Postmodern picture books as hypertexts?

Postmodern picture book design as resource for cognitive learning.

By SARA VAN MEERBERGEN, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden.

This paper is part of my postdoctoral research project called “Play, parody, intertextuality and interaction: postmodern Flemish picture books as semiotic playgrounds”. The paper deals with the influence of new media on the design of ‘older media’, more specific contemporary picture books for children. It unites insights from postmodern picture book research with studies on hypertexts and new media. The so called ‘loop books’ by Flemish picture book maker Tom Schamp are used as a case study to look at how postmodern picture book design can be used as a resource for cognitive and interactive learning. Also a comparison is made between the use of spatial and temporal reading paths in the loop books and in hypertexts and new media.

Keywords: Picture books, new media, hypertexts, cognitive learning, postmodernism, visual literacy

INTRODUCTION

Against the background of our ever growing digital society, recent research has showed an increasing interest in the role played by ‘new media’ and ‘new literacy’ in connection to children and learning (e.g. Unsworth 2006, Cole & Pullen eds. 2010, Davidsen & Christiansen 2014). While many studies are made about new media, it is at the same time interesting to ask ourselves how new media influence what we, in reverse, could describe as ‘old’ or ‘conventional media’. One of the main questions in this paper will be if and how contemporary or so called ‘postmodern’ picture book design (cf. Allan 2012), shows resemblance to the design of new media. In connection to this I will also discuss how postmodern picture books can be seen as multimodal artefacts designed for interactive learning.

As a case study I will be looking at fragments from the picture book Otto in de stad (2008, ‘Otto in the city’) which is part of a series of four books by the (inter)nationally renowned Flemish picture book artist Tom Schamp. In each of the books the reader follows the cat protagonist Otto on a journey throughout a landscape filled by (visual) intertextual references and visual and/or verbal puns. In Otto in de stad the entire scenery consists of humorous intertextual references to the city of Brussels. Through verbal and visual puns existing shops, museums, buildings and places are referred to in an almost parody-like way.

Because of their specific visual and circular structure – the books can be read from cover to cover and can be ‘re-read’ in the other direction as well – the books are promoted as ‘loop books’ by the
publisher (in Dutch called ‘lusboeken’). The loop books about Otto provide an interesting case study because they illustrate many of the typical features connected to cognitive learning in contemporary (postmodern) picture book research. Furthermore their design displays an interesting combination of traditional linear and sequential reading paths with ‘newer’ spatially organized reading paths comparable to those in digital texts or so called ‘hypertexts’ (cf. Bolter 2001).

INTERACTIVE LEARNING THROUGH POSTMODERN PICTUREBOOK DESIGN

Typical characteristics ascribed to postmodern picture books are the creative use of (visual) intertextuality, multi-layered play, the mixing of genres, media, (literary) conventions, ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, and the explicit use of play and parody (cf. Lewis 2001, Anstey & Bull 2004, Allan 2012). All of these features are extensively present in the loop books by Schamp where they are used as metafictional tools to activate the reader and make him/her into an interactive meaning maker.

Just like so called ‘wimmelbooks’ (cf. Rémi 2012) the loop books can be described as (almost) wordless picture books that display large sceneries with numerous small details presenting several storylines or visual captions simultaneously. This wimmel-structure (the German verb ‘wimmeln’ means ‘to swarm’ or ‘to be extensively present’) makes the books highly ‘re-readable’ as the reader can choose alternative reading paths and (s)he can discover new details in each reading. This feature of cognitive learning, but also the training of visual and verbal literacy, is typically connected to (almost) wordless picture books (cf. Arzipe 2014).

Although there is a verbal storyline present in the loop books, this is often restricted to single or short lines on each spread. These lines provide verbal comments and can play a more or less specific role in directing the reader’s attention to the visual, establishing a relationship of referential interplay between words and images (cf. Van Meerbergen 2010). A distinction can be made between two types of verbal references in relation to the visual. Either the verbal line is giving a more general comment; in other cases it is directing the focus of the reader to a more specific (visual) aspect or scene.

An example of a more general verbal reference to the visual can be found on the first spread where the following statement is presented ‘there is so much to see here [in the city]’ (my translation), leaving the visual details to be explored freely by the reader.
Example 1. ‘Otto wants an ice cream’

In Example 1 (see also Example 2) a more specific reference is made to a certain visual caption. The verbal line reads: ‘Otto wants an ice cream’ (my translation). This line implicitly activates the reader to look for more visual information about the typographically highlighted topic in the accompanying visual scenery. Visually Otto is depicted in frontal inclusive perspective gazing at the reader and attracting his/her attention (cf. Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006).

Otto is holding up two ice creams while standing in between an ice cream stand and his father sitting in the car. A visual pun is created by the penguins and the ice bear inhabiting the ice cream stand. Furthermore the ice cream stand carries the inscription ‘Ola Paola’. Here a parody-like reference is made to the (Belgian) ice cream brand ‘Ola’ (in Sweden called ‘GB Glace’, in Denmark ‘Frisko’) and the former Belgian queen called Paola. This is then combined with an intertextual play realised by the fact that Otto is standing in front of a park with royal lion statues by the fence (the lion’s gaze also directed to the reader), creating a possible reference to the ‘Warande Park’ next to the royal castle in Brussels. On top of this a reference is made to a popular Flemish expression: “(h)ola Paola” (meaning ‘take it easy, slow down’).

This example illustrates the typical multi-layered, multimodal and intertextual play in Schamp’s (loop) books, directed to readers of varying age and cognitive skills, but also readers with varying social and cultural backgrounds. The loop books can thus be described as typical ‘crossover picture books’, addressing readers of different ages and backgrounds (cf. Beckett 2006). By their use of metafictional features together with the multi-sequential (‘wimmel’) and multi-layered cognitive structure, the books put a high demand on the reader’s involvement in the reading act. The reader is made into an interactive reader because (s)he has to connect (visual/verbal) information and actively construct meaning.

**LOOP BOOKS AS HYPERTEXTS?**

Because of their use of multi-sequential and multi-layered multimodal structure, the reading of the loop books can be compared to the reading of so-called ‘hypertexts’ or digital texts where readers can move around freely and click their way to new information (cf. Gunder 2001). In a similar way Hassett (2005:1) connects the use of metafictive devices such as “extensive cross referencing elements, evocative graphics, various pathways to follow, links to other meanings, and/or parallel displays of information” in postmodern picture books to the reading of hypertexts. Also Dresang (2008:42) describes the postmodern picture book as a “handheld hypertext” because of its use of e.g. nonlinear and multi-sequential structures.

In the loop books an interesting combination of both linear and spatial reading structures can be found. The particular loop structure, connecting each page with the previous one in a visual way, provides the reader with a basic linear and sequential reading structure. This is enforced by the consequent use of (visual) pageturners, creating reader involvement and movement from one page to the next. While verbal pageturners often are realised through split sentences or words and split questions, visual pageturners can be realised through split depiction (of objects) and the expression of movement to the right (cf. Gressnich 2012).
In the loop books the pageturners often consist of a split depiction of roads and/or objects such as houses or different types of cars. This is shown in Example 2 where the Magritte Museum (and the inscription on the roof) is split in two from one page to the next. In addition the cars provide a clear movement from one page to the next.

Example 2. Split depiction and flow to the right

While the loop structure and the visual pageturners provide a linear reading path from cover to cover in both directions throughout the books, spatial and multi-sequential reading paths are offered through the wimmel-structure on each spread. The loop books thus consist of an overall linear reading structure while at the same time combining spatial and temporal patterns on each spread, the latter described as a typical feature of new media by Martinec & van Leeuwen (2009:1). The reader is thus provided with a basic linear reading path while at the same time given the freedom to read and explore more freely on each page. This type of reading could be compared to the reading of digital texts where scrolling or sweeping is combined with clicking or touching upon specific information, choosing what information to access (Martinec & van Leeuwen 2009:9).

CONCLUSION

The loop books provide us with an interesting example of contemporary picture books where traditional reading structures, use of form, format and space are challenged in a playful way, showing many resemblances to what has earlier been described as postmodern picture book aesthetics. The many forms of intertextual and multi-layered visual/verbal play make these texts into multimodal semiotic playgrounds activating and stimulating the reader into (inter)active meaning making. The specific combination of temporal and spatial reading paths reminds us at the same time of the visual reading paths used in digital texts and new media. These findings might suggest that ‘older media’ are being influenced by and adapt to new ways of visual display and reading introduced through new media.
REFERENCES


