



Visual Literacy: flying to another place

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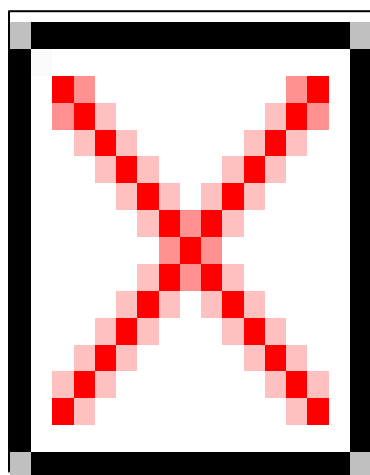
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Byline:

by **Piet Grobler**

In the second of a new mini-series on visual literacy for **Books for Keeps**, **Piet Grobler** discusses creating a sense of place, time and mood.

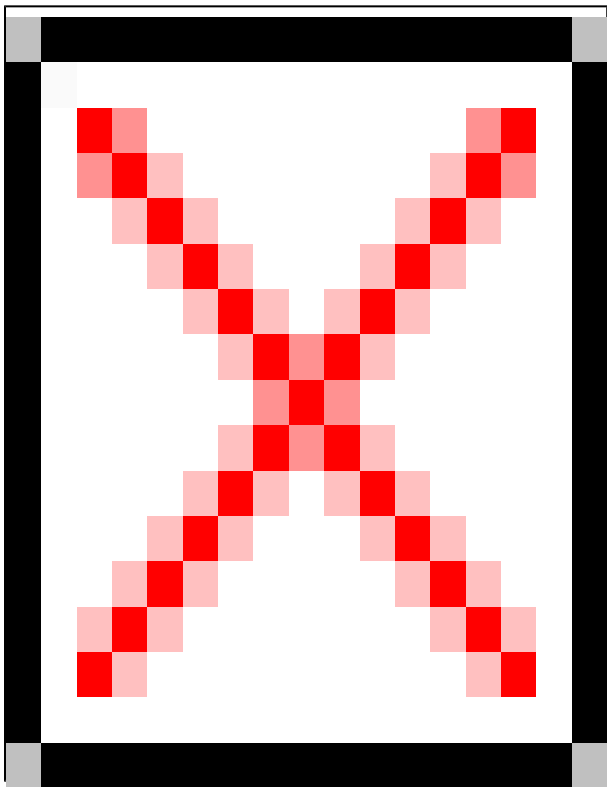
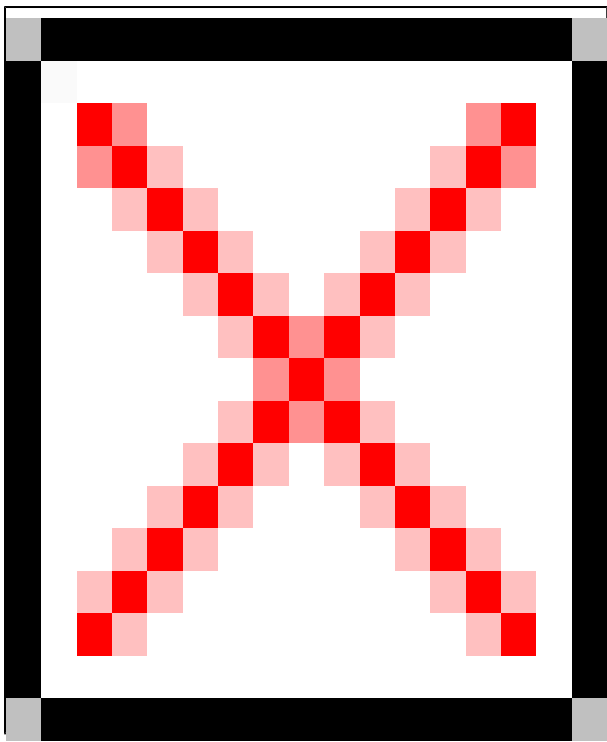
A good picture book is likely to be a flight of fantasy that manages to take the reader along to a place elsewhere. As said in the first article on visual literacy, this place may be created by the subject matter of the illustrations and the chosen medium, colours and techniques used. In the following examples, we will see how, in addition to that, the arrangement or composition of elements, the emphasis or focus, as well as repetition, rhythm, sequence and proportion can also be instrumental in creating this 'place' where the story unfolds.



The first flight I'd like to refer to happens to be called **First Flight**. This book by Italian-born illustrator Sara Fanelli is, like all her books, not only exceptional for its innovative images, but also for a very strong design sensibility. Every single element on the illustrated page contributes either to the communication of the subject matter of the narrative or to the ambience needed to set the scene. In this story of a baby butterfly struggling to take off in successful flight, Fanelli uses graphic devices like dotted lines to indicate the flight path (or fall!) of the main character. Even the placing of the copy 'only one word per line in a very tall paragraph' adds to the sense that gravity gets the better of the young butterfly.

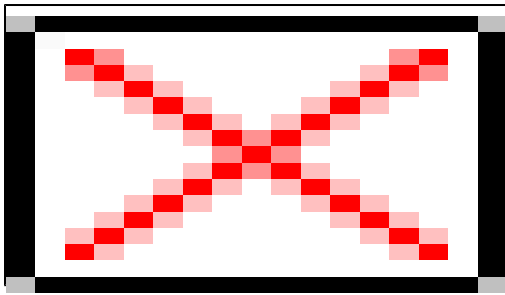
The use of collage is very suitable as the references to other paintings, scientific illustration, photographs and graphic design iconography adds an element of realism and of universality and timelessness. Little butterfly's journey spans times from the present to Leonardo da Vinci and places from Scotland to China: an exaggerated reality of make-belief and fantasy, set solidly in the real world.

Most of the pages indicate a divide by the combination of two richly coloured surfaces (wall paper, printed paper or painted paper) hinting at the difference between land and sky. When our main character succeeds in flying at last, however, the page is white 'as translucent as the air high above where she manages to go now. We see little butterfly repeated several times on the same double page indicating her movement through the sky. She is placed from left to right to coincide with the direction of our reading.



David Wiesner takes us on another flight with **Three Pigs**. The three little pigs from the well-known story escape from their own narrative by jumping out of their book onto the white paper of the book that we, the readers are holding in our hands. We soon see other books-within-books and the pigs trot happily into those to join characters from other well-known stories and nursery rhymes ? each executed in a different medium and visual language.

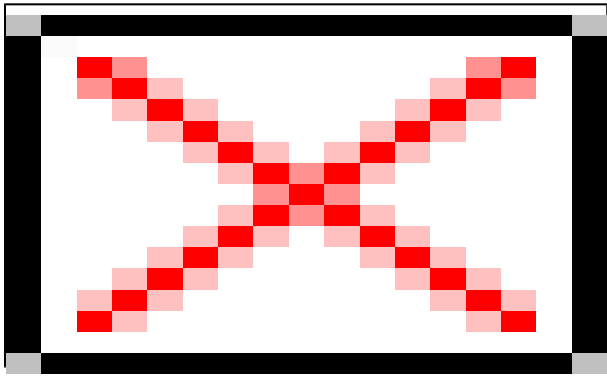
At one stage one of the pigs come close to the page like a character from a film might come close to the screen to have a look at the audience on the ?other side?, saying: ?I think ? someone?s out there?. The characters are conscious of the fact that they are ?acting? in a book and they are conscious of the format in which they are finding themselves. This device, called meta-fiction is, like the inter-textual introducing of characters from well-known stories, a feature often found in post-modernist picture books. In books like these, the readers are expected to engage with the construction of the narrative in order to make sense of it. The more books the readers have seen, and the more films and plays and places, the more visually literate they will be and the easier it they will find it to interact with a book that requires engagement from the reader. In a clever book like



this, the narrative also functions and entertains a young reader on the first level or layer and never turns into an academic exercise.

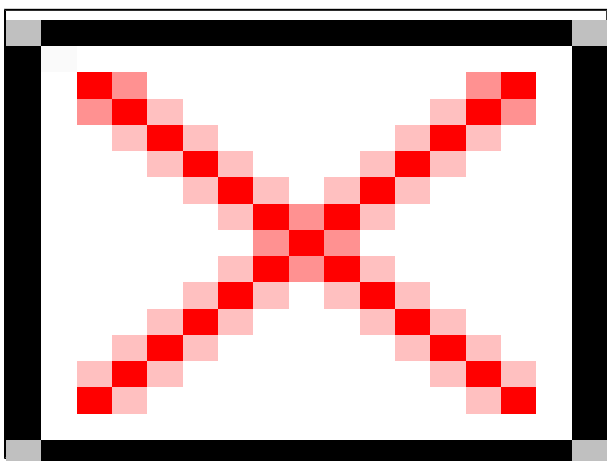
Wiesner echoes this interactive nature of the book by letting his three pigs return to their own story. They then interfere with it and manipulate the ending to shape an ending of their own choice. This book, even though it entertains and amuses on the surface, also emphasises an important strand of contemporary thinking: the meaning of a text is never fixed or finalized because context as well as the negotiating power of those involved in the process, will determine meaning of the art work.

Our third flight is that of Petr Horacek's **The Fly**. The fly shows and tells us about a day in the life of a housefly. The pages are not filled with loads of detail, but focus on the information under discussion ? alternating between the setting in the sky (or the ceiling) and the land, where the dangers in a fly's day are lurking. The typography in the title as well as the body copy is also composed in swirly meanders that mimic the fly's flight path.



One double spread turns reality upside down so that the reader is, with the fly, ?sitting? upside down on the ceiling, looking down at the boy with the fly swat. Whenever the fly swat strikes, Horacek zooms in to show the action close-up to exaggerate the dangerous moment.

A Lion in Paris is Beatrice Alemagna's beautiful tale of a lion who leaves his known environment for the strange city. The large format of the book and the fact that the book has to be opened with the spine to the top sets the scene of displacement and alienation. Repetitions of arches, trees, buildings, rain and people create crowded city-scapes that overwhelm our main character. At times, Alemagna zooms in to show us a close-up of the melancholic lion and then again his format becomes small and insignificant in the bustle of the city. Sometimes human beings are amplified to signify the lion's insignificance in this context.



Typography sits lonely on large open pages above each illustrated page. This results in sophisticated design, but at the same time echoes the displacement of the lion. Collaged photographs, combined with free and spontaneous drawing, add elements of reality to the fantasy and emphasise the setting of the story as real: an actual city. I believe fantasy becomes more convincing and more relatable when even the fantastical elements are somehow possible. Alemagna manages to convince brilliantly in this regard. Even the solution to the ?problem? that the narrative poses is believable and convincing. There is no quick fix or unsubstantiated solution for a lion in a city like Paris, but he can become a majestic landmark in a place and time that the illustrator has composed for the engaging reader.

Piet Grobler is an award-winning picture book illustrator, joint course leader in Illustration at the University of Worcester and co-founder of the **International Centre for the Picture Book in Society**.

Books mentioned:

A Lion in Paris, Beatrice Alemagna, Tate publishing, 978-1849761710, £12.99

The Three Pigs, David Wiesner , Andersen Press, 978-1849394055, £6.99

First Flight, Sara Fanelli Jonathan Cape, 978-0224064576,

The Fly, Petr Horacek, Walker Books, 978-1406330731, £5.99

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