. When discussing Malevich's painting *Red Square, Black Square*, Mitchell (1989) suggests that narrative should not be excluded from interpretations of the image. The physical arrangement of the shapes and the symbolic associations based on their angles, positioning and colours are interpreted as follows: »The relation of black square to red square is not just the relation between abstract opposites like stability and tilt, large and small, but of more potent, ideologically charged associations like deadly black and vivid, revolutionary red, domination and resistance, or of even more personal and emotional relationships like father and son« (Mitchell 1989, p. 359).

Shapes are described as having certain emotive associations (see Munari (1966; 1965), Mitchell (1984), Gombrich (2002), Kress/van Leeuwen (1996) to name a few). Referring to picturebooks, Nodelman (1990) suggests that the rigidity of squares offers strength and structure while the softer, rounded shape of circles is seen as gentler and more accommodating. Bang (2011) has explored shapes visually as an artist, creating different images and analysing the results. Echoes of gestalt theory and visual perception can be seen in her visual investigation of the effect of different shapes, sizes, colours and positioning on the page in her abstract version of *Little Red Riding Hood*. Different arrangements of shape on the page, for example, a series of triangles placed on the diagonal, create a dynamically charged image (Bang 2001). The images she chooses contain a pictorial element: there is sufficient information for the reader / viewer to fill in the gaps and read the narrative coherently. Her use of shapes extends to backgrounds as well as character design. She depicts the forest, for example, as a static series of parallel vertical lines when Little Red Riding Hood first enters it. The character is positioned as a small red triangle at the bottom of the page, creating the impression of the forest as an imposing space. This impression is heightened on the page which introduces the wolf into the forest, where Bang places the trees at harsh angles that create tension within the image and suggest an intense and disquieting initial meeting with a menacing character. The use of quite abstract, geometric shapes is highly effective even though they are not pictorial.

The use of shapes to depict characters

In Bang's book, Little Red Riding Hood is depicted by a simple red triangle. The use of abstract shapes to depict characters is also demonstrated in Leo Lionni's (1959) *Little Blue and Little Yellow*, in which the characters and their environment are shown as pieces of torn paper. Lionni uses the physical qualities of torn paper throughout as a way of creating a cohesive narrative. The environment the characters reside in, their homes and schools, are also created with torn paper. The emotions the characters feel are similarly depicted, for example, a crying character sheds smaller pieces of torn paper. This pattern and use of the material qualities of torn paper is broken when two tightly hugging characters can be seen to merge into one shape.

E.H. Gombrich (2002) has commented on the role the reader can play in creating an image, observing that the artist may rely on the reader to be complicit in creating meaning and filling gaps within an image. McCloud (1994, p.68) echoes this sentiment by describing the artist as »aided and abetted by a silent accomplice«, i.e. the reader. This participation on the part of the reader offers the artist considerable freedom in choosing how to depict characters and scenes. In *Dottoko Zoo*, Norio Nakamura (2012) experiments with abstract shapes, demonstrating how few pixels are needed to allow a possible identification of a number of animals in a book described by the judges at the

Bologna Ragazzi as a »highly sophisticated graphic puzzle, a tour de force of composition and minimalism designed to stretch the mind and the eye.«[i] Suggestions that withholding information from the reader or viewer can aid engagement by offering a puzzle have been made, for example, by Richard Pratt (2012, p. 518).

Visual depictions of the young kids and the wolf

Within my picturebook based on the fairy tale *The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids* by the Brothers Grimm, I was interested in exploring ways in which immobile shapes could be used to depict character, action and tempo. A more detailed discussion of how the characters were created for my version of *The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids* can be found in Little (2013), where I also discuss how background imagery can be used as a way of depicting a character's emotional state. In the images below, I used stenciled shapes to create a character (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).
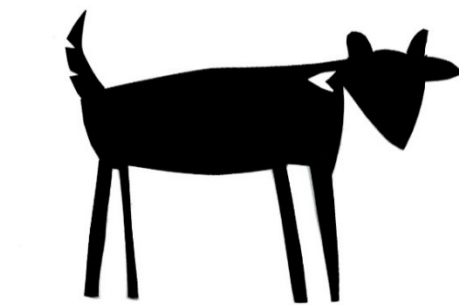

Fig. 1: Young Kid

The sense of shape was heightened in my depiction of the wolf, who was only shown as a series of black paw prints (Fig. 2). The absence of a directly pictorial depiction of the character emphasises the anxiety associated with the appearance of the wolf: we fear what we cannot see.

Fig. 2: Wolf

Depictions of action

Using a repetitive shape for each character and character set throughout the book resulted in a lack of many traditional action poses. For example, figures are not shown to be running, pouncing or crouching. Facial expressions are minimal or non-existent throughout the book. Werner Wolf (2004, p. 94) describes how a story emerges from a series of stills, captured frozen images made up of »pregnant moments«. In my book, the impression of action is similarly created through the elements of the narrative which are shown, and the elements which have been left out.

Nodelman (1990, p.160) suggests that depictions of actions in a picturebook are often made up of images which show an action which happens just before the event reaches its climax. Examples of this can be seen in my earlier book *The Taste of a Red Cap* (2005), which visually tells the story of *Little Red Cap* by the Brothers Grimm. The decisions on which scenes to include were based here more on action, for example, an image of a pouncing wolf on one double page spread was followed by an image of snapping jaws, dripping blood, on the next page. This depiction of action before, during and occasionally after an event, was appealing to draw, but as a sequence it lacked subtlety (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: *The Taste of a Red Cap*

In *The Wolf and The Seven Young Kids*, the pages progressively build with increasing intensity to a point of action; however the images stop before the action takes place. Instead, the focus is on the effect the action has on the characters and the aftermath of the event, serving to create tension in the images, and allowing gaps to be filled by the viewer. For example, on the page where the wolf comes to eat the little kids, the wolf is not shown. The little kid shown is the one who is not found by the wolf. The background is used to create an impression of the impact of the actions, rather than the actions themselves. For an action-based part of the narrative, the page is quite static.

Fig. 4: The youngest kid hides under the clock

A chaotic scene could have been created by showing the panicked group of young kids tripping and dashing across the double page spread, as the wolf chases and swallows them. My version takes a minimal approach, with a single character shown on a black background. While the large triangles suggestive of jagged aggressiveness across the top of the page could be interpreted as representing the wolf's closing jaws, neither the wolf nor the remaining kids are shown being eaten. Depicting a scene the moment before, or the moment after action takes place creates tension within a sequential narrative and allows gaps to be filled by the viewer, in this case with the wolf eating the young kids. In this example, the viewer/reader does not necessarily mentally see the missing image, but is apprehensive by the thought of it.

Tempo, rhythm and pacing

Depicting time, both in terms of its passage and also as an abstract concept, presents complex challenges (see, for example, Ryan (2009); Bal (1997) and Wolf (2004)). Mitchell (1984, p. 101) states: »The very fact that temporality must be inferred in a painting suggests that it cannot be directly represented by the medium in the way that spatial objects can be«.

In relation to picturebooks, both Nodelman (1990) and Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott (2006) draw connections with timing in films. While in films there might be discrepancies between how long something actually takes to happen and how long it takes on screen, visuals of clocks turning or pages flying off calendars provide clichéd examples of showing that time has passed even if the sequence on film takes only a few seconds. In a picturebook, on the other hand, the viewer/reader is free to linger on a page. Nathalie op de Beeck (2010) examines this issue in a comparison of animations and comics and observes that the visual devices used to depict timing in animations and comics can be quite similar, drawing on McCloud's observation that »space does for comics, what time does for film« (McCloud 1994, p. 7) . He describes how the placing of a character within a box, or a comic book frame, can create the impression of time; setting a character in a longer frame, which gives the character space, creates the impression that more time has passed, than if the same character is encased in a small frame, which fits snugly around it (McCloud 1994). Bang draws similar conclusions, also suggesting that space implies time (Bang 2001).

Complex images necessitate a pause in the narrative, as the viewer pauses to absorb the details (Nikolajeva 2010). While it makes sense that a higher proportion of details and action on a page will need longer to be viewed, from a practice-based perspective this feels slightly counter-intuitive. I think there is tendency to envision that complex images containing many different elements will be viewed as fast-paced and to imagine them to be read at speed to reflect that. However, the narrative

time (how long something takes in the story) and the discourse time (how long something takes to read) are not necessarily going to be equal or proportional, nor do they need to be.

Using the form of the book, or different types of paper, such as those used by Munari (1996) in *Nella Notte Buia*, can affect the sense of pacing in a book. The semi-translucent paper sequence in the middle of Munari's book has a very different pacing and feel to the black pages that the book opens with (Poesio 2002). The change in pace is also due to images from other spreads being partially visible on a semi-transparent page, creating a sense of depth in a quieter, dream-like sequence. This contrasts sharply with the heavy black paper Munari uses in the opening sequence of his book, where the tempo could be inferred as more rigid.

The use of contrast in different sections can also be seen to an extent in *The Wolf and The Seven Young Kids*, which contains four sections with different approaches to colour and layout. These four sections are partially narrative devices that highlight different elements of the story, but they also affect the pacing of the story. The first section begins with a white background. This gradually becomes darker in the second section and the double page spreads become more intense until the page where the young kid is hiding under the clock as the wolf eats its siblings, and the background is almost completely black (Fig. 4). The pace slows down during section three, which has empty grey spreads evocative of the mother goat's grief on discovering that her children have been eaten by the wolf (Fig. 5). Section four is a concluding sequence, which mirrors the opening, more neutral sequence of white backgrounds with some imagery on them.

Fig. 5: The mother goat and little kid

The third sequence of the book shows the mother goat returning home to discover the wolf has come and has eaten all her children. In the text, the description of this is a few sentences long. In my book this sequence is exaggerated and stretched over several double page spreads (Fig. 5). The scale of the mother goat and the little kid, positioned at the bottom of the page, emphasise the emptiness of the spread. These spreads are full bleeds of a grey background with minimal, dusty black images. Visually they depict loneliness, while the page layout and structure maintain a rhythmic progression through the book. This long section gives the impression of passing time as outlined by McCloud (1994). Placed after a section which is visually intense, this quieter section creates a pause in the narrative, allowing a break where there is less information to be considered. The disruption of spatial relations allows sufficient contrast to the rest of the book to set this section of the narrative time apart, offering the impression of a change in pace even if that change was not reflected in the discourse time.

Fig. 6: Monoprinted background

The grey backgrounds of this sequence were problematic. As blocks of solid colour imported from Photoshop, they were too flat. As monoprinted backgrounds, they were too textured (Fig. 6). The final background image is an enlarged section of a photograph of freezing fog (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7: Photograph of freezing fog, Limerick, 2010

This captured the cold bleakness of the image and gave a subtle depth to the grey, while maintaining an almost blank spread. A slight gradient progresses across the spreads, with the right hand page darker than the left hand page. This is apparent when the concertina book is spread out; gradients appear in peaks at the folds of the book, where the background was duplicated across several double page spreads.

Summary and conclusion

In this paper, I describe a practice-based approach to exploring the creation of artwork in a picturebook. Several artists have successfully used geometric shapes to depict characters and demonstrated how shapes can be positioned to create atmosphere and suggest action. I found that the use of static images when I attempted to depict action or create a sense of timing in a picturebook created a different set of challenges.

One challenge of practice-based research is a perceived gap between creation and interpretation. Within this paper, I have attempted to examine this gap by applying the discourse of the theorist to work in progress in the creative process. By focusing on ›how‹ the story was told, a framework to discuss how geometric shapes could be used in depictions of action and tempo in a picturebook began to emerge. Using a combination of semiotic interpretations of picturebooks and narrative theory offered a way to discuss the thought processes behind creating images in a more tangible manner. In this instance, the discourse of the theorist suggested ways in which the tacit knowledge of the maker could become explicit. This approach was particularly pertinent when discussing tempo. Depicting time in a static image is notoriously difficult both to create and also to write about; timing in

a static visual image needs to be inferred. Identifying the distinction between discourse time and narrative time allowed me in *The Wolf and The Seven Young Kids* to create a visual contrast in the book, offering the inference of a differing tempo during one section of the story. This paper looks at a small range of examples; however it demonstrates the possibility of using theory from various fields as a way to discuss work in progress as well as finished work, offering insights into the process of both creation and interpretation of images in a picturebook.

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[i] <http://www.bookfair.bolognafiere.it/en/bologna-ragazzi-award/winners-2014/non-fiction/2227.html> (August 25, 2014)