A play of signifiers:
absence and presence
in the picturebooks of Shaun Tan

by
Maria Lebedeva

Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Philosophy, Visual Arts (Illustration)
at the University of Stellenbosch

Supervisor: Lize van Robbroeck
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Visual Arts

March 2013

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploratory study into the signification potential of contemporary, postmodern picturebooks, specifically focusing on the way in which a seemingly 'simplistic' medium has the potential to initiate a vastly complex play of meanings. Picturebooks are traditionally considered to be a medium which implies a child reader, and conveys a simple linear narrative for educational and entertainment purposes. Traditional picturebooks thus assume a clear division between an author and reader, whereby the author is a 'knowing' adult, who conveys a moral or message to a passive child reader. These assumptions are arguably unsettled by the appearance of postmodern picturebooks, broadly defined as a medium which, while retaining the traditional picturebook format, opens itself up to multiple interpretations, instead of presenting the reader with an encoded message or 'meaning'. A number of postmodern picturebook authors, such as Shaun Tan, intentionally subvert the traditional dynamic between the author and reader of picturebooks by creating complex texts which display a general absence of clear accessible 'meaning', thereby allowing the reader to actively participate in the meaning-making process. With aid of the theories of signification set out by poststructuralist Jacques Derrida, this study aims to illustrate how a purposeful absence of apparent 'meaning' in picturebooks has the potential to allow for unlimited interpretations of a single text, thus by extension widening the 'implied' audience of such picturebooks. The objective is to set postmodern picturebooks apart from other texts (in particular more traditional picturebooks), and to provide a new outlook on the ways picturebooks are created, and the way they are read.

ABSTRAK

Hierdie tesis is 'n ondersoekende studie na die betekenispotensiaal van kontemporêre, post-moderne prenteboeke, met spesiale verwysing na die manier waarop 'n sogenaamde "simplistiese" medium die potensiaal openbaar om 'n hoogs-komplekse verskeidenheid betekenisse te ontlok. Prenteboeke word tradisioneel gesien as 'n medium van eenvoudige, liniêre vertellings gerig op die jong leser met die doel om op te voed of te vermaak. Tradisionele prenteboeke handhaaf dus 'n duidelike afbakening tussen die leser en die outeur, die sogenaamde "alwetende" volwassene, wat 'n morele les/ boodskap aan 'n passiewe, jong leser oordra. Hierdie veronderstelling word egter omvergewerp deur die verskyning van die post-moderne prenteboek wat, alhoewel in die tradisionele formaat van die prenteboek gegiet, die leser die geleentheid bied om veelvoudige interpretasies te maak in plaas van om net die beoogde geënkodeerde betekenis of boodskap van die boek te aanvaar. 'n Aantal post-moderne prenteboekskrywers soos Shaun Tan het die tradisionele dinamiek tussen prenteboekskrywer en -leser bewustelik omver kom werp deur komplekse teks te skep wat gekenmerk word aan die afwesigheid van 'n duidelik waarneembare betekenis en wat die leser dus toelaat om aktief deel te neem aan die interpretasieproses. Die doel van hierdie studie is om met behulp van die betekenispotensiaal-teorie, soos uiteengesit deur post-strukturalis Jacques Derrida, te illustreer hoe die doelbewuste weglating van 'n duidelik waarneembare betekenis of boodskap dit moontlik maak om die teks op veelvoudige maniere te interpreteer en daarmee saam ook die lesersprofiel van prenteboeke te verbreed. Die hoofdoel van hierdie studie is dus om die post-moderne prenteboek te onderskei van die tradisionele prenteboek en ander tekste en om nuwe waarnemings en insigte te verskaf in die wyse waarop prenteboeke geskep en gelees word.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Introduction and problem statement

The discussion around postmodern picturebooks is a fairly recent one, and there are various definitions of what this new picturebook 'genre' entails. As a term, postmodernism is used to describe tendencies that have occurred in the the broader context of the arts during the last half of the twentieth century (Sipe & Pantaleo 2008:1). These changes and transformations in the art sphere include the breaking of boundaries between art and everyday life, as well as the boundaries between elite and popular culture, and a stylistic eclecticism and mixing of codes (Sarup 1988:132). Postmodern traits such as nonlinearity, intertextuality, irony, self-reflexivity, as well as an invitation for the reader to become coauthor can be seen in many examples of contemporary literature, including picturebooks (Goldstone 2004:199). Various theorists have put forward descriptions of the postmodern traits found in picturebooks, and provided definitions for the postmodern picturebook. This study focuses on the definition proposed by Anstey (2002:447), who describes the postmodern picturebook as a medium that is designed to interrupt a reader's expectations, while allowing for multiple interpretations, and thus enabling them to be enjoyed by an audience with a broader age span than that of a 'traditional' picturebook.

The picturebook[1] can be loosely defined as a medium primarily intended for a young audience that uses a combination of words and images to tell a story (Nodelman 1988:vii). The interaction of these two modes is what makes the picturebook unique, because their combination is unlike that found in any other medium (Nikolajeva 2001:1). Words and images in a picturebook are so intertwined that one is unable to carry the narrative without the other (Schwarcz & Schwarcz 1991:5). Both the words and the pictures thus perform the primary functions of storytelling, however they cannot be interpreted simultaneously, thereby forcing the reader to constantly interchange between the two (Nodelman 1988:vii-viii). This creates a tension in the word-image relationship, and allows for unlimited possibilities in their interaction, which arguably renders the

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1   This study uses the term 'picturebook' as opposed to 'picture book', as it is suggested by Lewis (2001:xiv) that this term best describes the compound nature of image and text interaction within a single text.

picturebook as both unpredictable and ever-changing (Nikolajeva 2001:2). Consequently, Lewis (2001:65) suggests that there are no formal constraints that all picturebooks adhere to, other than the use of both words and pictures to tell a story.

The picturebook is constantly overstepping its own boundaries, developing into a new art form that has limitless variations of content, context, and style (Schwarcz & Schwarcz 1991:5). The picturebook itself can thus not be defined as a genre, but rather a form that has the ability to exploit various genres. Lewis (2001:65) describes the picturebook as a form which "incorporates, or ingests, genres, forms of language and forms of illustration, then accommodates itself to what it has swallowed". Within a broader context, Sipe and Pantaleo (2008:1) point out that children's literature has always reflected the "societal values, attitudes, and knowledge" of the historical period within which it was created. This is to be expected, because although the implied audience of picturebooks is traditionally thought of as 'unsophisticated'[2], their authors and illustrators (as well as a significant proportion of their readers) are adults who live in, and are influenced by, the increasingly complex contemporary world (Lewis 2001:87). It is therefore unsurprising that elements of postmodern thought have made their way into picturebooks, spurred on by the currently expanding market of picturebook makers, many employing innovative stylistic and conceptual approaches (Anstey 2002:447). This study thus makes the assumption that a postmodern picturebook, while retaining the basic attributes of being a medium that communicates through words and images, is becoming more sophisticated, and (due to its postmodern characteristics) more open to various interpretations, which allows it to surpass its definition as a medium intended for children.

It is important to note that the idea that a picturebook can allow for various interpretations, and address both a child and adult audience simultaneously, is not altogether new. For instance Nikolajeva and Scott (2001:21) argue that "many picture books are clearly designed for both small children and sophisticated adults, communicating to the dual audience at a variety of levels". Furthermore, according to Lewis (2001:74), the picturebook always opens "at least two windows upon the text[3] so

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2 The fact that children are unsophisticated and thus limited in their ability to interpret complex texts seems to be the common opinion among picturebook theorists. Although I do not necessarily agree with this opinion, the scope of this study does not allow for an in depth exploration of children's abilities to understand and interpret postmodern picturebooks.

3 The term 'text' refers to an assemblage of signs (words, images, gestures, sounds) which is constructed

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that we may see it in more than one light", because of its use of both words and images to tell a story. Various theorists discuss the use of textual gaps as a means to engage a reader, for instance Lewis (2001:96) argues that "all stories are built upon gaps – writers and picturebook makers cannot describe, explain, or show everything". This idea is particularly relevant to picturebooks, which are so 'simple' in their form, that in order to make sense of them a reader needs to approach the text with a vast and complex background knowledge which the book itself does not offer (Nodelman 2008:15). According to Tan (2010:s.p), the simplicity in the form of a picturebook is deceiving, because "the restrained coupling of text and image can contain any level of poetic sophistication and complexity". It can thus be suggested that any picturebook, whether postmodern or not, can be described as a medium which is seemingly simplistic, but simultaneously complex, and allowing for various interpretations by multiple audiences. What, then, sets the postmodern picturebook apart?

In order to distinguish the postmodern picturebook among its counterparts, this study sets out to explore the claim made by El-Tamami (2007:37), who states that one can see the

> postmodern presence (or is it absence?) in many picture books that toy with the idea of signification. The best picture book 'creators' admit to – in fact, revel in – their loss of control: subverting the idea of a direct cord between signifier and signified – and thus between Meaning-Maker and ready recipient.

The idea of unstable signification[4] where a signifier and signified are no longer regarded as simply connected originates from poststructuralist theory, particularly from the work of Jacques Derrida (Sarup 1988:33). El-Tamami's argument thus suggests that postmodern picturebooks have a unique communicative approach, which is based not only in postmodern, but also poststructural philosophy. Sarup (1988:133) explains that

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and interpreted according to the conventions associated with a particular medium or genre (Chandler 2002:2-3). In the context of this study the term 'text' is used to refer to picturebooks. The broader implications of the term 'text', such as the relation between the terms 'work' and 'text', as well as text and intertextuality are explored in chapter 3.

4   Signification refers to the workings of signs, the term 'sign' referring to a unit of communication, such as a word, image, sound or gesture (Chandler 2002:2). According to the Saussurean model, the sign consists of the signifier and signified, the signifier being the visual or verbal manifestation of the sign, and the signifier the concept to which it refers (Chandler 2002:18). Saussure's concept of a stable relationship between the signifier and signified is widely criticised by poststructuralists, as is discussed in Chapter 2 (Sarup 1988:3).

"postmodernism is in part a description of a new type of society but also, in part, a new term for post-structuralism in the arts"[5]. It can thus be suggested that the authors of certain postmodern picturebooks (whether consciously or unconsciously) play with poststructuralist notions of signification, and subvert the traditional perception of the author as the origin of meaning, which arguably results in the postmodern picturebook displaying communicative qualities that are unlike those of other picturebooks.

This study thus aims to understand the ways in which a postmodern picturebook communicates, specifically focusing on the implications of a poststructural approach to signification, and its effect on meaning making. El-Tamami (2007:40) describes the postmodern picturebook as a

> medium of Derridean freeplay, the constantly self-questioning system that prefers to live in flux, to ponder possibilities and explore multiple ... mini-narratives, rather than succumb to the security of fundamentalism, of championing one Grand Narrative above all others.

It can therefore be suggested that the postmodern picturebook, unlike traditional picturebooks, does not seek to deliver a specific meaning or message, but rather provides the reader with an experience of exploring an array of possible story lines and meanings. This study seeks to explore the notion that a reader of a postmodern picturebook does not passively consume the author's text, but uses the elements present in the picturebook to create his/her own text. Stephens (2008:92), for instance, suggests that many postmodern picturebooks present their contents as bits and pieces of discarded material, which the reader uses to construct texts, and consequently meanings. This has great potential implications for the picturebook because of the principle of relay, or the generation of meaning structures that are greater than the sum of the written and visual information present in the text (Stephens 2008:92). The elements (word and image) in the picturebook are thus employed by the reader to generate (or resignify the text with) elements, ideas, and meanings which are not simply present in the text, and also not simply absent. The terminology of absence and presence, mentioned above by El-Tamami (2007:37), is essential to Derrida's poststructural theory of signification, and this study

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5 According to Novitz (2005:214), the term 'postmodernism' was initially used by artists, but was later appropriated by poststructuralists such as Derrida, Lyotard and Baudrillard. In fact Sarup (1988:144) states that many poststructuralists can also be said to be postmodernists, because the two movements are so closely bound in their approaches.

seeks to explore these notions in order to understand the workings of signification in postmodern picturebooks.

The workings of such signification are arguably evident in the work of Shaun Tan, an Australian postmodern picturebook author. Tan makes unique picturebooks, which contain dense fragmented narratives, and display a seeming absence of any particular 'meaning', yet simultaneously appear very complex. This study aims to take a closer look at Tan's picturebooks *The Lost Thing* (2000), *The Red Tree* (2001), and *Tales from outer suburbia* (2009), all of which display very different narrative structures, and diverse relationships between words and images. *The Lost Thing* (2000) tells a story of a boy who finds an unidentifiable 'lost thing' on the beach, and tries to find its place in a surrealistic city full of obscure concrete buildings and excessive plumbing. *The Red Tree* (2001) is a picturebook without a specific narrative, which follows a red-haired girl as she wonders aimlessly through a series of self-contained, highly detailed surreal landscapes, accompanied by a minimal and vague thread of text (Tan s.a). *Tales from outer suburbia* (2009) is a very unusual picturebook, which consists of fifteen individual stories, each very different stylistically, but all presenting slightly unsettling open-ended narratives which combine regular suburban life with fantasy. According to Hunter (2011:10-11), an air of uncertainty seems to be the main rhetoric surrounding Tan's work, relative to both the content of his picturebooks, as well as their ability to evade classification.

Tan works across boundaries, and while his work may take the form of picturebooks, they don't seem to fit within the traditional ideas concerning what 'children's literature' should be (Hunter 2011:11). According to Tan (2010:s.p), his books are treated simultaneously as child, teen and adult fiction, depending on the country of publication. Tan's picturebooks can thus be said to display the postmodern characteristics described by Anstey (2002:447), as they disrupt expectations by presenting the reader with something very different to a 'traditional' picturebook, and arguably widening the 'implied' audience. Furthermore, this study seeks to explore the notion that Tan's work toys with the concept of 'Derridean freeplay', by analysing *The Lost Thing* (2000)*, The Red Tree* (2001), and *Tales from outer suburbia* (2009), focusing specifically on the two modes that by definition make a picturebook what it is – image and text – and attempt to discover and explain the workings of Derridean signification, with specific focus on absence and presence. By

doing this, I hope to uncover the potential of postmodern picturebooks to subvert traditional notions of picturebook communication, and discover how a 'simple' medium is able to trigger an infinitely complex process of meaning-making in any reader wishing to engage with it.

1.2 Aims and objectives

This study aims to explore the communicative potential of contemporary, postmodern picturebooks, specifically focusing on the way in which a seemingly simplistic narrative has the potential to initiate a vastly complex play of signification. Furthermore, this study aims to illustrate that a purposeful absence of apparent 'meaning', and the author's intentional empowerment of the reader aids this signification process. By doing so, the study aims to demonstrate that a postmodern picturebook has the potential to allow for unlimited interpretations, thus by extension widening the 'implied' audience of such picturebooks[6]. The objective is to set postmodern picturebooks apart from other texts (in particular more traditional picturebooks), and to provide a new outlook on the ways picturebooks are created, and the way they are read.

1.3 Research methodology

Firstly, it is necessary to investigate both the theories of signification of poststructuralist Jacques Derrida, as well as the theoretical background from which he develops these theories. Secondly, it is important to investigate the phenomenon of the postmodern picturebook, taking into consideration the assumptions attached to more traditional picturebooks, and establish a difference between the 'genres'. Thirdly, a thorough analysis of the workings of words and images within a picturebook is necessary in order to understand the modes of communication, or 'signs', within the picturebook, namely how they interact, and how they signify. Furthermore, it is important to explore the key concerns of Derrida's theoretical approach, such as the metaphysics of presence, as well as Saussure's theories of the sign and signification. It is also important to provide a brief

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6 The scope of this study does not allow for an in-depth investigation of the readers of postmodern picturebooks, and thus the approach to the implied reader remains a purely theoretical one, with no specific examples of reader participation reviewed. However, I would like to note that an exploration involving the analysis of specific reader reactions is a valid and interesting investigation, which could follow as a continuation and expansion of this study.

historical overview of the picturebook, in order to establish how a postmodern picturebook differs from the more traditional conception of what a picturebook is, and how it communicates. Finally, it is necessary to decode a number of postmodern picturebooks, namely *The Lost Thing* (2000)*, The Red Tree* (2001), and *Tales from outer suburbia* (2009) by Shaun Tan in order to establish how the images and words operate, taking into consideration their interactions, the ways in which they signify (using Derrida's signification theory as a framework), and how absence and presence are used in the signification process of both visual and written signs. Furthermore, where relevant, intertextual references are identified and discussed. This is done in order to explore the signification potential of postmodern picturebooks, and to speculate how they are able to triggers, and thus assists in, the generation of meanings.

1.4 Outline of chapters

Chapter two provides a theoretical background of Derrida's poststructural theory, focusing on his ideas relating to the sign and signification. In order to contextualise Derrida's theory of signification, the chapter provides a brief historical overview of Western philosophy's reliance on the notion of presence, or the Western metaphysics of presence, as Derrida terms it. Furthermore, the chapter provides a short exploration of Saussure's theory of signification, as it forms the basis from which Derrida's theory developed. Derrida's theory of signification is then discussed, focusing on his ideas of how the sign functions, specifically looking at différance, the concepts of absence and presence, and the trace. The chapter is concluded with a brief overview of how the process of meaning-making functions within Derrida's theories about signification. This chapter aims to provide a framework from which to discuss the changes occurring in postmodern picturebooks, specifically the ways in which they are able communicate and trigger meaning-making processes in a reader.

Chapter three explores the picturebook medium, focusing on postmodern picturebooks. In order to understand how a postmodern picturebook differs from its more traditional counterparts, an overview of traditional picturebooks is provided. The attributes of postmodern picturebooks are then discussed, focusing on the changes which the picturebook has undergone in recent years. Furthermore, Barthes notion of 'text' is

discussed in order to establish how a postmodern picturebook functions more like a 'text' than like a 'work', thus effecting the way it is read, as opposed to a traditional picturebook. This is followed by a brief discussion of words and images, focusing on their interactions, and the way in which they are perceived by readers. Words and images are then discussed within the context of the picturebook, and an attempt to describe their interactions is undertaken. Lastly, the chapter looks at the concept of the implied reader of picturebooks, and the current theory is contested in an attempt to widen the perceived readership of postmodern picturebooks.

Chapter four provides an overview and investigation of three postmodern picturebooks, namely *The Lost Thing* (2000)*, The Red Tree* (2001), and *Tales from outer suburbia* (2009) by Shaun Tan. An overview of Tan's intentions as author are provided in order to establish his desire to leave his picturebooks as devoid of meaning as possible, and thus attempt to define them as 'texts'. The three picturebooks are then discussed, taking note of their basic plot and characteristics, investigating both the words and images, as well as the relationship between the two modes, and taking note of intertextuality, where relevant. This is done with specific attention to identifying the workings of absence and presence, and the play of signs within the texts, in order to ultimately demonstrate the meaning-making potential of postmodern picturebooks, and their ability appeal to a wide readership.

Chapter 2 – Signification, and a Derridean account of absence and presence in the text

In order to understand how a postmodern picturebook communicates, it is necessary to establish a theoretical basis that explains the workings of this communication, namely the ways in which images and text (or the absence of these) signify, and how the reader processes the textual information. Poststructural theory is a useful basis for such a study, as it offers a distinctive view on the relationship between readers and texts, and has a close affinity with postmodern theory (Belsey 2006:43). According to Belsey (2002:5), poststructuralism "names a theory, or a group of theories, concerning the relationship between human beings, the world, and the practice of making and reproducing meanings". The poststructuralist view stresses the interaction between reader and text in the search for meaning, making reading an active process, as opposed to a passive consumption of a pre-established structure (Sarup 1988:3).

Poststructuralism occurred largely in response to structuralism, however poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida do not work in opposition to structuralism, but rather from within it, altering, but not discarding, structuralist thought (West 1996:178). As the name suggests, structuralism is concerned with the study of structures, or the means by which our world is organised into 'meaningful entities' (McGowan 2006:3). According to Culler (1983:22), structuralists attempt to develop a system which accounts for linguistic elements, and the ways in which these elements combine, in order to explain the meaning and structure of texts. One of the key theorists of the structuralist movement, Ferdinand de Saussure, developed an account of language as a system of signs, which was later critiqued and reworked by Derrida, who is considered to be the key poststructural theorist. Derrida critiques Saussure's theory in relation to a tendency he calls the 'metaphysics of presence', which he sees as the state of Western thought and philosophy in general (Cilliers 1998:42). It is therefore important to understand both the 'metaphysics of presence', as well as Saussure's theories in order to fully grasp the theory of signification proposed by Derrida. This chapter thus aims to give a brief overview of the foundations of Derrida's theory, and to discuss some key ideas within the theory, which form the basis for the discussion of picturebook communication in the following chapters.

2.1 Western metaphysics and logocentrism

Derrida (1978:278-279) proposes that the history of Western philosophy (and thus Western thought in general) is inseparable from the concept of a centred structure, the centre being synonymous with an origin or a 'full presence'. The name of this centre changes over time – consciousness, God, man – but always retains the status of unmediated presence (Derrida 1978:279-280). Derrida calls this notion the 'metaphysics of presence', or the idea that Western thought relies on an existence of an immediately available source of certainty, truth and ultimate meaning (Sarup 1988:35). Language has thus traditionally been thought of as a neutral system or tool for naming an objective reality that pre-exists the linguistic system (McGowan 2006:4). This notion is dubbed by poststructuralists as 'logocentrism', and refers to the Western belief that connects the voice or 'the word' with ultimate truth, or the "immediate expression of the self-presence of consciousness" (West 1996:178-179). Logocentrism thus affirms that beyond any sign lies a pure, unmediated truth, which is ever-present and accessible to the human mind and describable by language (West 1996:179).

The metaphysics of presence and the logocentric tradition rely upon the humanist notion of the 'unitary subject', or the idea that the subject or author is a central authority, the source of, and consciousness behind, the ultimate truth and meaning (Sarup 1988:3). According to Barthes (1977:142-143), "the author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual". Many Western philosophers, such as Husserl (who's phenomological theories Derrida critiques), thus assume that language is driven by expression, where expression is the meaning willed and intended by the utterer/author (Harland 1987:125). In this way culture is centred on the author, and fiction is seen as a transparent medium through which the author confides in the reader (Barthes 1977:143). A sign is therefore filled with the meaning intended by its author, or, to put it another way, a signifier refers to a signified which is animated by the author's intention (Harland 1987:126). Derrida (1973:51) points out that this view sees signs as derived from the author (and thus secondary), and as such closely bound to the presence of the author and his/her intended meaning, which is immediately and universally available to the reader that receives the

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sign. This expression gives preference to verbal communication, as it is seen as more immediate, due to the literal presence of the speaker as the 'source' in the moment of communication (West 1996:179).

Derrida (1973:19) thus finds that in the Western tradition "*meaning* is reserved for the content in the ideal sense of *verbal* expression, spoken language". Speech is viewed as a more natural means of communication, whereas writing is seen as artificial and secondary, a representation of a representation (Culler 1983:100). Speech is believed to emanate directly from the 'consciousness' of the speaker, and is therefore imbued with intended meaning, while writing is a number of physical marks, separated from the 'consciousness' that created it (Culler 1983:100). Writing is thus perceived not only as a representation, but also a distortion of speech (Culler 1983:100). This leaves the reader in a simultaneously passive and questionable position – on the one hand meaning can only stem from the consciousness of the author, and on the other hand writing is a distortion, secondary to verbal communication. Prior to Saussure, language was thus considered to be a system for naming an objective and accessible reality, and the reader (or listener) was merely a consumer of the meaning communicated by an author (McGowan 2006:4). Saussure somewhat improved the status of the reader, and although he too is influenced by Western metaphysics, his theory of signification shifts the notion of meaning-making within a given linguistic system quite drastically.

2.2 Signification according to Saussure

The work of Saussure, a Swiss linguist and one of the founders of structuralism, is primarily concerned with the mechanisms through which language acquires meaning (Cilliers 1998:38). His radical claim, in opposition to traditional Western thought, is that ideas do not pre-exist language, and therefore meanings cannot function outside of language (McGowan 2006:4). In the structuralist view, language is responsible for producing 'meanings', and not the other way around, as the metaphysics of presence may claim. Structuralism therefore shifts the focus from the unmediated 'central' presence of Western metaphysics to the linguistic and cultural structures we are governed by (McGowan 2006:3-4). Structuralism, however, does not claim to have access to an 'ultimate' meaning that is achieved by a reader engaging with a text, but describes the

logic of how he/she got there (Culler 1983:32). This process, according to Saussure, is governed by the operation of signs.

Saussure uses the term 'sign' to describe a unit that does not have an inherent meaning (i.e: they are arbitrary sounds/images), but the meaning of which is acquired in the context of a specific linguistic system (McGowan 2006:6). Signs can be anything – verbal or visual (anything from an image to a word or gesture), however they can all be said to function similarly, as they are bound by the linguistic system within which they are produced (McGowan 2006:10-11). Saussure distinguishes between 'langue' – the linguistic system, and 'parole' – linguistic acts, or signs in use (Cilliers 1998:38). According to Saussure, the sign gains significance through its difference from other signs, making language a system of differences without positive terms (Cilliers 1998:39). Therefore, in the process of signification, parole is dependent on langue for its meaning, since langue is the total linguistic system of differentiations, which consists of all the terms that the sign is not (Harland 1993:3). A sign is thus not defined by its inherent properties, but by the way it differs from other signs (Culler 1983:98). In this way, a concept is only understood in relation to what it is not, for instance 'honesty' gains significance from its opposite, 'dishonesty' (Besley 2006:44). The signs that differ from the sign in question do not have to be uttered or even thought, they differ simply by being part of langue (Harland 1993:3).

Saussure subdivides the sign into two components – the signifier and signified, where the signifier is the linguistic unit, while the signified is the concept that the signifier represents (Cilliers 1998:38). There is no natural link between the signifier and signified - they are connected by the arbitrary conventions present in language (Cilliers 1998:38). For Saussure, the signifier and signified are a unity, connected almost as if they are two sides of a single sheet of paper (Sarup 1988:33). Although Derrida employs some aspects of signification proposed by Saussure, he argues that Saussure remains somewhat dependent on the metaphysics of presence. For instance, Derrida critiques the idea of of signified, because it describes a concept that is mental or psychological, and thus the meaning of a sign is supposedly present to the individual who utters it (Cilliers 1998:42). Furthermore, Saussure, like other Western philosophers before him, insists on the primacy of speech, as he believes that meaning of words is unanchored when a distance between the author and sign is created (Cilliers 1998:42). Derrida's deconstruction of the

metaphysics of presence is thus key to his radicalisation of Saussure's theories, and to the development of his own take on signification.

2.3 Signification according to Derrida

Contrary to Western philosophers who believe in the primacy of speech over writing because it allows access to 'unmediated' meaning, Derrida believes that the immediacy of meaning in speech is an illusion, as speech is subject to the same signification systems as writing, and thus every uttered word, or sign, is also open to the process of interpretation (Culler 1983:108). The presence of the author/speaker in verbal communication creates the illusion of a direct access to the author's consciousness, and brings about a false sense of the 'presence' of meaning (Cilliers 1998:42). Derrida thus gives preference to writing, as language is at its most 'true' form when it is self-sufficient, to the point where it communicates in the absence of the author who created the text (Harland 1987:127). Derrida attributes primacy to writing over speech precisely because writing does not allow the reader to attribute meaning to presence, as in most cases the author of a text is absent when the text is read (West 1996:181). This allows writing to function self-sufficiently and autonomously, allowing concepts to be placed "on reserve, to postpone them, to put them outside of consciousness until called for"(Harland 1987:128).

Derrida goes further to argue that the author only discovers the meaning of his/her words (and even then only partially) in the act of writing them (Harland 1987:131). A written sign is thus not sent, but only received, which places emphasis on the reader (Harland 1987:132). According to Derrida (1978:178),"before me, the signifier on its own says more than I believe that I meant to say, and in relation to it, my meaning-to-say is submissive rather than active". The sign therefore has a vast potential to signify, and is not restricted or hindered by the supposed intention of the author. Derrida thus does away with the passive reader that Western metaphysics assumes, and de-stabilises the idea that the meaning intended by the author is present and accessible to the reader. In order to understand how a text can signify, and how meaning can be made within this new framework, it is essential to discuss Derrida's ideas on signification, noting his critique of Saussure's notion of the sign.

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2.3.1 The sign

Poststructuralism distinguishes between two possible modes of functioning for the sign (Harland 1987:124). The first is the conventional mode, where the sign works in a rigid predictable manner (Harland 1987:124). This is linked to Saussure's model of language, according to which a word or sign cannot be stable on its own, but needs to gain stability and equilibrium by being packed up tightly against other words and signs (Harland 1987:136). The second is the unconventional mode, in which the sign works anarchically and creatively (Harland 1987:124). This unpredictable functioning of the sign subverts the socially controlled system of meaning, and socially controlled systems of every kind (Harland 1987:124). Equilibrium is thus lost, and signs cannot have fixed positions, like in Saussure's notion of signifier and signified, but need space between them in order to function (Cilliers 1998:42). In Derrida's approach to signification, words and signs are no longer packed up against each other, but topple over "in causal chains … like lines of falling dominoes" (Harland 1987:136-137). Derrida's signifier and signified can thus never achieve unity, as they are continually breaking apart, and re-attaching in an infinite variety of combinations.

Whereas Saussure regards language as a stable system of oppositions, Derrida removes all stability from his account of language, by undermining Saussure's idea of representation as presence, where the signified is present as a mental concept (West 1996:178). Derrida rejects the notion that meaning occurs in our minds, or the movement from marks on a page to decisive mental contents or images (Harland 1987:134). He believes that the meaning of a sign can never be fully present or anchored, whether in speech or writing, because a sign gains meaning in its difference from other signs, and thus can never be fully present (Cilliers 1998:42). When searching for the signified, we are faced with an emptiness or absence, which indicates that the signified does not exist (Harland 1987:34). The signified is therefore not viewed as stable, and because it relies on other signs for its meaning, it functions like a signifier (Cilliers 1998:42). Derrida removes the mental component of the fully-present signified, leaving a chain of signifiers whose meaning is unstable and excessive, and can thus never be complete or in our control (Cilliers 1998:43).

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Derrida thus transforms Saussure's "rigid" model of language by describing how the differences, on which the model is built, interact in time. Signifiers are actively signifying, or pointing away from themselves at other signifiers (Harland 1987:134). Each signifier has various signifieds, and each of these signifieds in turn are signifiers, referring to more signifieds (Selden & Widdowson 1993:126). Signification has a flow of both positive and negative meaning, of that which it is, and that which it is not (Harland 1987:148). No particular signifier can be assumed to consistently and universally refer to a particular signified, and we are unable to escape this system of signification (Sarup 1988:35). Signification is thus a movement of signifiers, which Derrida calls dissemination, or the state of perpetually unfulfilled meaning in the absence of signifieds (Harland 1987:135). According to Derrida (1978:25) "the meaning of meaning ... is infinite implication, the indefinite referral of signifier to signifier ... its force is a certain pure and infinite equivocality which gives signified meaning no respite, no rest, but engages it in its own economy so that it always signifies again and differs". Signifiers are a product of differences, defined by their difference from other signifiers, thus making language a play of differences (Sarup 1988:44). Signs therefore exist by virtue of their difference from other signs, but also through deferring meaning from one signifier to another (Harland 1987:138). This process, a perpetual differing and delay of meaning, has been coined 'différance' by Derrida.

2.3.2 Différance

'Différance' is based on a re-invention of Saussure's use of the term 'difference', which is central to his account of language as a system of differences (West 1996:179). In line with Derrida's preference of writing over speech, this term is pronounced the same as the French 'difference', and can only be recognised as being unlike 'difference' when written down (West 1996:179). According to Culler (1983:97), "différance sounds exactly the same as difference, but the ending 'ance', which is used to produce verbal nouns, makes it a new form meaning "difference-differing-deferring". Différance thus designates both a "passive" difference already in place as the condition of signification and an act of differing which produces differences". Likewise, Derrida explains that the 'a' in 'différance' indicates the indecision of the term, because it can be described as being active and passive simultaneously (Culler 1983:97).

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The term 'différance' thus relies on both the the terms 'differ' and 'defer' for its meaning (West 1996:180). Derrida (1978:129) explains that "on one hand, [differer] indicates difference as distinction, inequality, or discernibility; on the other, it expresses the interposition of delay, the interval of a spacing and temporalizing that puts off until 'later' what is presently denied". Différance is therefore the play of differences, traces of differences, and the spacing through which elements correlate with one another (Culler 1983:97). This spacing allows for a production of intervals, through which signification is allowed to take place (Culler 1983:97). The process of signification generates an endless chain of meanings, which can be said to be both different from each other, and yet similar. According to Harland (1987:138) "in 'différance', alternative meanings are not the same to the extent of being identified in a single meaning; they are the same to the extent that a single force passes through them, crosses the boundary between them". In différance a written word exists by deferring words that are not written, and they are combined by a force which passes from the present words, to those that are absent (Harland 1987:138).

Différance thus denies the logocentric tradition, as it never allows for the pure presence of meaning. Representation is never sheer presence, as it involves both a differing and deferral of meaning (West 1996:179). According to West (1996:179), "the notion of *différance* is specifically designed to disrupt the metaphysics of presence"[7]. While différance may be temporal and dynamic, producing differences without which language would not function, Derrida emphasises that différance cannot be considered as the metaphysical origin of differences, because it is in itself never certain, always in motion, and never present (West 1996:180). Différance reminds us that the elements of sameness and difference that are involved in all acts of communication cannot be simultaneously and wholly present (West 1996:179). Any presence that is invoked is therefore already divided by difference (Culler 1983:96).

2.3.3 Absence and presence

Derrida believes that because presence is divided, there is no single definable moment of the present, here and now (Sarup 1988:35). Culler illustrates the idea of presence as a

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7   As mentioned before, the term 'metaphysics of presence' refers to the notion that there is an immediately available certainty on which philosophical thought and theory can rely (Sarup 1988:35).

paradox by describing the flight of an arrow. It can be argued that an arrow is in motion as it moves from one point to the next. However, at any given moment, the arrow is in a particular spot, and is therefore not in motion. In other words the arrow is in motion, however the motion is not present at every moment of the flight. Thus every instant can be said to be divided in itself, a product of its relationship between past and future, and inhabited by the non-present (1983:94). According to Culler (1983:95)

> the past is former present, the future an anticipated present, but the present instant simply is: an autonomous given. But it turns out that the present instant can serve as ground only insofar as it is not a pure and autonomous given. If motion is to be present, presence must already be marked by difference and deferral.

According to Derrida (1978:224) "the 'perceived' may be read only in the past, beneath perception and after it". It can thus be said that even our most seemingly immediate experiences are not a direct reaction to the outside world, but a contact with something which has already been inscribed in our memories (Harland 1987:144).

An account of language, however, is bound to treat meaning as something that is present somewhere, for instance in the consciousness of a speaker during an utterance (Culler 1983:96). According to Culler (1983:94) "the authority of presence, its power of valorization, structures all our thinking. The notions of 'making clear', 'grasping', 'demonstrating', 'revealing', and 'showing what is the case' all invoke presence". For Derrida, however, presence can never be immediate, but is mediated by language (West 1996:181). Derrida states that the play of differences does not allow, at any moment, for an element that is fully present and refers only to itself (Culler 1983:99). An element cannot function as a sign unless it refers to something which is not present, therefore nothing in the system of signification can be said to be either fully absent or fully present at any time (Culler 1983:99). The concept of presence, like all other concepts, is not isolated, but is inhabited by its contrary term of absence (West 1996:180). Derrida thus believes that signs refer to an absence, and that therefore full meaning is also absent, or inaccessible (Sarup 1988:33). Sarup (1988:44) states that for Derrida, the sign "marks an absent presence". Presence therefore needs to possess qualities that belong to absence in order to function (Culler 1983:95). A sign that is present is thus inhabited by traces of all the signs that are absent, and it can only function as a signifier if it consists of such traces

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(Culler 1983:96).

2.3.4 The trace

The structure of a sign is determined by a trace, or imprint of that which is absent (Sarup 1988:33). The sign must thus be studied "under erasure"[8], always carrying the trace of another sign, which is never to be found (Sarup 1988:34). The trace is therefore not a self-sufficient entity, but an absence relative to something else (Harland 1987:148). A sign contains traces of all the signs excluded in order for the sign to exist. It also contains traces of all the signs that preceded it (Sarup 1988:34). The meaning of a sign can thus be defined by the relationship it has with all the other signs within a system, and is determined by its differences from all other signs, whether synonymous to it or not (Cilliers 1998:44). According to Cilliers (1998:44) "the sign has no component that belongs to itself only; it is merely a collection of the traces of every other sign running through it", therefore a sign has no positive content that is fully present and refers to itself. According to Culler (1983:99), "the arbitrary nature of the sign and the system with no positive terms give us the paradoxical notion of an 'instituted trace', a structure of infinite referral in which there are only traces – traces prior to any entity of which they might be the trace".

It is therefore impossible to track down the origin of a trace, as any origin is already divided by difference (Cilliers 1998:44). Similarly, Derrida's signifiers cannot be thought of as things which exist before they signify, they signify even before they are things, they point away from themselves before becoming determinate (Harland 1987:147). The sign thus becomes nothing more or less than a signifier (Harland 1987:150). The signifier that is devoid of a signified has an infinite implication, in that it can mean everything in the universe in an "expanding, unfolding, general meaningfulness" (Harland 1987:150). The trace works through absence and negativity – the signifier creates an infinite void into which meaning spreads out (Harland 1987:150-151). Meaning is never final, because as a certain meaning is generated for a sign, a disturbance in traces shifts this 'original' meaning, and the play of signification continues (Cilliers 1998:44-45). Harland (1987:151)

8 Derrida's idea of "sous rature" or "under erasure", is to write a word, cross is out, and then print both the word and erasure (Sarup 1988:33). The word is inadequate, or inaccurate, so it is crossed out, but since language is necessary, the word remains (Sarup 1988:33).

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quotes Derrida, who states that the trace is an "essential nothing on whose basis everything can appear and be produced within language".

2.3.5 Meaning making

Derrida does not define meaning or the methods of finding it, but rather demonstrates the difficulties of any theory that strives to define a set, single, unambiguous meaning based on any assumption, such as the author's intention, or reader's reaction (Culler 1983:131). According to West (1996:185), the poststructuralist account of reading implies that texts "cannot be tied to any single or univocal source of meaning of any kind". Derrida suggests that the meaning of meaning may be an infinite implication, the never-ending process moving from one signifier to the next, never resting, but engaging with each signified meaning in order to keep signifying (Culler 1983:133). The interpretation of texts is thus open to limitless contexts and interpreters, allowing for an infinite multiplication of meanings[9].

Culler explains Derrida's two interpretations of interpretation. The first interpretation seeks to decipher and locate the ultimate truth, or origin, which escapes the play of signification. The other embraces an absence of origin, a lack of full presence, and a free play of meaning. Derrida is often seen as urging us to choose the second interpretation, however he cautions that we cannot effectively choose one or the other. The second interpretation cannot be successfully realised in discourse, whereas the first provides a divided concept of experience (1983:131-132). According to Culler (1983:132) "whatever the theorist's choice, the theory seems to present a divided meaning of interpretation – divided, for example, between meaning as a property of a text and meaning as the experience of a reader". Our experience cannot be said to be a reliable guide, however it may seem that the experience of interpreting meaning is divided between our semantic participation with a text, as well as the properties of the text, against which we check our experiences (Culler 1983:132). According to Culler (1983:132), "it may be that what makes the notion of meaning indispensable is this divided character and divided reference: to what one understands and to what one's understanding captures or fails to

9 As mentioned before, this is a process Derrida terms 'dissemination', which does not constrain the meaning-making process, but rather multiplies it, allowing endless uncertainties, recontextualisations and reinterpretations (West 1996:185).

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capture".

Meaning is thus bound to context, but context is boundless, and no meaning can be determined out of context, but context is never exhausted (Culler 1983:123). According to Culler (1983:133) "the combination of context-bound meaning and boundless context on the one hand makes possible proclamations of the indeterminacy of meaning … but on the other hand urges that we continue to interpret texts, classify speech acts, and attempt to elucidate the conditions of signification". Derrida does not propose an end to distinctions, nor an indeterminacy that results in meaning being the invention of a reader (Culler 1983:134). Meaning in Derrida's understanding is not a moment of stability, but a movement, an interaction between endless signifiers. Nevertheless, in the play of signifiers, there are moments of stability, however fleeting or incomplete (Cilliers 1998:42). According to Culler (1983:134) "the play of meaning is a result of what Derrida calls 'the play of the world', in which the general text always provides further connections, correlations, and contexts"[10]. Meaning-making is thus an endless chain of signification, a play of signifiers, which arguably allow for limitless interpretations of a single text – a concept which this study wishes to explore as a possibility for postmodern picturebooks.

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10 This 'play of the world' described by Derrida is synonymous to the workings of intertextuality within a
   text – a notion discussed in more detail in chapter 3.

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Chapter 3 – Word and image in postmodern picturebooks

In order to establish a new proposed outlook on postmodern picturebooks, and understand how they signify, it is important to explore the picturebook as a text, and consider the ways in which the modes of image and text function within it. According to Doonan (1993:9), there is much to consider when looking at a picturebook, namely "the object itself in all aspects of its physical form, and how words tell, and how pictures show, and what happens among the three of them, and what happens between them and the reader". This chapter attempts to provide an overview of all these factors, such as the picturebook as a medium and the changes it has undergone, the modes of word and image and their interactions, the ways in which communication takes place, and the reader 'implied' by this communication.

3.1 Picturebooks, postmodernism and the implied reader

3.1.1 Traditional picturebooks

The first picturebooks appeared in the 1600s, at a time when most books were illustrated, regardless of the audience they were intended for (Nodelman 1988:2). The picturebook, however, seems to be the only book (aside from graphic novels) which has retained both words and images as primary modes of communication. The most likely reason for this is that picturebooks are made for children, who are thought to respond more readily to pictures than to words (Nodelman 1988:1). The pictures in picturebooks are traditionally thought to be mere reading aids, acting only as a visual reference to the text, and thus becoming unnecessary as a child grows up and learns to read (El-Tamami 2007:26). In fact, pictures in 'adult' books are thought to be not only unnecessary, but harmful, because they hinder the imagination of the reader by replicating the text, and thus 'fixing' it[11] (El-

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11 In this way words and pictures can be said to act as Derrida's 'supplement' – a term which describes how traditional polarities (culture/nature, speech/writing) are perceived (Sarup 1988:39). The first term traditionally constitutes the privileged entity, or the better state, in other words culture is merely a supplement of nature, and writing the supplement of speech (Sarup 1988:39). The supplement both adds on to the original state, but also subtracts from it (Sarup 1988:38). In the case of the picturebook, pictures are though of as a 'supplement' for words, as they are assumed to elaborate the meaning of the words to not-yet-literate children, however they also detract from the words because they supposedly 'fix' the 'meaning'. However, Derrida erases this distinction between 'original' state and supplement, as neither term is self-sufficient without the other, and neither can be privileged (Sarup 1988:39). Neither word nor image in a picturebook can thus be considered to be the privileged. mode of communication.

Tamami 2007:26). Pictures, or illustrations, are thus popularly dismissed as being the domain of young, inexperienced readers.

The traditional opinion concerning illustrations in picturebooks is the assumption that they serve one of two purposes, namely completing the meaning conveyed by the words, and providing a decorative embellishment to attract the attention of the child reader (Nodelman 1988:3). The decorative appeal of these pictures is meant to draw attention to the accompanying words, which they 'clarify', allowing the picturebook to serve an educational purpose (Nodelman 1988:4). The educational purposes of the medium are further enhanced by a fairly uniform narrative structure. Traditional picturebooks typically follow a linear narrative, where characters are established, faced with a problem, react to that problem, face the consequence of their reaction, and come to a resolution which creates closure for the reader (Goldstone 2004:198). The author and illustrator guide the reader to make certain conclusions and extract a specific message, moral, or body of knowledge from a narrative (Goldstone 2004:198). For instance, a recent picturebook by Ferida Wolff, Harriet May Savitz and Elena Odriozola entitled *The Story Blanket* (2008) tells the tale of an old woman in a remote village, who has a blanket on which all the children gather to listen to her stories. One particularly cold winter, she begins to make warm clothing for those in need, using the threads from her blanket, and leaving the items anonymously for people to discover. The people in the village notice the story blanket becoming smaller, and one morning the old lady discovers that each of the villagers has taken some yarn from their blankets, and left it on her doorstep. This picturebook is a fairly traditional one, following a linear narrative, and delivering an obvious moral about the joys and necessities of sharing. The picturebook thus plays the part of a socialising agent, teaching a child about the world (such as the concepts of 'right' and 'wrong'), and preparing them for adulthood (Goldstone 2004:198)[12].

Although the above may not be true for all picturebooks, the general perception appears to be that a picturebook is a medium stripped down to its pedagogical aims, such as the technical development of reading skills in children, coupled with a 'message' or 'moral' that is imposed on a passive child addressee by the adult author (El-Tamami 2007:25).

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12 This opinion is clearly rooted in the metaphysics of presence, as the author is assumed to be present and in control of the message that the child reader extracts from the picturebook.

Picturebooks do serve as a form of entertainment for children, however the didactic aspect is almost always present (however covertly), because picturebooks always reflect societal beliefs about child development. Postmodern picturebooks, however, appear to be bringing about a change in these perceptions. Goldstone (2004:198), for instance, argues that postmodern picturebooks differ from traditional picturebooks in their functions, formats, and semiotic codes, so much so that they can be classified as a separate genre.

3.1.2 Picturebooks and postmodernism

Postmodernism, like poststructuralism, rejects the idea of grand narratives, which are central to logocentric tradition, as they presume a tangible truth that is universal and accessible to society (Sarup 1988:145). As discussed in the last chapter, postmodern philosophy, under Derrida's influence, is critical of the notion of present and attainable truth or meaning, and affirms that what we experience as reality is merely a play of signs (Novitz 2005:215). According to Novitz (2005:219), postmodern ideas of interpretation are largely influenced by Derrida's notion of signification, whereby the process of meaning-making is a play of signs, and nothing lies hidden beneath the text for the reader to uncover. Postmodernism thus advances the idea of an active reader, who is no longer the consumer, but the producer of the text (Novitz 2005:219). Furthermore, postmodernism, like poststructuralism, advocates that there can be no single, true interpretation of an art object[13], whereas modernists believe that there is always one single true interpretation or meaning[14] (Novitz 2005:217).

Postmodern devices in picturebooks can thus be assumed to bring about a change in the way these books are read, when compared to traditional picturebooks, which are structured in a way that presumes closure. Postmodern tendencies seem to oppose the perceptions attached to traditional picturebooks, which strive towards delivering an accessible message or moral. It is difficult to identify specific characteristics which allow a picturebook to be classified as 'postmodern', however several theorists have singled out a number of commonly occurring devices. Anstey (2002:447), for instance, identifies several commonly occurring characteristics which appear to disrupt the closure associated with

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13 The picturebook can be classified as an art object (Doonan 1993:7).
14 A parallel can be drawn here between the modernist approach to meaning, and the traditional
   picturebook, which is assumed to deliver a specific moral or message, as mentioned above.

traditional picturebooks. For instance, nontraditional plots, characters, settings, and unusual methods of narration are often used. There is often an indeterminacy in the written or illustrative text, plot, character, or setting, which forces the reader to construct their own narrative. A pastiche of illustrative styles, as well as unusual design and layouts are utilised, forcing the reader to employ a range of prior knowledge in order to engage with the images, and challenging his/her perceptions of how to read a book. Contesting discourses are created between image and text, requiring the reader to consider alternate meanings. Finally, intertextuality[15] is often employed as a device that forces the reader to use their prior knowledge in order to interpret certain layers in the text (Anstey 2002:447). These devices, or characteristics, are used (whether consciously or not) to disrupt reader expectations, and allow for a variety of readers to produce multiple meanings, rather than imply a child reader who is expected to 'discover' the single meaning encoded by the author (Anstey 2002:447).

Postmodern picturebooks thus allow readers to become coauthors, and generate multiple, often contradictory interpretations in ways which traditional picturebooks do not offer (Sipe & Pantaleo 2008:4). A picturebook can be said to be postmodern if it displays any number of the characteristics mentioned by Anstey (2002:447). One may question, however, whether it is fruitful to classify a book as postmodern or not-postmodern, since such a binary opposition between the postmodern and the traditional is reductive and goes against the principles of postmodernism itself (Sipe & Pantaleo 2008:4). While it is necessary, for the purposes of this study, to generalise about the characteristics of the traditional versus the postmodern picturebook, it must at all times be kept in mind that such a watertight distinction seldom applies in practice. While some picturebook authors may not consciously strive to produce postmodern texts, it is inevitable that such a description would be applied to books that display a playful and layered nature (Salisbury 2008:25). El-Tamami (2007:37) proposes that "the picture book form is an embodiment of postmodernism, not in the nihilistic sense commonly attributed to it, but in its most joyously freewheeling incarnation". This playfulness of the postmodern picturebook, and the distinctiveness of its meaning-making structures compared to traditional picturebooks, can be better understood if the postmodern picturebook is positioned as a 'text', as defined by Barthes.

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15 The implications of intertextuality are dealt with in the following section.

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3.1.3 Postmodern picturebooks as text, and intertextuality

Barthes' and Derrida's critique of the Western tradition's attribution of authority to the writer as the source of a work, inevitably leads to the critique of the concept of a 'work' as a complete entity which transcends time and history, while encapsulating meaning (Marshall 1992:121). The work is considered to be the property of the author, and the reader is bound by the author's declared intention (Marshall 1992:131-132). The shift of power from the author, to writing itself, and later to the reader, has brought about the notion of writing as 'text', rather than 'work' (Marshall 1992:121). The text as an entity shows no respect for the intentions of the author, only allowing the author to come back into his/her text as a 'guest', or reader, no longer privileged (Marshall 1992:132-133). The difference between the work and text is synonymous with the difference between traditional and postmodern fiction, or, within the context of this study, traditional and postmodern picturebooks (Marshall 1992:126).

The work, such as a traditional picturebook, is an object of consumption, in which the reader waits patiently for closure in order to 'make sense' of what he/she has read (Marshall 1992:134). The text, on the other hand, diminishes the distance between writing and reading, and invites the reader to join both the consumption and production of the text into a unified signifying practice (Marshall 1992:134). The text functions by collaborating with the reader in a negotiation for 'meaning', and always remaining in motion (Marshall 1992:135). The difference between the work and the text can thus be equated with the difference between product and process (Marshall 1992:123). A work needs to be deciphered by a reader, as it presumes that a truth or meaning lies hidden within it, while a text is 'disentangled' as the reader follows the limitless 'threads' of its structure (Marshall 1992:125). According to Barthes (1977:147), the text can be ranged over, but not pierced, because there is nothing beneath it, as "writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning". The work is thus presumed to close on a signified, either by presenting scientific fact, or by indicating a truth that is to be sought out, and in both cases functioning as a general sign with a predetermined signified (Marshall 1992:126). The text, on the other hand, functions like a Derridean sign, constantly deferring the signified, and allowing for a play of signifiers while refusing closure (Marshall 1992:126).

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Derrida believes that writing is bound with the absence of the 'Father' (author or metaphysical source of truth and meaning), and it is made up of a system of interrelations (intertextuality) that come together in a specific text (Marshall 1992:122). According to Barthes (1977:146), a text, as opposed to a work, "is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash". The text is plural in the sense that it consists in its entirety out of citations, references, echoes, influences which are untraceable, but already read (Marshall 1992:128). The picturebook by definition is prone to intertextuality, as it is a medium which ingests and combines a multitude of genres, art forms and influences (El-Tamami 2007:40). Furthermore, Anstey (2002:447) points out that postmodern picturebooks increasingly employ intertextuality in order to disrupt reader expectations and aid a play of signification. The postmodern picturebook can thus be said to be a text which consist of an infinite network of intertextual references, each of them forming the 'threads' a reader can follow. According to Marshall (1992:128), attempting to find and identify these intertextual references is somewhat futile, and contradicts poststructural thought, which denies an ultimate origin. However, for the purposes of this study it is useful to identify certain intertextual references found in the postmodern picturebooks in question, in order to explore the implications of the postmodern picturebook as 'text'.

It can thus be established that traditional picturebooks were intended to function as 'works', while postmodern picturebooks celebrate their status as 'texts' – entities permeated with intertextual references, which allow for a free flow of signification in the absence of the author as the source of meaning. Poststructuralists, however, warn against the either/or logic of definitions (a text versus not a text), therefore the definition is a loose one (Marshall 1992:123). Consequently, while a traditional picturebook may be thought of as a 'work', the passing of time or shifts in paradigms (such as the worldview of authors and readers) can transform it into a 'text' (Marshall 1992:127). The work is thus also not entirely a work, as every work is inevitably intertextual, in the sense that no text can have 'meaning' without all the texts that came before it (Marshall 1992:128,137). It can therefore be suggested that traditional picturebooks differ from postmodern picturebooks in the expectations of the authors and readers, who view the traditional picturebook as a 'work'. This study seeks to propose the idea that the appearance of

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postmodern picturebooks as 'texts' is a sign of a change in the way picturebooks are perceived, and the way they are written and read. The following section explores how the two modes which make up a picturebook (namely words and images) function within the changing postmodern picturebook.

3.2 Words and images

In order to discuss words and images in picturebooks, it is useful to take a brief look at how visual and linguistic signs are perceived, and how they communicate. Throughout history, there has been a struggle between visual and linguistic signs, each claiming rights to a 'nature' to which only it has access (Mitchell 1984:529). The dialogue of word and image seems to be a constant factor in each culture, although varying at different times, and from one culture to the next (Mitchell 1984:529). During the Enlightenment, for instance, both language and imagery were believed to be transparent media through which reality or 'meaning' is presented directly to the understanding (Mitchell 1984:503). According to Mitchell (1984:529), the compulsive struggle for dominance between word and image represents the relations we assume between 'culture' and 'nature', or between signifier and signified. In this way, Mitchell (1984:529) suggests that the image can be seen as:

> a sign that pretends not to be a sign, masquerading as (or, for the believer, actually achieving) natural immediacy and presence. The word is its 'other', the artificial, arbitrary production of human will that disrupts natural presence by introducing unnatural elements into the world – time, consciousness, history, and the alienating intervention of symbolic mediation.

It can be argued that picturebook theorists adopt a similar viewpoint when assuming that pictures in picturebooks are mere reading aids, which become unnecessary as a reader's education progresses (El-Tamami 2007:26). In this light, the picture is a transparent medium, the signified to the signifier of the words, which is removed once the reader no longer needs the 'meaning' of words illustrated, or made clear, through the accompanying image.

Mitchell (1984:503-504), however, claims that images should be understood as a form of language, a mode that is not transparent, but "presents a deceptive appearance of

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naturalness and transparence concealing an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation". This is arguably the most interesting in approach to the dialogue between word and image, identified by Mitchell (1984:529) as "the relationship of subversion, in which language or imagery looks into its own heart and finds lurking there its opposite number". Neither word nor image is thus seen as a transparent mode of communication, and neither can claim to present the reader or viewer with an immediate presence of meaning. In the contemporary world, much in line with postmodern and poststructural thought, words and images have thus become enigmas, unexplained problems which tend to conceal, rather than reveal their 'message' (Mitchell 1984:503). This study adopts the opinion that words and images cannot be thought of as transparent signifiers, but rather as consisting of signs[16] which disrupt the presence attributed to them, allowing for a play of signification. The interaction of words and images within a picturebook format is thus a complex and interesting one, as their relationship becomes one of mutual translation, interpretation, illustration, and embellishment (Mitchell 1984:530).

3.2.1 Word and image interactions in picturebooks

Words and images in picturebooks can be said to function very differently from words and images in any other medium or application. Nodelman (1988:42) describes the written narratives in picturebooks as being "toneless", not allowing for much detail, mostly describing actions, and not assuming an emotional response. According to Driggs Wolfenbarger and Sipe (2007:279), "picturebook authors are like poets searching for concise, spare, evocative language". The simplicity of the words is thus arguably able to harbor a sophistication and complexity, similar to a poetic composition. The images in picturebooks, on the other hand, are traditionally afforded the task of setting a tone, and conveying the emotional aspect which can be applied to the words (Nodelman 1988:42). As a result, images in picturebooks often act as a primarily storytelling device, appearing to carry a much bigger narrative load than the words (Nodelman 1988:vii-viii). However, both the images and words in picturebooks are essential to the narrative, as they are responsible for different aspects in the signification of the picturebook. Picturebooks can thus be considered to be 'multidiegetic' because the text and image have the potential to

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16 In the poststructuralist, Derridean sense.

express a number of different narrative levels independent of each other (Pantaleo 2010:15).

In addition to their difference in narrative function, there is also a vast divergence in the spatial and temporal attributes of words and images. While the written word assumes progression in time, but has limitations in signifying space, the visual image confronts the viewer with all its aspects simultaneously, but has a greater potential in showing spatial dimensions (Schwarcz 1982:9). Although language is not purely linear, and images not purely spatial, the difference with which we perceive the two has implications for how picturebooks are read. There is always a tension between pictures, which invite the reader to linger and gaze at them, and the text, the linear structure of which invites a reader to keep reading (Sipe 1998:100-101). This creates a paradoxical situation – the two modes work together, and yet they are constantly separated (Nodelman 1988:viii). This complicates the reading process, making the reader more involved in the meaning-making process than when faced with only words or images.

When reading a picturebook, our eyes move between text and image as we piece together the messages and 'meanings' presented to us by each mode of representation. Lewis (2001:33) describes this process as a weaving together, or interanimation, of word and image to result in a composite text, which is more than just the accumulation of the various parts. As our eyes move between the various parts of the text, we accumulate traces[17] that have an effect on how we experience what we read or see (Nodelman 2001:35). The words create expectations for the images, and the images create expectations for the words. Through this movement, more expectations are created, and the process of meaning making is expanded (Nikolajeva & Scott 2001:2). The words thus change the pictures, and the pictures change the words, and the resulting product is something new and different (Lewis 2001:36). Sipe (1998:98), defines this relationship between words and pictures as "synergy", where the combination of the two modes has a greater effect than that of each mode used separately. This effect is achieved not only through the union of text and image, but also through their "perceived interactions and transactions" (Sipe 1998:99). Poesio (2002:224), for instance, likens the symbiosis of words

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17 The 'trace' here is used in the Derridean sense – the words and images that the reader is faced with contain traces of the words and images which have come before, as well as the traces of the words and images which have been excluded (Sarup 1988:34).

and images in a picturebook to an alchemy, where "typographical characters, marks, lines, colours, perspective, and cleverly manipulated spaces .. evoke not only sounds, but also tactile sensations, emotions, and moods".

Figure 3.1. Double page illustration of Oliver Jeffers, *Lost and Found*, 2005.

In order to better understand the relationship between word and image, it is important to explore the kind of interactions that can take place between them. Lewis (2001:44) argues that these interactions cannot be successfully subdivided into any number of categories, as the picturebook medium is highly flexible and diverse. Furthermore, the relationship between words and images within a single picturebook may shift and change throughout (Lewis 2001:49). For the purposes of picturebook analysis, however, it is useful to set some guidelines within which to discuss word and image interactions. The categories set out by picturebook theorists Nikolajeva and Scott (2000:225)[18] are a functional basis to do so. This system does not have many categories, but appears to cover the basics of most possible word-image interactions. In a symmetrical relationship, for instance, the words and pictures tell exactly the same story, neither providing more information than the other[19]. In this case, the words and images appear to be mutually redundant, and the

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18 I am conscious of similar systems used to categorise word-image interactions, but choose to use this specific one as the most comprehensive, and most commonly used for similar analyses.

19 I do not agree that words and images are able to tell the exact same story, as the relationship between them is complex and conflicting in all circumstances. These categories are merely presented as a guideline for the current theory concerning word and image relationships in picturebooks.

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words may draw our attention to some details in the pictures, but they leave little, if anything to the imagination (Nikolajeva & Scott 2001:12,14). A symmetrical dynamic can typically be found in more traditional picturebooks, such as *Lost and Found* (2005) by Oliver Jeffers. The first spread in the book (Figure 3.1) presents us with the sentence "once there was a boy and one day he found a penguin at his door", while the image shows just that – a boy looking out of his front door at a penguin standing on the doorstep (Jeffers 2005:s.p). The image does not contribute any significant information not present in the words, aside from showing us what the boy and penguin look like, and setting the scene in what appears to be a neat suburban area. There appear to be no discrepancies between the words and images, and no visual elements contradict or significantly expand on the verbal narrative.

Figure 3.2. Double page illustration of Elena Odriozola in Ferida Wolff and Harriet May Savitz, *The Story Blanket*, 2008.

Another dynamic commonly found in traditional picturebooks is an enhancing interaction, in which case one of the modes expands on the other, for instance if the pictures provide additional information not present in the words, or vice versa (Nikolajeva & Scott 2000:225). In this case one of the modes appears to carry the narrative, while the other takes on a supportive function (Nikolajeva & Scott 2001:12). In *The Story Blanket* (2008)

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by Ferida Wolff, Harriet May Savitz and Elena Odriozola, the relationship between words and images is an enhancing one, with the words providing more information than the accompanying illustrations. In the first spread of the book (Figure 3.2) we are told that "deep in the snow-covered mountains, was the tiny village where Babba Zarrah lived. The children loved to settle down on Babba Zarrah's big old story blanket to listen to her stories" (Wolff, Savitz & Odriozola 2008:s.p). The accompanying image shows children sitting on a colourful blanket, with a few small houses clustered close to the words. The image does not show Babba Zarrah, or the village and mountains mentioned in the words, and does not appear to provide any additional information, other than the fact that the children have taken their shoes off to sit on the blanket. There is no conflict between the words and the accompanying illustration, but there are slight visual gaps which allow the reader to participate in the meaning-making. An enhancing dynamic is thus slightly more complex than a symmetrical relationship, although the two modes provide minimal enrichment (Nikolajeva & Scott 2000:230).

Figure 3.3. Double page illustration of Delphine Durand in Ramona Badescu, *Big Rabbit's Bad Mood*, 2009.

A complementary dynamic can be seen in picturebooks where an enhancing interaction becomes particularly significant, and the words and images enrich each other to a greater extent (Nikolajeva & Scott 2000:226). For instance, in *Big Rabbit's Bad Mood* (2009) by Ramona Badescu and Delphine Durand, the interaction of words and images provides a somewhat comic effect. On one of the spreads (Figure 3.3) we see the words "and Big Rabbit had a big, bad, hairy mood that stuck to him like glue. Big Rabbit turned on some music. Some soft, beautiful music. Big Rabbit listened, listened, lis- Augh! What a beastly, greedy, bad mood!" (Badescu & Durand 2009:s.p). The images show a creature (presumably the 'mood') tormenting the rabbit in various ways, although not literally 'sticking' to the rabbit like the words imply. The dynamic of words and images is particularly interesting because the mood is shown as a personified being, which is a delightful visual surprise, and the antics of the mood are not mentioned in the accompanying written narrative. There is also a more direct interaction between the two modes, as the words are interrupted, and the reason for this is explained in the images, which show the mood consuming the rabbit's radio. The gaps between the verbal and visual narratives are thus more significant in a complementary dynamic, which encourages the reader to interact with the words and images to a greater extent than symmetrical or enhancing interactions.

A counterpointing dynamic implies that the words and images form two mutually dependent narratives, which can be collaborated to create meanings beyond the scope of each other (Nikolajeva & Scott 2000:226). In *The Lost Thing* (2000) by Shaun Tan, a fairly simple written narrative is accompanied by intricate surreal imagery, making the interaction of the two modes complex and at times unsettling. In the third spread of the book (Figure 3.4) we see the main character (Shaun) playing with 'the thing' he found on the beach, before realising that the creature is lost, as no one had come to claim it. The simple written explanation of their interaction is coupled with frames depicting Shaun playing catch and building a sandcastle with a giant red mechanical creature. The gap between the words and images is vast, as the words do not mention what kind of 'thing' Shaun found on the beach, and the coupling of regular beach activities with such an unlikely companion (and in the context of a barren, industrial setting) provide a disquieting effect. The words and images provide information which, while not directly conflicting, makes no pretense of providing 'closure', which arguably forces the reader to

actively partake in the meaning-making process.

Figure 3.4. Double page illustration of Shaun Tan, *The Lost Thing*, 2000.

In an extreme case of word and image relationships a contradictory relationship may occur, in which case the two modes provide conflicting information, or form two separate and seemingly unrelated narratives (Nikolajeva & Scott 2000:226). For instance in *The Red Tree* (2001) by Shaun Tan, the words and images do not seem to refer to each other, leaving the relationship between them very vague. In the second spread of the book (Figure 3.5) we see the words "darkness overcomes you", accompanied by a very detailed surreal image of a girl walking down the street, while a giant fish floats above her (Tan 2001a:s.p). The image itself is suggestive, as it is unclear whether the fish is really present, or whether it represents the girl's emotional state (the surrounding pedestrians seem unaware of the fish). The words do not describe the action but rather confuse the situation further, as it is unclear whether the 'you' refers to the girl in the image or to the reader, and the concept of 'darkness' can be interpreted in a number of ways (physical darkness, depression, or looming danger to name but a few). The vague written narrative and surreal image, and the absence of an overt relationship between them, draws the reader

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in to make their own meanings by attempting to negotiate a link between the two modes, thus encouraging them to co-author the text.
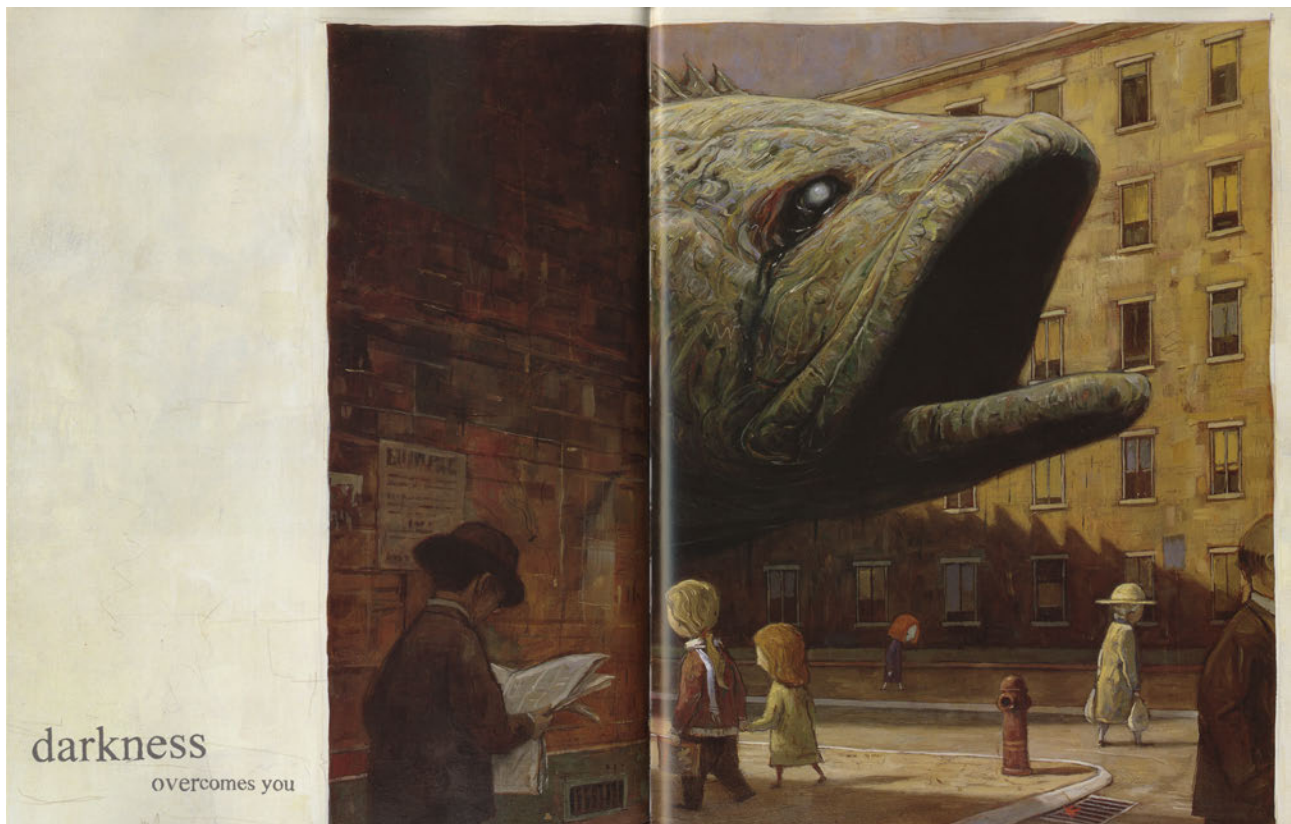

Figure 3.5. Double page illustration of Shaun Tan, *The Red Tree*, 2001.

Picturebooks with non-symmetrical relationships, specifically those employing a counterpointing or contradictory dynamic in some aspect of the narrative[20], tend to be particularly interesting (Nikolajeva & Scott 2001:24). Tan (2011:8) argues that an 'incompleteness' between word and image compels the reader to partake in the meaning-making process. These interactions are also most applicable to a discussion of postmodern picturebooks, as a non-symmetrical relationship between word and image allows for more textual gaps, which in turn invite the reader to take part in the meaning-making process. Nikolajeva and Scott (2001:2) argue that both words and images in picturebooks leave gaps, or room to be 'filled' by each other, either wholly or partially. Tan (2010:s.p) states that he likes to think of words and images in a picturebook as "opposite points on a battery, creating a potential voltage through a 'gap' between telling and

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20 Picturebooks usually combine several types of interactions within separate aspects of the book, so while characterisation may be complementary, the plot line of modality may be contradictory (Nikolajeva & Scott 2000:226).

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showing". But gaps are also left for the reader, and these are 'filled' with prior knowledge, personal experiences and expectations, thus allowing for countless interpretations of one text (Nikolajeva & Scott 2001:2). Furthermore, Nikolajeva and Scott (2000:232) argue that in a case where the words and images are very close in meaning and 'fill' each other's gaps, or if the gaps are few or very alike in nature, the reader's role becomes passive, as little is left to the imagination. This study, while adopting the notions of textual gaps, wishes to oppose the idea that these gaps can be filled wholly, as this would presume an absolute presence of meaning, which contradicts both postmodern and poststructural thought. Within the context of this study, the gap is thus seen not as something which can be entirely filled by a reader to reach a final 'meaning', but as an absence[21] that allows for a play of signification to take place, thereby allowing the reader to co-author the text.

Textual gaps are most prominent in picturebooks displaying a counterpointing relationship between words and images, as mentioned above. As with any attempted categorisation of this sort, it is impossible to identify and catalogue all the possible ways in which words and images can create a counterpointing relationship. However, it is useful to explore the possible dynamics set out by picturebook theorists, as this can provide a guide for picturebook analysis. Nikolajeva and Scott identify several devices which picturebook authors use to create a counterpointing relationship between words and images, and thus create textual gaps which allow for more active reader co-authoring. For instance, counterpoint in style refers to the eclectic nature of the words and images that are chosen to appear together. In this form of counterpoint, one mode could be humorous while the other is serious, or one may be historic while the other is anachronistic. Counterpoint in genre or modality happens when the words and images belong to different genres, such as if one suggests fantasy, while the other is clearly realistic. In most fantasy picturebooks, there is some tension between the objective and subjective narratives expressed by words and pictures. Counterpoint by juxtaposition refers to an instance when two or more visual stories occur simultaneously, not necessarily supported by the words. Counterpoint in perspective happens when there is a difference in point of view – there is a gap between who is seeing (the images) and who is speaking (the words). The narrative voice and the visual voice may differ in ideology or perception, such

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21 When applying a poststructural perspective, it can be suggested that a 'textual gap' is in some ways synonymous with an 'absence', as neither the words or images appear to provide 'closure' for the reader, and thus meaning is not fully 'present'.

as the adult perspective versus the perspective of a child. Counterpoint in characterisation can occur when a character is presented in a contradictory way by the words and images, often creating irony or ambiguity. Counterpoint in metafictive nature refers to the inability of images to express certain verbal metaphors, or, alternatively, for imagery that is far more laden with metaphors than the text. Finally, counterpoint in space and time is a phenomenon which is inevitable in picture books, because text and images have different spatiotemporal characteristics, as previously mentioned (2001:24-26).

Carol Driggs Wolfenbarger and Lawrence Sipe (2007:274) believe that the dissonance created when words and pictures do not appear to tell the same story catches a reader's attention, and the ability to experiment with this relationship is what ultimately provides a satisfactory reading experience. The ambiguity that is created by the unexpected symbiosis of words and images induces a reaction that Poesio (2002:234) describes with Gianni Rodari's metaphor of a stone, which, when thrown into a pond:

> sets in motion concentric waves that spread out on the surface of the water … It is not much different with a word, thrown by chance into the mind, producing waves on the surface and in the depths. It provokes an infinite series of chain reactions, and, as it falls, it evokes sounds and images, analogues and recollections, meanings and dreams, in a movement that touches experience and memory, the imagination and the unconscious.

This ambiguity thus forces us to look beyond the surface of the page, stimulating the reader to make connections and find new layers of meaning. The reader is ultimately invited to participate in the picturebook through elements of indeterminacy, and the possibility of alternative 'meanings' make themselves felt through distortions (gaps or absences) in the text (Iser 1987:24,229). That which is said (or shown) seems to function only as a reference to that which is not said, and that which is 'present' is thus present only to refer to that which is 'absent'. Consequently, as we read, we endow with presence that which is absent[22] (Iser 1978:137). Similarly, Derrida (1981:129-130) states that "certain forces of association unite … the words 'actually present' in a discourse with all the other words in the lexical system". The 'concentric waves' created by gaps, or 'absences' are thus reminiscent of Derrida's notion of the chains of signifiers, each pointing to the next in an infinite sequence. It can therefore be argued that the

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22 These presences are fleeting, because the 'meaning' which has been endowed with presence can only be stabilised artificially, and can always be subverted to generate more, equally plausible meanings (Novitz 2005:219).

counterpoint of word and image assists as a trigger in the play of signification, and it does so through elements of indeterminacy (gaps or 'absences'), which encourage the reader to co-author the text by becoming actively engaged in the meaning-making process.

3.3 The implied reader of postmodern picturebooks

The qualities of a picturebook, namely the simplistic text and abundance of pictures, lead us to assume that the implied reader is a child[23] (Nodelman 2000:27-28). According to Nodelman (2000:24), the implied reader can be defined as "a person in possession of the knowledge and the methodology of thinking about signs that allow an understanding of the text more or less as its speaker or writer intended it". Nodelman (1988:9) argues that all perception requires prior experience, therefore one needs to be familiar with a concept or symbol in order to interpret it correctly and adequately. Children can access the meanings 'encoded' in many picturebooks (which at times may be quite complex) and take great joy in discovering these, on the condition that they are taught the correct interpretive approaches to analysis by an adult, such as a parent or teacher (Nodelman 2000:23-26). This argument appears to be a widely accepted one among picturebook theorists, however this study wishes to oppose these opinions, as they are arguably firmly grounded in the metaphysics of presence. The definition assumes that a reader is bound by the author's intention, or the meaning that is 'encoded' within the text, and therefore needs to possess the prior knowledge to interpret the signs present in a picturebook in a specific manner. Furthermore, this study wishes to oppose the definition of the implied reader, specifically the notion that picturebooks imply a child readership.

Many theorists suggest that picturebooks are targeted at both children and adults simultaneously, however it can be argued that this does not sufficiently expand intended readership, but rather fragments it. Nikolajeva (1996:57), for instance, believes that children's literature (such as the picturebook) assumes two different systems of signs – one intended for the child and the other for the adult. This concept, identified by Nikolajeva and Scott (2001:21) as dual address, assumes that there are different levels of information encoded in the picturebook, one purposefully targeted at 'small children' and

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23 This appears to be a universal social convention, in which picturebooks are synonymous with children's literature, and suitable exclusively to a juvenile reader (Tan s.a).

the other at 'sophisticated adults'[24]. For example, in a case where a text contains visual and verbal humor of varying complexity, it is presumed that the child is amused by particular jokes, while the adult can enjoy others (Nikolajeva & Scott 2001:22). In other words, it is assumed that an adult and child have different ways of looking, and will therefore see different things (Lewis 2001:129). Picturebooks are thus presumed to address both an adult and child audience, as the two audiences inevitably approach the text in different ways, and this process that can be purposefully manipulated by the picturebook creator (Nikolajeva & Scott 2000:238). Consequently, it is assumed that children and adults are bound to interpret signs in predictable ways, which can be predetermined by the picturebook author, once again highlighting the author's intention as a stable factor that controls signification.

It can be argued that the notions of implied reader and dual address are destabilised with the emergence of contemporary picturebook authors, who create picturebooks that (whether intentionally or not) disregard the traditional notions of the implied reader. According to Tan (2010:s.p), "if it is thought that picture books are for children, this is merely an observation of conventional publishing culture in most English-speaking countries, not an intrinsic quality of the medium itself". Furthermore, Salisbury (2007:6-7) observes that a large portion of contemporary picturebook creators work intuitively, not taking into consideration the age of the audience they are working for. Moreover, many picturebook authors altogether deny the allegations that they make picturebooks for a young audience (Lewis 2001:77). Salisbury (2008:36) argues that the most successful picturebooks are often created by authors who do not consider their intended audience, but rather work from the intention of saying something important to themselves. This intention does not take the form of a factual account or moral lesson, but rather as a question or speculation on a topic that concerns the artist. Shaun Tan, for instance, feels that picturebooks should pose questions by providing a speculative proposition, rather than provide answers, as traditional picturebooks attempt to do (Tan 2002:s.p). In such a case, the postmodern picturebook is no longer entirely concerned with addressing the assumed likes and needs of a child (and sometimes both a child and adult) reader, but becomes a challenging visual storytelling medium, where the words and images are

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24 The constraints of this study do not allow for the examination of the assumptions concerning the levels of sophistication of child and adult readers, and their ability to engage with texts on different levels. However, the author suggests that this could be a topic for further investigation following this study.

expressive elements, rather than didactic tools (Kiefer 2008:19). In this way, the postmodern picturebook functions as an art object[25], as most art in any medium is not created for a specific audience, but seeks to build one for itself (Tan 2002:s.p).

This study argues that the postmodern picturebook can thus not be limited to a specific audience, and cannot be defined as a purely children's medium. Furthermore, the application of a postmodern and poststructural approach to the picturebook contradicts the notion that the 'implied reader' is one who is able to decode the intention of the author (even more so the notion that there are specific pre-determined signs that will appeal separately and predictively to an adult and child reader)[26]. In the context of the postmodern picturebook as a 'text', it can be said that the 'unity' of a text lies with the reader, rather than the author, as Barthes (1977:148) suggests that "the reader … is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted". The postmodern picturebook thus subverts the relationship between the authoritative author and passive reader by demanding active reader participation, analysis, performance and re-creation (El-Tamami 2007:25). Shaun Tan, for instance, consciously attempts to keep the imagery and words in his books as open to interpretation as possible, and believes that readers feel more drawn in to the text when it does not claim to 'mean' anything in particular (Tan 2002:s.p). In this way, Tan can be said to work according to the notions discussed by Barthes (1977:147) who states that "by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text … liberates what may be called the anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary". This study thus seeks to explore this approach to picturebooks, by investigating how word and image (and their interactions) can aid a free flow of signification, ultimately allowing the picturebook to appeal to a wider readership.

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25 Doonan (1993:7) believes that pictures in a picturebook enable it to function like an art object, or "something which gives form to ideas and to which we can attach out ideas".

26 As mentioned previously, the notion that a sign is filled by the meaning intended by its author is a concept characteristic of the logocentric tradition, and the metaphysics of presence (Harland 1987:126).

Chapter 4 – Shaun Tan's picturebooks – exploring absence

The previous discussion has established that a postmodern picturebook implies an active reader, subverting the relationship between the author as the source of meaning, and the reader as passive consumer. Postmodern and poststructuralist theory in general adopts Barthes' opinion that the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author (Barthes 1977:148). Moreover, Barthes (1977:147) states that "to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing". The presence of an author is presumably limiting, not allowing for the play of signifiers, but ending the work[27] on a signified, or a final 'meaning'. However, Derrida simultaneously stresses that the process of interpretation cannot completely discard the initial intention of the author (West 1996:185). This study thus incorporates an aspect of the author's perspective into the exploration of Shaun Tan's postmodern picturebooks, focusing in particular on his intention to give up control of the 'meaning' of the text, and thus subverting the role of the author that is implied by the metaphysics of presence. Tan (2011:8) claims that "above and beyond any simple story or 'message', I believe that the personal reflections of the reader are far more important than those of an author". This chapter aims to explore postmodern picturebooks created by an author who consciously intends on creating a 'text' rather than a 'work', and to investigate the way in which these texts allow for a play of signification, and thus ultimately subvert the notion of implied reader.

Tan's work reflects all of the postmodern characteristics outlined by Anstey (2002:447), specifically the possibility of multiple meaning-making for multiple readers. Tan claims that he does not think much about 'meaning' when he writes and draws, and does not try to define any 'meanings' when the picturebook is complete, but rather works with a concept he finds interesting, and leaves his work unfinished so that it requires interpretation (Tan s.a). This incompleteness involves readers by bringing them into a state of unfamiliarity where they are forced to take part in the meaning-making process (Tan s.a). Tan (2010:s.p) states that his aspirations are "to simply present the reader with ideas that are essentially silent, unexplained, and open to very broad interpretation". The picturebook thus becomes a space in which the reader's own thoughts and

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27 The presence of the author thus assumes a 'work', rather than a 'text'.

interpretations can take form, and a play of signification can take place (Tan 2011:8). Tan (2012:s.p) attempts to infuse his picturebooks with as much 'negative space'[28] as possible, stripping down his own intentions and interpretations so that there are gaps in his understanding of the picturebook that he is creating. In this way, his interpretation of the words or images is consciously removed, leaving only the elements necessary for a reader to create their own stories (Tan 2012:s.p). Similarly, Iser (1987:229) suggests that the possibility of alternative meanings can make themselves felt through distortions (gaps or 'absences') in the text. The intentional absence of apparent meaning with which the author traditionally 'infuses' his work, as well as the incompleteness and indeterminacy (which is a key characteristic of postmodern texts) arguably make Tan's picturebooks open to interpretation, and the general 'absence' allows the reader to actively partake in meaning-making (Anstey 2002:447).

Iser (1987:107) argues that the success with which the process of meaning-making occurs depends largely on the ability of a text to activate the reader's capability of perception. The text should therefore be able to draw the reader in, and it does so by differing from the world that the reader occupies (Iser 1987:181-182). Within a picturebook context, for instance, fantasy situations and characters far removed from 'ordinary' life allow the text to open itself up to complex interpretations (Nodelman 2008:16). This occurs because it is in the nature of a reader to connect their experiences to ordinary, everyday understandings. By creating a completely 'unbelievable' world, and treating it as though it is 'normal', the author unsettles that world, and triggers the reader's meaning-making process (Nodelman 2008:17). In Tan's picturebooks, an unsettling indeterminacy is brought about by the fairly dark worlds which they portray, subtly hinting at something which is not quite right, and thereby creating a quality of disquiet (Tan s.a). According to Hunter (2011:11), Tan "renders imaginary worlds which are both specific and at the same time universal and surreal representations of wordless longings and fears". Unlike more traditional picturebooks, Tan's work does not appear to deal with specific themes or messages, but presents the reader with questions which are "delivered in silence" (Tan 2010:s.p). Similarly, Moebius (1986:146) argues that the most successful picturebooks are those that portray invisible concepts which cannot be easily described in words or images. This strangeness of a world not quite like the one the

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28 This 'negative space' can be said to function much like a gap, or an absence.

reader occupies brings about a sense of indeterminacy, which forces the reader to take part in the meaning-making process by attempting to formulate that which is 'absent' (Iser 1987:181-182).

The word and image relationships differ in each of Tan's texts, however, as with many postmodern picturebooks, their interactions always enhance the indeterminacy and silences (or absences) in the text (Anstey 2002:447). The written narrative in picturebooks such as *The Lost Thing* (2000) and *The Red Tree* (2001) is kept to a minimum, and the words refrain from referring to the content of the images in any literal, descriptive way, thus leaving the images free to invite the reader in (Tan s.a). The illustrations are purposefully as open to interpretation as possible, and are mostly quite surreal in both the stylistic approach and the subject matter, which is characteristic of postmodern texts (Anstey 2002:447). Tan believes that a surrealistic approach to images aids in creating an unsettling experience, and allows the reader to partake in the meaning-making, as the images do not appear to represent anything in particular (like a signifier with no particular identifiable signified) (Tan s.a). Similarly, Barthes (1977:144) suggests that "surrealism ... contributed to the desacrilization of the image of the Author by ceaselessly recommending the abrupt disappointment of expectations of meaning". The surrealistic approach thus arguably aids the disruption of any inherent 'meaning' that the reader may expect to uncover in a text, leaving the process of signification unhindered by the author. Furthermore, the surreal imagery in Tan's (2010:s.p) picturebooks deepens the "uncertainty of language, enjoying its ambiguous references, exploiting its slipperiness, and at times, confessing its inadequacy", thereby unsettling any expectations of meaning in the written narrative. Finally, Tan's intentional use of intertextual references, specifically in the illustrations, further enhances the signification potential of his texts by providing the reader with a multitude of 'threads' to follow in the meaning-making process (Tan 2001b:sp). Tan's picturebooks thus consciously disrupt meaning, and play with the absences, or gaps, that ultimately enable the reader to co-author the texts. The following chapter attempts to explore the use of absence and Derridean signification in the picturebooks *The Lost Thing* (2000)*, The Red Tree* (2001), and *Tales from outer suburbia* (2009).

4.1 The Lost Thing

The Lost Thing (2000) is a picturebook with a fairly traditional narrative structure, and the story seems to be a universal one – a boy called Shaun finds a lost 'animal' (identified only as the 'lost Thing') on the beach, and tries to find out who owns it, or where it belongs (Tan 2002a:s.p). Shaun and the Thing embark on a journey to find the Thing's rightful place, and with a series of clues they are able to locate an anonymous location (full of other equally lost Things) where it seems to fit in[29]. This ordinary narrative is juxtaposed with a very unusual delivery – the Thing is a huge red tentacled monster, which Tan (2002a:s.p) describes as "not quite animal or machine, with no particular function or origin". The world Shaun inhabits is a surreal urban landscape, cold, mechanical, complete with acid green skies, and full of obscure excessive plumbing. This world is ordered, everything is labelled, explained, and has a place, while the lost thing exists in contrast to its surroundings, being whimsical, purposeless, out-of-scale and apparently meaningless (Tan s.a). Tan (2002a:s.p) thus describes *The Lost Thing* (2000) as "both simple and complex – depending upon how the reader chooses to understand it".

The written narrative in *The Lost Thing* (2000) is a matter-of-fact anecdote, addressed to the reader, and presented as a 'what I did over summer' story (Tan s.a). This approach is supported visually, as the words are handwritten on lined paper, and pasted among the images. The words do not appear to describe anything in particular, not mentioning what the lost Thing is, where the story is set, or who is narrating it (Tan 2002a:s.p). According to Tan (2002a:s.p) "the first person narrative is deliberately deadpan; inconclusive to the point of casual dismissal". The simple narrative 'shell' of the words arguably creates a space in which the play of meaning can take place, because there is no sense that something needs to be 'correctly interpreted' (Tan 2002a:s.p). Contrary to the written narrative, the images in *The Lost Thing* (2000) are extremely detailed, and mostly quite surreal and obscure, their visual intricacy intensified by the collage made from engineering textbooks which frames each image. Stephens (2008:94) describes the images in *The Lost Thing* (2000) as

a version of the postmodern fantastic historiography which gave rise to steampunk …

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29 Although it is unclear whether it truly 'belongs', this remains largely unresolved.

crammed with signs and notices, directions, pipes, bits of machinery, dials, cogwheels and box-like buildings, and convey the impression of a futuristic world patched together from the leftovers of the past.

However, the weird absurdities present in the images are mentioned in the accompanying text with casual disinterest, if mentioned at all (Tan s.a). As discussed in chapter three, *The Lost Thing* (2000) seems to employ a predominantly counterpointing dynamic of words and images, with a vast gap between the written and visual narratives, and many things left unexplained. This arguably encourages the reader to play with the two modes, accumulating traces of each, and combining them in order to attempt meaning-making.
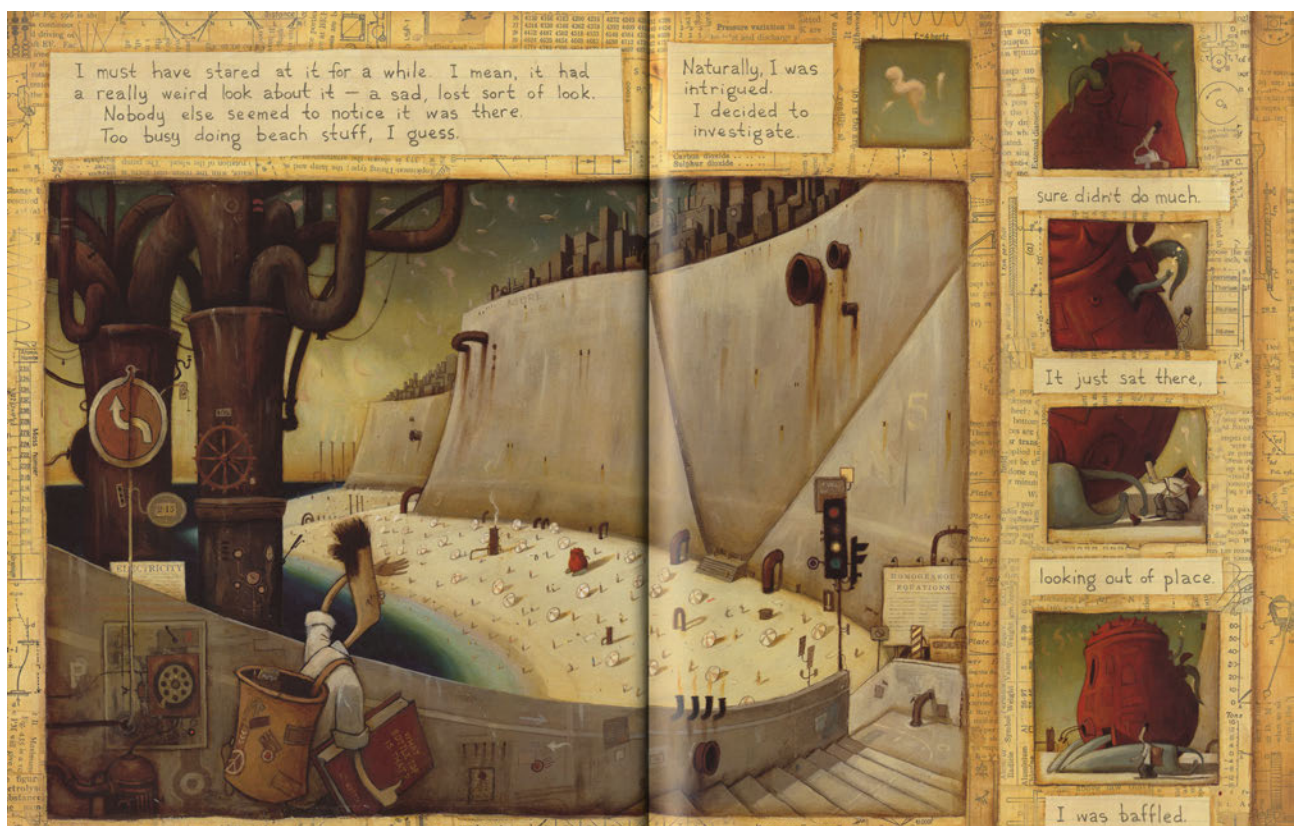

Figure 4.1. Double page illustration of Shaun Tan, *The Lost Thing*, 2000.

The words and images in *The Lost Thing* (2000) counterpoint each other in a number of ways, most significantly in genre or modality, and in characterisation. While the words appear to be quite ordinary and realistic, the images are clearly fantastical. For instance, as mentioned in chapter 3, the scene where Shaun finds the Thing and begins to play with it (Figure 3.4), is described quite casually in the written narrative - "I played with the thing for most of the afternoon. It was great fun, yet I couldn't help feeling that something

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wasn't quite right". If it was not for the images, one could conclude that 'the thing' is a lost animal, which the protagonist found in a most ordinary setting. Meanwhile, the images show a desolate beach where Shaun and the massive red Thing, which escapes definition, play catch with a huge piece of rusted plumbing, and build an obscure sandcastle which looks like a futuristic factory. The "something wasn't quite right" refers to the fact that the Thing is lost, rather than the fact that it exists at all, which is puzzling considering the strangeness of the Thing (Tan 2000:s.p). The Thing is thus key to the counterpoint in characterisation, as there is no description of it in the written narrative, other than the fact that it has "a sad, lost sort of look" about it (Tan 2000:s.p). The counterpointing of the written and visual narratives arguably creates gaps through indeterminacy, and provides more questions than answers. It is unclear what the Thing is or where it came from, why it is lost, why the world it inhabits looks the way it does, and why no one seems to notice the Thing, aside from the protagonist. According to Tan (2002:s.p) the answers to these questions cannot be found, as the book is not a "puzzle punctuated by clues, that need to be solved. Unlike a riddle, there is no clear answer to these questions, which remain open".

Figure 4.2. Double page illustration of Shaun Tan, *The Lost Thing*, 2000.
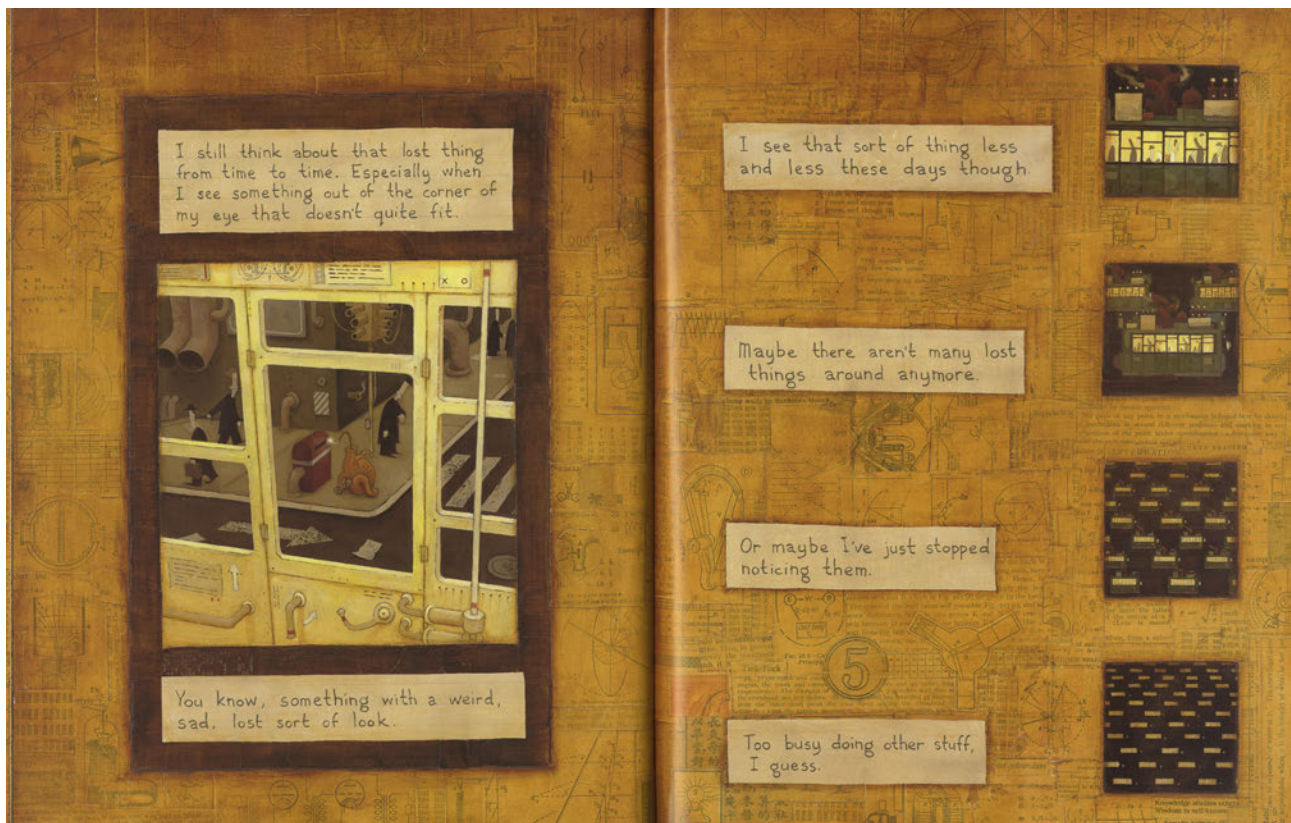
Figure 4.3. Double page illustration of Shaun Tan, *The Lost Thing*, 2000.

The presence of the Thing seems to pose the majority of questions, as it is out of place in a much deeper sense than just being 'lost' (Tan 2002:s.p). Although it is huge, obscure, and impossible to miss, the Thing remains largely unnoticed – in the second spread of the book (Figure 4.1) Shaun notes "nobody else seemed to notice it was there. Too busy doing beach stuff, I guess" (Tan 2000:s.p). When Shaun brings the Thing home with him (Figure 4.2), there is a similar reaction, as his parents "didn't really notice it at first ... eventually I had to point it out to them" (Tan 2000:s.p). In both instances, the images show the Thing as being large and obtrusive, very prominent in the bleak beach landscape (Figure 4.1), and taking up most of the space in the room of Shaun's house (Figure 4.2). Moreover, the Thing is not the only obscure, lost creature inhabiting this world – in one of the last spreads (Figure 4.3) Shaun says that he thinks about the lost Thing, "especially when I see something out of the corner of my eye that doesn't quite fit" (Tan 2000:s.p). The accompanying image (Figure 4.3) shows a strange surreal creature on a street corner, surrounded by pedestrians who seem to be completely oblivious of its existence. Moreover, Shaun himself admits that he too is becoming oblivious to these 'things' as the words state "I see that sort of thing less and less these days though. Maybe there aren't

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many lost things anymore. Or maybe I've just stopped noticing them" (Tan 2000:s.p). The presence of the weird creatures which, like the lost Thing, appear in the city, seems to be measured by the extent to which they are noticed (Tan s.a). Generally, they are not noticed at all, and are thus functionally absent.

Figure 4.4. Double page illustration of Shaun Tan, *The Lost Thing*, 2000.

The Lost Thing (2000) seems to play with the notion of absence and presence in various aspects of the narrative. The world portrayed in the picturebook appears to be full of 'meaning' – everything is explained, labeled, and over-saturated with signage (Figure 4.1, Figure 4.2, Figure 4.4). The collaged textbooks which frame each page provide further 'meaningful' visual elements, such as graphs and factual explanations of the workings of some unknown machinery. This world is so ordered that there is even a 'federal department of odds and ends' (Figure 4.4) which deals with 'objects without names', 'troublesome artifacts of unknown origin', and 'things that just don't belong' (Tan 2000:s.p). Things that do not have apparent 'meaning' need to be hidden from sight (the above-mentioned department's slogan is 'sweepus underum carpetae'), and treated as

absent, like the lost Thing and other creatures[30]. However, because the world of *The Lost Thing* (2000) is so surreal and unrecognisable, and the collage elements so fragmented, this very 'meaningful' world functions much like a signifier with no signified, as the 'meaning' is not apparent to the reader[31]. The apparently 'meaningful' entities are thus discontinuous, creating an overall impression of fragmented excess (Stephens 2008:94). The world in which the lost Thing finds belonging (it is hidden behind a door that Shaun discovers in a hidden alleyway) does not seem to claim any 'meaning' whatsoever, but simultaneously appears less fragmented (Figure 4.5). According to Stephens (2008:96), the image depicting Shaun and the Thing at the door presents the reader with

> a strange heterotopia, a scene which is a Daliesque painting whose bright colours foreground a celebration of difference ... a paradox here emerges that the surreal world of the lost thing seems more 'real' ... the creatures are postmodern hybridisations ... but none of them seems out of place, and yet nothing is 'in place' either.

In this way, meanings which appear present are actually absent, and apparently meaningless entities (such as the lost Thing) which are treated as absent, are in fact very present.

The indeterminacy created by the absence of apparent meanings is intensified by the excess of signs the reader is faced with. According to Stephens (2008:92), *The Lost Thing* (2000) allows the reader to construct texts, and possibly 'meanings', out of the over-abundance of signs present in the picturebook, however the fragmentation and excess can disrupt "any desire to cohere the parts into a higher signifying system". This excess is achieved largely through the images, which are both very detailed, and permeated with intertextual references, all of which cannot be identified. For instance, the appearance of the lost Thing pays homage to pebble crabs and cast iron stoves, while the architecture of the city uses references to a Perth power station, and the paintings of Edward Hopper, John Brack, Jeffrey Smart, and Hieronymous Bosch (Tan 2001b:s.p). As with all texts, attempting to identify all of the intertextual references proves to be futile, however their presence enhances the possibility of multiple meanings, increasing the amount of 'threads' a reader can follow through the text (Marshall 1992:128).

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30 Despite their very apparent and at times intrusive 'presence'.

31 A parallel can be drawn between the world of *The Lost Thing* (2000) and the metaphysics of presence – this world seems to function as though meaning is present and accessible, whereas in fact it is unavailable or 'absent' to those who are not part of the world (the reader).

Figure 4.5. Double page illustration of Shaun Tan, *The Lost Thing*, 2000.

The Lost Thing (2000) thus displays an overabundance of signs, which, like Derridean signs, seem to have an excess of meaning, with only some of the potential meaning realised in specific situations (Cilliers 1998:42). It can thus be argued that this overall excess, coupled with an overt absence of apparent 'meanings', allows the reader to engage with a true play of signifiers, and take part in the meaning-making processes in the picturebook. However, as mentioned by Tan (2002:s.p), the questions are bound to remain unanswered, and thus no final signified can be reached in the play of meanings. This notion is emphasised by the ending of the picturebook, as according to Tan (2002a:s.p), "the story ends, although no particular conclusion is put forward". According to Stephens (2008:96), the ending of the *The Lost Thing* (2000) emphasises conjunction without significance, as the words appear to dwell on meaninglessness. The last spread of the picturebook shows the narrator riding away in a tram (Figure 8), receding further into the distance in each consecutive frame, eventually disappearing as he is swallowed up by a world saturated with signifiers but devoid of 'meaning'.
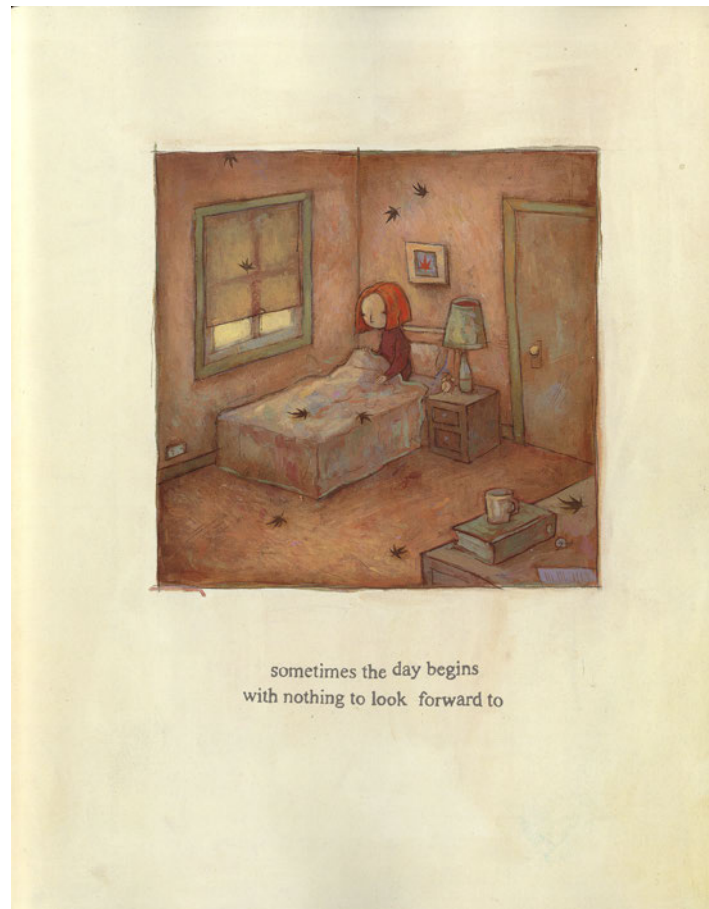
4.2 The Red Tree

Figure 4.6. Illustration of Shaun Tan, *The Red Tree*, 2001.

According to Tan, *The Red Tree* (2001) is an experimental narrative, which challenges picturebook conventions by presenting a story with virtually no written narrative, no clear continuity, no characters, and gloomy, surrealistic images (Tan s.a). The picturebook begins with an image (Figure 4.6) of a nameless red-haired girl waking up in her bed while brown wilted leaves fall from the ceiling, accompanied by the words "sometimes the day begins with nothing to look forward to" (Tan 2001a:s.p). The following spreads show the girl meandering through a series of surreal landscapes, dealing with a range of what appear to be unexplained emotions and thoughts (Tan s.a). Unlike traditional picturebooks, *The Red Tree* (2001) does not have to be read sequentially, although the beginning and ending of the book are linked by the girl, who leaves her bedroom in the beginning of the book, and returns to it at the end. The remaining spreads seem to be completely unrelated to one another, each one presenting the reader with an intricate world, the only link between them being the girl, and a small red leaf which appears,

barely noticeable, in each spread. According to El-Tamami (2007:39), *The Red Tree* (2001) is a picturebook in which "large, abstract statements are accompanied by surreal artistic interpretations, exquisitely detailed and ripe with echoes, allusions, and unplumbed depths, which the reader pores over again and again, each time discovering something new".
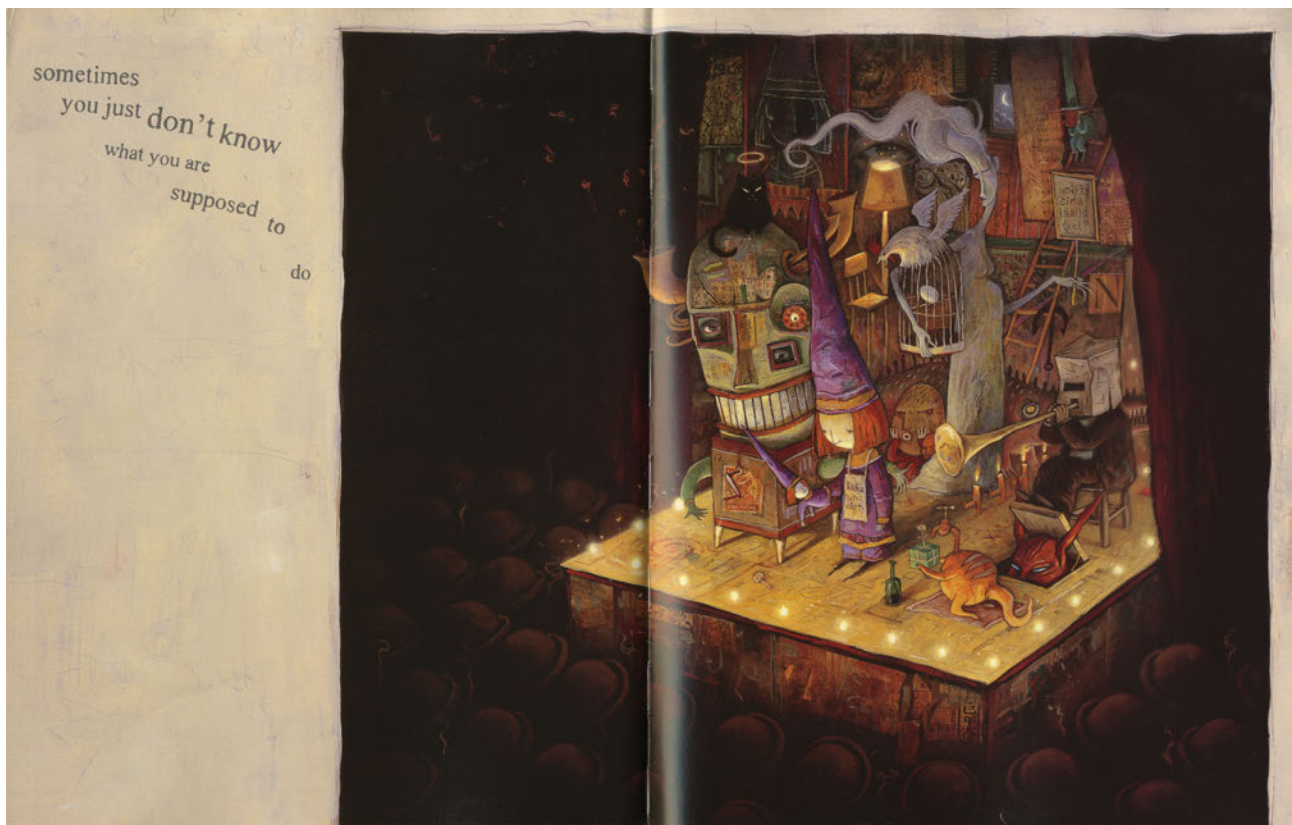

Figure 4.7. Double page illustration of Shaun Tan, *The Red Tree*, 2001.

Tan states that the dynamic between words and images in *The Red Tree* (2001) is intentionally indeterminate in order to allow for a play of meanings (Tan s.a). As discussed in chapter 3, this picturebook employs a predominantly contradictory relationship between the words and images, as the two modes appear to function almost like unrelated parallel narratives. The words do not directly refer to the images at any point, and the relationship between the two remains vague throughout the book. For instance in the first spread (Figure 4.6), the girl is not mentioned in the written narrative, and we can only assume that the words refer to her, and that she is waking up to a day in which nothing good is bound to happen. In other spreads the gap between the words and images is even more vast, for instance in the spread (Figure 4.7) in which the words

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inform us that "sometimes you just don't know what you are supposed to do", accompanied by an image of the girl standing on a stage, surrounded by bizarre creatures, and holding a puppet that is a miniature copy of herself (Tan 2001a:s.p). The combination of the words with the image create a state of extreme indeterminacy – the words directly state an uncertainty, while the image completely unsettles any 'meaning' by being simultaneously highly detailed, and devoid of anything that can be coherently explained. According to Tan, the word and image combinations thus leave the reader to actively partake in the meaning-making process in the absence of any apparent explanation of the scenes (Tan s.a).

Figure 4.8. Double page illustration of Shaun Tan, *The Red Tree*, 2001.

The Red Tree (2001) seems to employ the whole range of counterpointing relationships mentioned by Nikolajeva and Scott (2001:24-26). The counterpoint in genre or modality is similar to that of *The Lost Thing* (2000), however it is further intensified by the fact that each surreal landscape is disconnected from the previous one, and the minimal, realistic written narrative is juxtaposed with a series of increasingly obscure fantasy images, which the words do not refer to in any way. Furthermore, it is uncertain whether the

images are displaying an objective 'reality', or whether they represent the thoughts and emotions of the protagonist, and thus the worlds reflected in the images are both present and absent simultaneously. Each of the images seems to function as a separate visual narrative, thereby bringing about a counterpoint by juxtaposition. For instance in one of the first spreads (Figure 3.5) the girl is pictured walking down a city street with a giant fish floating above her, while on the very next spread (Figure 4.8) she appears in a deserted alien landscape, trapped inside a large bottle, and wearing a vintage scuba diving helmet, accompanied by the words "nobody understands" (Tan 2001a:s.p). Each spread presents a different disconnected world, none of which are mentioned in the written narrative. This arguably creates gaps (absences) between the consecutive spreads, as there is no obvious connection between them, and no explanation of why the girl moves between them so abruptly.

Figure 4.9. Double page illustration of Shaun Tan, *The Red Tree*, 2001.

There also appears to be a gap between the reader and narrator, or a counterpoint in perspective, as it is uncertain who is narrating, and who the written narrative is addressed to. At times the words seem to use direct address, such as in the above-mentioned first

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spread (Figure 3.5) that reads "darkness overcomes you", however it is simultaneously unclear whether the 'you' refers to the girl, or to the reader, and it is uncertain who the 'source' of the words is[32] (Tan 2001a:s.p). Furthermore, the fact that the girl (who is presumably the main character) is never mentioned in the written narrative implies a counterpoint in characterisation – the girl is present in all of the images, yet absent from the written narrative. Finally, there is a counterpoint in metafictive nature, where at times the images seem to function as metaphors for the words, however unusual these metaphors may be. For instance, in the spread where the girl is trapped in the bottle (Figure 4.8), one could interpret the bottle and barren landscape as being a metaphor for her isolation, and the emotions she experiences because "nobody understands". Combined, these counterpointing devices create indeterminacy through the vast gaps between the visual and written narratives, which leave the narrative devoid of any apparent 'meanings'.

Figure 4.10. Double page illustration of Shaun Tan, *The Red Tree*, 2001.

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32 It can be suggested that in this way the picturebook opposes the metaphysics of presence, as it is unclear who is being addressed, and who the 'source' of the written narrative is, thus deconstructing the traditional conventions associated with the reader and author.

Figure 4.11. Illustration of Shaun Tan, *The Red Tree*, 2001.

Much like *The Lost Thing* (2000), *The Red Tree* (2001) seems to dwell on absence, uncertainty, and a general lack of implied meaning in both the words and images. The written narrative consists almost entirely of statements that dwell on the senselessness of the world – for instance on two consecutive spreads we see the words "the world is a deaf machine without sense or reason", while the following spread states that "sometimes you wait and wait and wait and wait and wait and wait and wait but nothing ever happens" (Tan 2001a:s.p). Another sentence which spans a few spreads reads "sometimes you just don't know what you are supposed to do or who you are meant to be or where you are" (Tan 2001a:s.p). The words thus directly address a general absence of meaning, much like the visual narrative which, while extremely dense and detailed, seems to escape definition, or any obvious interpretation[33]. Stephens (2008:94), describes the images as having a feeling of 'fragmented excess', displaying a radical indeterminacy and excessive use of signs. For example, one of the spreads (Figure 4.9) shows the girl climbing up a

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33 In this way, the images in *The Red Tree* (2001) are similar to those in *The Lost Thing* (2000), as they function like signifiers without specific pre-determined signifieds.

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ladder in a strange landscape constructed from collaged book and newspaper pages, accompanied by the words "without sense or reason" (Tan 2001a:s.p). The amount of detail in the image is overwhelming – the words within the collage attract attention, yet the majority of these cannot be read, and the multitude of creatures, airplanes, shapes, windows, and ladders render the girl barely noticeable. There is an overabundance of visual signs, a pastiche of intertextual references (including maps, stamps, and some visual references to the cubist aesthetic) so dense that it results in a radical indeterminacy. The girl appears to be engulfed in a senseless world, full of activity and signs which cannot be interpreted, surrounded by means of travel (ladders, roads, airplanes), but going nowhere, and thus echoing the written narrative by having neither 'sense' nor 'reason'.
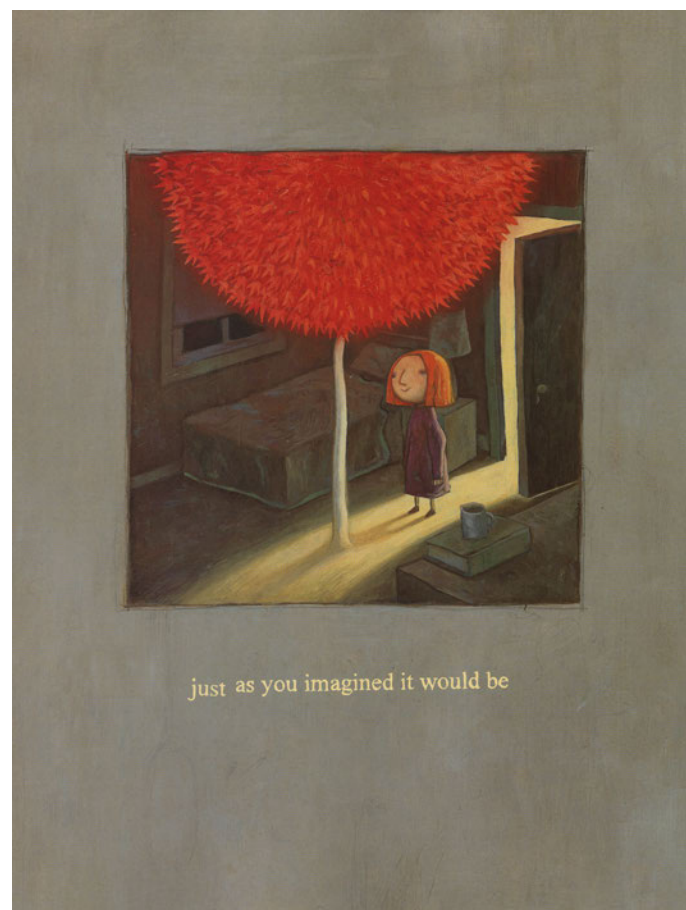

Figure 4.12. Illustration of Shaun Tan, *The Red Tree*, 2001.

The actions of the girl character in general appear to display an absence of meaning, as her actions are predominantly purposeless. In one spread (Figure 4.10) she is shown sitting on the shell of a giant snail, endlessly counting down the passage of time, and

'waiting', only to find out that 'nothing ever happens' (Tan 2001a:s.p). Her countdown resembles one typically associated with inmates counting down the days of their imprisonment, and the images are surrounded with fragmented handwritten words such as 'waiting', 'too long', 'never there yet', 'waste', 'gap', and 'absent', presumably referring to a meaningless passing of time (Tan 2001a:s.p). In another image (Figure 4.11) on the first page of the picturebook we see the girl attempting to speak through a loudspeaker, only her words emerge fragmented and indiscernible, appearing as separate letters falling down to the ground. Her attempt at communication is thus failed, and her intended 'meaning' is left unfulfilled[34]. This general indeterminacy of the girl's journey, coupled with an overabundance of signifiers which appear to lack signifieds, arguably creates a gap, or void, within which a play of meanings can occur (Harland 1987:150-151). The ending of the picturebook, although it does appear to come to a resolution in the form of a red tree blossoming in the girl's bedroom (Figure 4.12), is equally indeterminate, because it is an arbitrary event which is left unexplained by the words (Tan s.a). According to El-Tamami (2007:39) "Tan ... manages the near-impossible feat of achieving a richly satisfying conclusion, whilst maintaining the openness of interpretation ... that makes this book surpass his authority, leaving it limited only by the (lack of) bounds of the collective imagination of its readers".

4.3 Tales from outer suburbia

Tales from outer suburbia (2009) is a picturebook consisting of fifteen short stories, each completely different in both stylistic approach, and relationship between the written and visual narratives. These fragmented stories all involve the basic notion of something very unusual happening in the mundane environment of suburbia. According to Tan, 'outer suburbia' is both a state of mind and a place, somewhere close and familiar, but also on the edge of consciousness (Tan s.a). Suburbia thus represents something understandable, imbued with 'meaning', and the contrast between this mundane setting and extraordinary events or characters has an unsettling and thought-provoking effect (Tan s.a). Due to the constraints of this study I have selected three of these stories, each very different in their narrative approach, in order to explore how 'meaning' is unsettled through indeterminacy

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34 Interestingly, this image brings to mind Derrida's views concerning the intended meaning of a speaker, which cannot be considered as present and accessible.
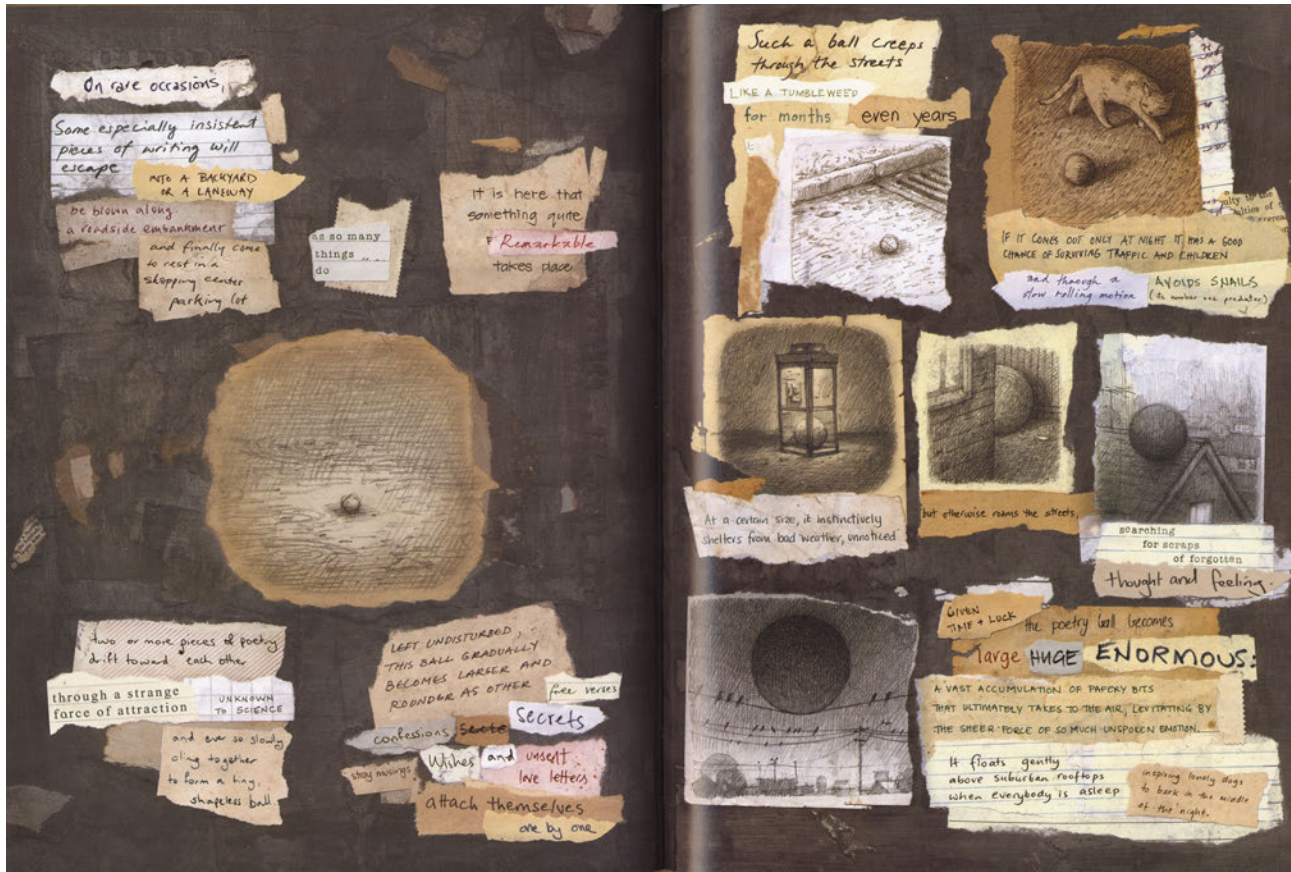
and absence.

4.3.1 Distant rain

Figure 4.13. Double page illustration of Shaun Tan, *Tales From Outer Suburbia*, 2009.

Distant rain functions almost like a surreal wildlife documentary, telling the story of a huge ball made out of words, particularly those that are written on scraps of paper, forgotten or lost (Tan s.a). Gradually, small pieces of paper which were once poems, unsent love letters, wishes, or any other form of lost or hidden written musings gather themselves into a large ball, which seems to develop a collective consciousness (Tan 2009:30). Tan states that the narrative is a references to the Jewish story of the Golem, an artificial being made of clay who could be animated by spoken or written words (Tan s.a). This artificial being becomes enormous in size, levitating above the city "by the sheer force of so much unspoken emotion", but is simultaneously fragile, and can be reduced to shreds within a matter of minutes (Tan 2009:31,34). The story has an interesting visual approach, as there are few images, and the spreads are largely constructed from collaged

scraps of paper on which the written narrative appears, both handwritten and typed, each scrap distinctly different from all the others. The narrative is fragmented, and slightly eerie and unsettling, which arguably forces the reader to actively partake in the meaning-making process.

Figure 4.14. Double page illustration of Shaun Tan, *Tales From Outer Suburbia*, 2009.

Interestingly, unlike *The Lost Thing* (2000) and *The Red Tree* (2001), 'Distant rain' employs an enhancing relationship between words and images, as the visual and written narratives do not contradict each other in any way. The written narrative is dominant, while the images seem to illustrate select parts of the written narrative quite directly, as fairly realistic pencil sketches. For instance, in the second spread (Figure 4.13) the actions of the ball, such as the fact that "it instinctively shelters from bad weather, unnoticed", are described in the words, while the accompanying image shows the ball inside a telephone booth (Tan 2009:31). However, because of the visual quality of the written narrative, there is a strangeness in the relationship between the words and images, as they do not appear as two separate modes, but seem to blend into a holistic narrative, in which the written

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and visual are inseparable. Despite this visual merging of the words and images, the overall effect is not unifying, but increasingly fragmented. The combination of written and visual narratives constantly interrupt the reader's progress by creating an uncertainty of which word should be read next, as the placement is haphazard, and some words are crossed out, while the images further interrupt the 'flow' of the words. Furthermore, neither mode treats the appearance of a large ball of words as an extraordinary occurrence, as the images document the event fairly realistically, albeit eerily (Figure 4.14), and the words do not seem to indicate any irregularity, which has a general effect of uncertainty and indeterminacy.

Figure 4.15. Double page illustration of Shaun Tan, *Tales From Outer Suburbia*, 2009.

The indeterminacy is further intensified by the intertextual nature of the story, the pastiche of scraps forming a sort of visual illustration of Barthes' notion of the 'text'. The scraps are clearly recognisable as references to some other texts, however they are like untraceable echoes, as the reader can never know the context from which each one emerged. Each of the scraps thus functions as a signifier in the absence of a signified, and

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these signifieds 'play', coming together into an entity which seems simultaneously meaningful and meaningless, and breaking apart with ease at the end of the story (Figure 4.15). The conclusion of the story sees the ball broken apart by wind and rain, and leaving the scraps scattered around the suburbs in a mess of "faded words pressed into accidental verse, barely visible, but undeniably present" (Tan 2009:35). The presence of these signifiers does not guarantee meaning, in fact the story seems to end with an absence of any 'meaning' or explanation of the event, leaving only the scraps, which "will whisper something different" to each reader (Tan 2009:35).

4.3.2 Grandpa's story

Figure 4.16. Double page illustration of Shaun Tan, *Tales From Outer Suburbia*, 2009.

'Grandpa's story' is a fairly traditional linear narrative, telling the tale of a strange a ritual that two people have to perform before they are allowed to get married. The story has a familiar feeling of a grandfather telling his grandchildren about how different life was when he was younger, however this account takes a fantastical turn. The story begins with

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a written account of the ritual, called the 'Scavenger Hunt', which was to lead the newlyweds 'beyond all the signs and roads' with instructions to find a number of objects, and be legally wed after their successful return (Tan 2009:41). The account is interrupted by four spreads depicting dark, fantasy landscapes through which the couple have to make their (clearly perilous) journey (Figure 4.16). The indeterminacy between the written and visual narratives, as well as the clearly fantastical imagery create an unsettling effect, and allow for a play of meanings.

Figure 4.17. Double page illustration of Shaun Tan, *Tales From Outer Suburbia*, 2009.

The relationship between words and images in 'Grandpa's story' is counterpointing, with a very significant counterpoint in genre and modality. A vast gap is created between the realistic account presented by the written narrative, and the obscure surreal imagery. Interestingly, the words and images are also separated visually, and appear independently on different pages, thus bringing further attention to the gap. The relationship between the separate images is also fragmented (Figure 4.16, Figure 4.17), and it is unclear whether they form a linear account, as the landscapes and events do not appear to be

connected among themselves. The words and images take on different roles in the narrative, the written narrative giving an account of grandpa's tale, which does not mention the environment in which the adventures took place, other than to say that "it's hard to explain all the horrible things that happened out there. In fact, the more I tell you, the less you will actually understand" (Tan 2009:41). The images, meanwhile, provide increasingly strange and eerie scenarios (Figure 4.16, Figure 4.17) which the couple are faced with, thus bringing about a counterpoint by juxtaposition, as the images appear almost like a parallel narrative, left unexplained by the words. This, along with the fact that the words and images are physically disconnected from one another, creates an indeterminacy, as it is unclear whether the images really form part of a factual journey, or wether they are imagined, and thus functionally absent.
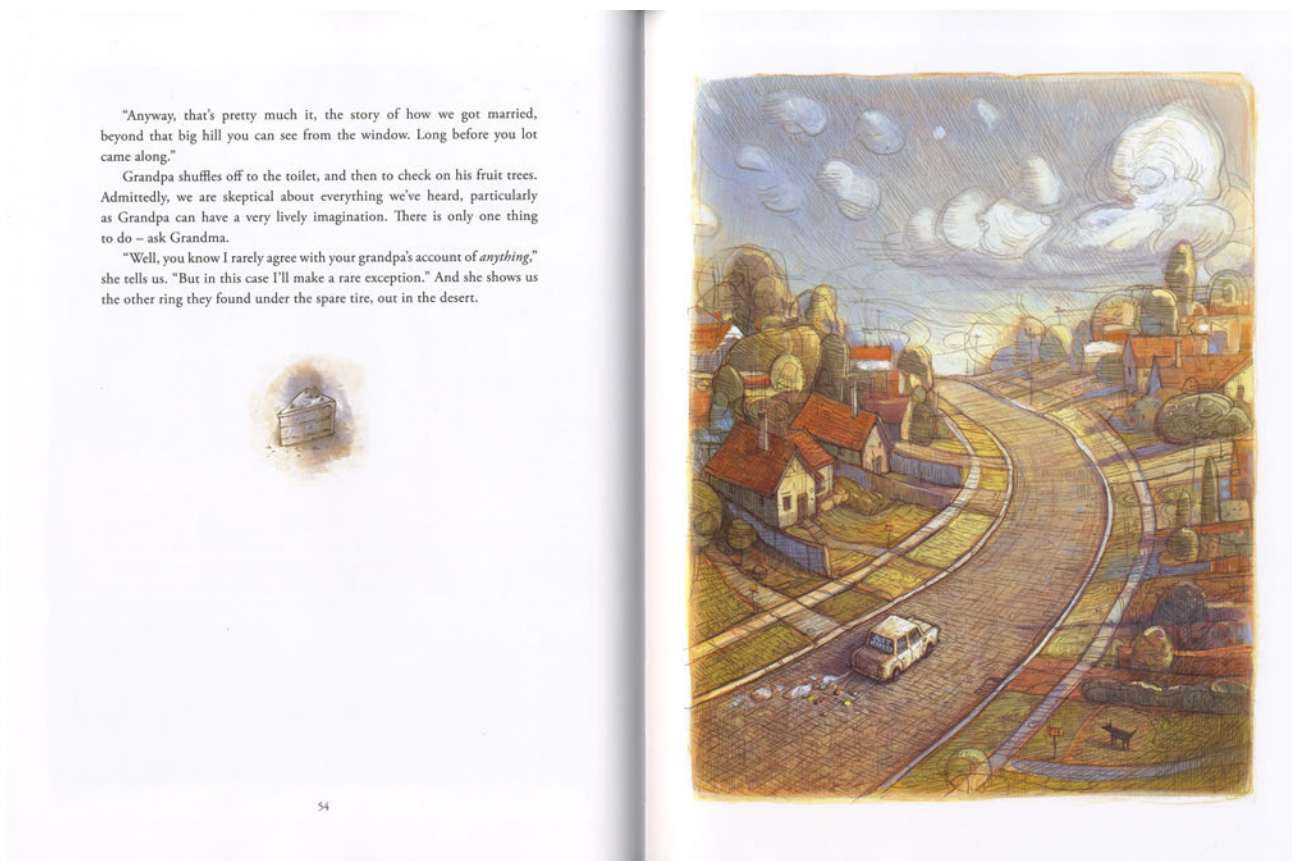

Figure 4.18. Double page illustration of Shaun Tan, *Tales From Outer Suburbia*, 2009.

'Grandpa's story', much like *The Red Tree* (2001), appears to display a general absence of 'meaning' in the actions of the characters. According to Tan, the story makes reference to the strangeness of Western wedding customs, which may have been meaningful when

they were initiated, however they have lost their 'meaning' with time (Tan s.a). The 'meaninglessness' in 'Grandpa's story' is based largely on the banal items which need to be recovered in a dangerous surreal landscape, such as an iron, an alarm clock, and a soft toy (Tan 2009:51). The reason for this quest remains unexplained, as does the significance of the items that need to be collected. In fact, the items remain unnamed in the written narrative, only mentioned as 'objects', which were "tied ... to the rear bumper with wedding string in the customary way" (Tan 2009:50). Furthermore, the absence of any explanation of the landscapes, and the strange creatures and events which are encountered, function much like empty signifiers, as they reference familiar objects in an unexpected way (such as aggressive galloping TV sets). At the end of the narrative, grandma confirms the story displayed in the images, and coupled with an illustration of the same car (Figure 4.18) riding through an ordinary suburb (objects attached to the back as proof of the journey) this brings about an indeterminacy, which leaves the reader attempting to piece together what 'really happened'[35].

4.3.3 Stick figures

'Stick figures' is an account of strange creatures constructed from earth and sticks inhabiting a suburban landscape. The account is non-linear, and there is no definitive beginning or conclusion, merely a description of the figures, which have "always been here, since before anyone remembers" (Tan 2009:65). According to Tan, this story references an installation in Lapland called 'The silent people', which consists of several hundred scarecrow-like figures congregated on the side of a highway (Tan s.a). Much like the Lapland sculptures, and the creature from *The Lost Thing* (2000), the stick figures remain voiceless, and their purpose and intentions are unknown. Unlike *The Lost Thing* (2000), however, these creatures inhabit a very realistically rendered landscape (the paintings are of Perth suburbs), and this presence of bizarre creatures in a realistic landscape has an unsettling effect (Tan s.a). Something familiar, understandable (and thus arguably 'meaningful') is occupied by 'meaningless' entities, which insist on lingering within the suburbs relentlessly and purposelessly (Figure 4.19). The indeterminacy of something that is outside of language placed within a familiar environment arguably

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35 Although, as with most postmodern narratives, one can never know what 'truly happened', and any found 'meaning' will shift and change.

creates a gap, or absence, within which a play of meanings can take place.

The relationship between words and images in 'Stick figures' is somewhat contradictory, as the two modes seem to function as independent narratives, although addressing the same subject matter. The words detail the reactions of the suburb dwellers to the presence of the stick figures, such as the fact that adults pay them little attention, while small children try to dress them up like scarecrows, and adolescents beat and break them (Tan 2009:65-66). The images, meanwhile, show deserted suburban landscapes inhabited only by the stick figures, and making no direct reference to the interaction of the people and figures described in the written narrative. The suburb dwellers are thus present in the words, but absent from the images, which creates a kind of counterpoint in perspective, because the narrators are removed from the visual narrative. The absence of the narrators creates an eerie indeterminacy when coupled the looming presence of the 'meaningless' figures, which they try to remove to no avail.
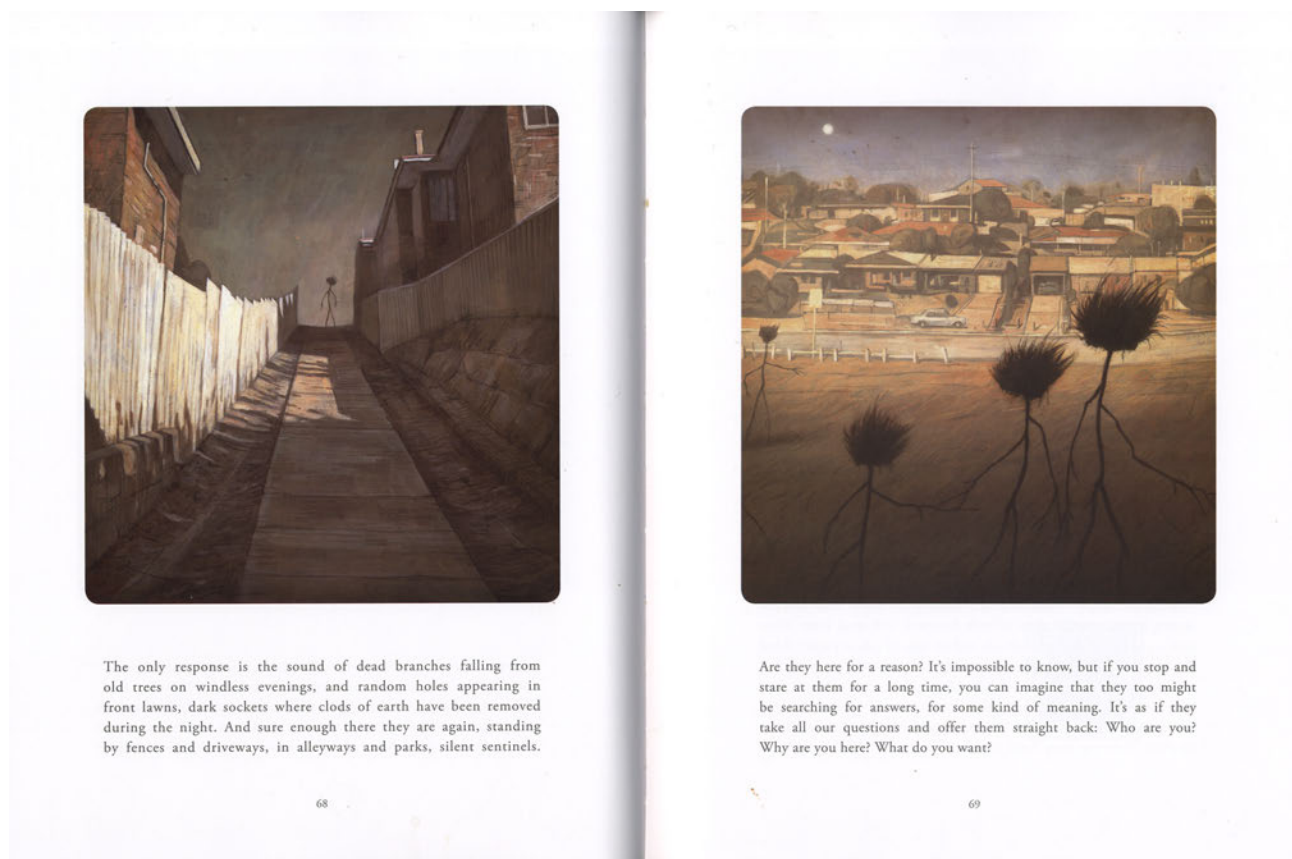

The only response is the sound of dead branches falling from old trees on windless evenings, and random holes appearing in front lawns, dark sockets where clods of earth have been removed during the night. And sure enough there they are again, standing by fences and driveways, in alleyways and parks, silent sentinels.

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Are they here for a reason? It's impossible to know, but if you stop and stare at them for a long time, you can imagine that they too might be searching for answers, for some kind of meaning. It's as if they take all our questions and offer them straight back: Who are you? Why are you here? What do you want?

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Figure 4.19. Double page illustration of Shaun Tan, *Tales From Outer Suburbia*, 2009.

The narrative of 'Stick figures' seems to be centered around a play with the concept of 'meaning', questioning the validity of the meanings we create for ourselves, and unsettling them. Referring to the figures, the written narrative asks "what are they? Why are they here? What do they want?" (Tan 2009:67). The impossibility of finding an explanation, a meaning, a signified for these voiceless empty signifiers is infuriating, and people respond by either ignoring their presence, or attempting to eliminate it. The story does not offer a resolution or explanation for the purpose of the stick figures, and resolves that the reason for their presence is

> impossible to know, but if you stop and stare at them for a long time, you can imagine that they too might be searching for answers, for some kind of meaning. It's as if they take all our questions and offer them straight back: Who are you? Why are you here? What do you want? (Tan 2009:69).

The reader is thus left uncertain, as the ending of the story does not provide closure, but leaves more questions, both about the 'meaning' of the existence of the figures, and our own. However, this meaning is 'impossible to know', and we are thus left in a Derridean play of signifiers, forever engaging with the text, but never able to access a stable and 'final' meaning.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how the 'simple' picturebook is able to transcend its traditional function of a medium intended for entertaining and educating children. As discussed in chapter three, traditional picturebooks can be characterised by a fairly uniform narrative structure, and the use of words and images to convey a simple and accessible message or moral, which is both entertaining and educational. These picturebooks typically utilise symmetrical or enhancing dynamics between the words and images, presumably so that the reader is able to uncover the message or 'meaning' (usually pedagogic in tone and intent) with ease. The traditional picturebook is thus much like a 'work' as defined by Barthes, and the relationship between author and reader presumes that the reader is passive, searching for an encoded meaning, and bound by the author's intention. Postmodern picturebooks, on the other hand, seem to differ considerably from their more traditional counterparts, as seen in the discussion of Shaun Tan's postmodern picturebooks in chapter four.

While Shaun Tan's texts adhere to the definition of a picturebook by using a combination of words and images to communicate, they do not follow a traditional linear narrative structure, and intentionally avoid closure. While maintaining the 'simple' appearance of a traditional picturebook by utilising a minimal written narrative and large pictures, Tan's texts are highly complex. As discussed in chapter four, Tan's picturebooks play with the notion of absence through an over-saturation of signs, intertextuality, and a general lack of explicit and accessible 'meanings'. In this way, the picturebooks achieve a state of dissemination, whereby the meaning-making process is not constrained, but is multiplied, allowing for endless uncertainties, recontextualisations, and reinterpretations (West 1996:185). The picturebooks thus become true 'texts', presenting the reader with perpetually unfulfilled meaning in the absence of signifieds. The author no longer dictates 'meaning', but appears to be absent from the picturebook, allowing the reader to interact with the text instead of passively consuming a prescribed moral or message.

I would like to argue that this implies a widening in the implied audience of postmodern picturebooks, because they surpass their function as a purely didactic tool, and their potential for meaning-making makes them appropriate for readers of all ages. It is

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impossible to access all the possible 'meanings' of the words, or of the images, or of the word-image relationships in a picturebook, which arguably encourages the reader to re-visit the text, each time discovering something new (Sipe 1998:101). The picturebook thus has unlimited potential for meaning-making, and a postmodern, poststructuralist approach allows the medium to surpass the limitations associated with traditional picturebooks, and encourages participation and exploration from both authors and readers alike.

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