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CHALLENGES OF CREATING AN AUTHENTIC CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE IN A DOCUMENTARY GRAPHIC NOVEL

ARTISTIC RESEARCH

Abstract: *Children books about difficult topics represent only a fraction of the available books. In children's literature, the first-person narrative implies an adult author behind the child as a character. The imbalance between the narrative voice of an adult and the child focalizing character indicates power structures and impose an adult's sentimental (and educational) ideas to the child reader. The same happened when I started creating a graphic novel about my own experience of the bombing, as a child. To avoid this pattern, I decided to make an authentic perspective of the child going through a traumatic event. This posed the following questions: To what extent is a graphic novel suited for departing from power structures in children's literature? What is the significance of radical themes in creating the space for empowering children? Which elements of graphic narratives make the perspective of a fictional child authentic? This paper outlines the academic and practical research I undertook to answer these questions. It describes and emphasises the importance of authentic voice and perspective of children characters in the literature for children. It focuses on the importance of literature with radical themes in establishing the space for a fictional child to explore the world and empower its independent*

quests beyond the boundaries usually set in the children's literature. Moreover, it presents the ways it can be used by an author to present the story from an authentic perspective of the child. It describes and justifies my choice of using interpretative frameworks from other fields of cultural studies to question how comics can be used to establish traditional power structures or depart from them. Finally, it summarises the ways my academic research influenced the practical research and enriched the creation of my book.

Key words: *comics, narrative, children's literature*

The importance of authentic voice and perspective of children characters in the literature for children¹

This chapter focuses on the overview of children's books related to difficult topics. I searched for books through the *Children's Literature Comprehensive Database*². CLCD provides over 1.9 million Children's and Young Adult Literature records containing more than 500,000 professional reviews of children's books, multimedia and audiobooks (aggregated from 42 sources). The search conducted using the keywords "war", "trauma", "suicide" and "depression" produced a total of 6086 books in the juvenile literature section. Considering that I did not try all possible keyword combinations for difficult topics in children's literature, and the fact that this database does not contain all existing published books, the number of books with a difficult topic is only 0.3 per cent of all juvenile literature in the shown database. If this database is representative of the total amount of published books, the number of books dealing with difficult topics is only a fraction of them.

In combination with this data, it is worthy to mention the distinctive power structures in existing children's literature:

"...nowhere else are power structures as visible as in children's literature, the refined instrument used for centuries to educate, socialize and oppress a particular social group. In this respect, children's literature is a unique art and communication form, deliberately created by those in power for the powerless."³

Radical topics are still seen as difficult topics for anyone to discuss. These topics are particularly challenging when they are

1 A condensed version of the thesis. Thesis supervisor Pascal Lefèvre, Academic year 2018–2019. Master of Visual Arts / Graphic Design / Graphic Storytelling, LUCA School of Arts, Brussels.

2 CLCD (2018). Children's literature comprehensive database. June 18, 2019, <http://www.clcd.com/>.

3 Nikolajeva, M. (2009) *Power, voice and subjectivity in literature for young readers*, Abingdon: Routledge, p. 8.

targeted towards children, which can be a reason why they are less interpreted in the children literature.

Nikolajeva⁴ points out that these topics can provide important conditions, such as the physical dislocation of characters and the removal of the parental protection, which allows a fictional child to explore the world and test the limits of its autonomy. These conditions are emancipating the fictional child, while the narratives have a subversive effect, illustrating that the rules enforced on the child by the adults are in fact arbitrary.

Additionally, as can be seen in recent history, difficult events are common for any age, children included. According to Bouchane⁵, wars, migration, and trauma are issues of contemporary importance. In my opinion, if readers would have an opportunity to think about these topics without imposed opinions of adult authors, it could lead to a better understanding of the world and all its complexity. Eventually, it would help them to better understand their environment, which could be beneficial for the development of critical thinking. This is why I believe that a graphic novel about a radical topic can be a valuable tool for communication and empowerment of the readers and can help them become less liable to manipulation.

The Story

Various elements must be considered when writing (and reading) a graphic novel. Some of them are the target group (audience), the theme, the setting, the characterization, the point of view, the relation between images and words, the time, and the genre. Combined with the previous experiences of the reader, all elements work together to tell a story and create an exclusive experience for every reader.

Although my book's target group was not only children, it was important to me that children easily understand the story. This was motivated by my wish as a child to read a story that is about the bombing and find any knowledge about an event that I did not understand. The theme and setting were a natural continuation of the idea to make a book about something I lived through. The story depicts the bombing of Serbia in 1999, and it is situated in the very same shelter where I spent most of the days during the bombing. The characterization, the point of view, the relation

4 Nikolajeva, M. (2009) op. cit., p. 10.

5 Bouchane, K. (2018) Early childhood development and early learning for children in crisis and conflict, paper commissioned for the 2019 Global Education Monitoring report: *Migration, displacement and education: Building bridges, not walls*, Paris: UNESCO, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000266072>.

between images and words, and the time are established after elaborate research in the fields of writing, narrative theory, and art; and this paper is a part of the study.

In the beginning, I did not consider the idea of portraying an authentic children's perspective. The specific needs of my characters developed the story in that direction. During the process, I discovered the meaning of my story and that encouraging the critical thinking and unconstrained exploration of the reader is indeed relevant to it. The following text describes the obstacles I had to overcome and the way they directed the story.

It was evident that specific constructions of my initial sentences were implying an adult author behind the child as a character in my book. This led to the situation of the story being non-objective, as it imposed my feelings as an adult to the reader. As I did not want to force my opinion to the reader, the solution was to make an authentic perspective of the child going through a traumatic event. That would be possible only if I could find a way for my child character to tell the story realistically and using age-appropriate language and visual elements. This transformed the question from "What is my story about?" to "How to tell the story?". The problem of unbelievability was the biggest obstacle to solve.

Terminology and medium – specific features of comics

This section introduces necessary terminology and analyses medium-specific features of comics. In the book *Narration in Fiction Film*, Bordwell⁶ explains useful terminology, such as *fabula* and *syzhet* (plot). *Fabula* is defined as the chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events, referred to by the narrative, while *syzhet* (plot) is the order of events, presented in the narrative discourse. *Diegesis* is explained as the term for everything that belongs to the fictional world: events, characters, dialogues, locations, etc. In contrast to diegetic material, non-diegetic material presents everything outside the fictive world: the title, comments of an all-knowing narrator, etc.

As Lefèvre⁷ underlines, the terms *style*, *syzhet* and *fabula* are ensuring starting points for the study of the influence of

6 Bordwell, D. (2013) *Narration in the fiction film*, Abingdon: Routledge.

7 Lefèvre, P. (2011) Some medium-specific qualities of graphic sequences. *SubStance*, Vol. 40, No. 1, Issue 124: "Graphic Narratives and Narrative Theory", Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 14–33.

a medium on narration and explains different aspects of the interaction between narrative and medium.

To connect these definitions to my book, the following observations can be made. Fabula contains events from one year before the bombing, when the older sister moved out of the flat. Then a few days before the first bomb fell, children doing homework, finding the dog, going to school, the emergency exercise, the beginning of the bombing, losing the dog, trying to find it, etc. Syzhet is the order of these events in the way I presented it in the narrative. In my specific case, fabula and syzhet have a lot in common, since I tried to present the events chronologically and in present time, with only a few exceptions. I believe that this way of narration is closer to that of a nine-year-old girl, since it is immediate, without intricate knots or mysterious elements that would reveal the mind of an adult narrator embodied in the child character.

Many of the mentioned elements and their definitions are acquired from other media and narrative forms. Some of them are adjusted to be useful when addressing the comic as a specific medium. To emphasise the closeness among medium-specific features of comics and other media, Kai Mikkonen compares elements across the media and tries to find the ones that have the same functionality.⁸ As he advises, medium specificity should not serve the idea of “*unproductive guarding of borders between media*”, but for examining how comics are different and similar to other narrative media or arts, particularly the closely related forms of visual storytelling, on the level of their formal characteristics. These characteristics are then not determinative but relative and comparable. He investigates the conditionality of the media with individual freedoms given to it by its specificity and the limitation that is conditioned by the material form, the semiotic source, or the format of the publication.

With this in mind, I observed the list of constraints proposed by Duncan and Smith.⁹ The list contains the medium-specific features that I investigated further, to discover arguments supporting the idea that the graphic novel is suited for departing from traditional power structures or creating an authentic perspective of the fictional child.

- spatial limitations (number of pages, page size)
- reproduction technologies (paper quality)

8 Mikkonen, K. (2017) *The Narratology of Comic Art*, Abingdon: Routledge, p. 18.

9 Duncan, R. and Smith, M. J. (2009). *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture*, London: A&C Black, pp. 119–120.

- unrealistic images (comics are two-dimensional and lack the photo-realistic qualities of some other forms of visual storytelling media)
- limited capacity to control the reader (readers can view panels and pages in any order and for any duration)
- the page as a unit of composition (allows some control over the reader)
- the conception of images as selected moments
- the interdependence of words and pictures
- artistic skill (what the cartoonist is able to achieve)
- the serial aesthetic (most mainstream comic books are published as episodes in an on-going saga)

An important constraint is the limited capacity to control the reader that can be applied to picture books as well, and up to some degree also to animation movies. To connect these with one interesting idea of Rebecca Palmer¹⁰, we need to include the following question: “How are these narratives intended to be read?”. In her examinations of the relationship between image and text in picture-books and graphic narratives, she discovered a third element that should be included — the reader, specifically, the way the reader reads. As she states, this element is one of the main distinctions between these two forms. The reading experience is not fixed and binding, but it is implied, both for comics and picture books. As Palmer mentions, picture books can be read alone, but they are designed to be shared as well while reading out loud to or with others. Editors of picture-books usually test the words to see how they sound out loud. A comic, on the other hand, is best suited to be read in silence.

Given their formal qualities, I believe that comics provide an intimate reading experience. The limited capacity to control the reader in combination with the particular way that comics are supposed to be read, encourage departing from traditional power structures and suppress the amount of influence of external interpretations.

Whose story is it?

Using the term “narrative agency”, Mikkonen¹¹ tries to address the agent responsible for choosing, organising and disseminating the story material, and at the same time underlines the problem

10 Palmer, R. (2014). Combining the rhythms of comics and picturebooks: thoughts and experiments. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, p. 298.

11 Mikkonen, K. (2017). op. cit. p. 129.

of using notions like “narrator”, “teller” or “presenter”. He uses the term “graphic narrator” being responsible for the whole narrative organisation, including the creation of both the words and drawings, as well as panels and scenes. To make a distinction between the global and implicit “graphic narrator” and any narrator who may be involved in the story world, Mikkonen uses Philippe Marion’s, Thierry Groensteen’s and Andre Gaudreault’s formulations.

When speaking about a narrator that *coincides with the focus of explicit discourse*, Groensteen¹² mentions that this type of narration has become common in contemporary comics, specifically in autobiographical works. When speaking about the case of first-person narration (with the character involved in the story), Groensteen uses the term *actorialised narrator* or *a delegated narrator*. There are various types of delegated narrators, and he examines a few cases and gives the examples for them.

A) *The narrator has a simple function to put the story into gear.*

B) *The actorialised narrator who nonetheless remains extradiegetic.*

C) *The narrator, who is a projection of the author, while nonetheless not being subject to the needs of sincerity and truth upon which the “autobiographical pact” is usually founded.*

D) *The improbable narrator.*

E) *The autobiographic narrator, whose “I” bears witness, but who does not create his or her own story.*

For my novel, none of these examples is fitting. For that reason, I propose including an extra case of *Merged narrator*. In this case, the narrator is the character telling the story she is living through (making it autobiographic narrator) while interacting with the other story’s characters. The narration in my book is continuously interrupted by the evolution of the story, and the character that tells the story switches between two positions. In my story, the character’s narrating and acting positions are merged in the storyline.

12 Groensteen, T. (2010) The monstrator, the recitant, and the shadow of the narrator, *European Comic Art*, Brooklyn: Berghahn Journals in association with American Bande Dessinée Society and the International Bande Dessinée Society, p. 5.

Elements of children's perspective

If the reader is to believe that the presented perspective is of the child, the child character in my graphic novel needs to borrow children-like features from the real world and behave accordingly. In other words, I need to assign characteristics to the actors of my story, known as a process of characterisation¹³. In my opinion, elements that separate children the most from adults are the voice they use, the language, the point of view, the imagination, and their cognitive abilities. I will explore some of these elements in the theory of graphic narrative and apply the found knowledge to my own story.

Characterization

Mikkonen¹⁴ argues that the notion of characters in fiction depends on several elements: artistic tools of characterisation, genre and medium-specific codes of storytelling, and models of the real-world people and their typical situations.

My primary challenge is to create person-like features for the main character. To be more precise, the challenge is to create children-like features that will be believable in the mind of the reader. An additional challenge is to convince the reader that the main character simultaneously lives through and narrates the story.

As Mikkonen¹⁵ states, in the case of the first-person narrative like mine, the whole narrative is indicative of the narrator character's properties, focused on the narrator's speech and thought. In such cases, the most relevant approach is to examine the narrative techniques of voice, style, perspective, or the relationship between the time of narration and the time of the events; than to study the narrator as a character. With this in mind, the focus of my research will be the elements that Mikkonen suggests.

The main character in my book has several personality traits. She is curious, likes the freedom that holidays are ensuring, prefers literature over math, creative, highly imaginative, and often worried about her best friends. The question is, how is the reader able to assign these traits to the main character? The fundamental principles of narratology recognised in literary narratives can assist with that. Of course, we should not exclude visual cues of

13 Jannidis, F. (2013) Character. in: Hüuhn, Peter et al. (eds.): *The living handbook of narratology*, Hamburg: Hamburg university press. July 18, 2019. <http://wikis.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Character>

14 Mikkonen, K. (2017) *The Narratology of Comic Art*, Abingdon: Routledge, p. 177.

15 Mikkonen, K. (2017) op. cit. p. 179.

characterization and the word–image interaction. According to Bal and Van Boheemen¹⁶, four different principles work together to construct the image of the character: repetition, accumulation, relations to other characters, and transformations. Repetition is used to establish relevant characteristics of the character, and it is needed to illustrate the character’s behaviour. Accumulation of relevant characteristics helps to find the relations among them in order to form an image of the character. The character’s relations with other characters and him/herself, help the reader to build the image of the character. Finally, characters change, and these changes or transformations also work to explain the character to the reader.

Repetition in my work is omnipresent. The main character questions everything, speaks about her best friends frequently, takes care of people, animals, environment, she often draws; and we see several mental pictures suggesting that she is prone to imagining situations. In her relationship with other characters, the reader can notice that she wants particular attention from the others; she wants to name the dog first or to give the speech for the welcoming party. She is the one sharing Iva’s story with everyone, and at the end, she narrates the whole story. With all of these combined, the reader can conclude that she wants to be heard. The main difference that separates comics from literary narratives is the need to give the characters specific visual attributes. In comics and picture books, characters and their actions can be presented both through visual and verbal means; and image–word interaction can confirm or contradict each other while creating the meaning. As Mikkonen¹⁷ explains, the visual methods for representing the mental states of the characters are more flexible in comics than in picture books, partly due to the possibilities of the sequential form. A chain of panels can depict complex mental states by contrasted perspectives or by revealing the development of the emotions in the character’s facial expressions and body gestures. To explore further, Gibson¹⁸ states the differences between picture books and graphic novels regarding the representation of the passing of time. *In relation to depicting time, in the picture book events unfold from page to page, while in the comic novel, movement from panel to panel on each page, as well as across the whole text, shows temporal shifts.* All of these remarks

16 Bal, M. and Van Boheemen, C. (2009) *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p. 127.

17 Mikkonen, K. (2017) op. cit. p. 196.

18 Gibson, M. (2012) Picturebooks, comics and graphic novels, in: *The Routledge Companion to Children’s Literature*, Abingdon: Routledge, p. 101.

combined contribute to a unique idea. To construct the image of the character, repetition, accumulation, relations to other characters and transformation of the character are needed. For these principles to occur, one must assume the passage of time. Temporal shifts, as elements of graphic novels, are opening the possibility for the representation of an extended period of time, a characteristic that is not common for picture books. The passing of time means an opportunity for the reader to get to know the characters better, and follow his/her development within the story, which is a necessary precondition of a believable authentic perspective of a fictional character. Following I will examine the rest of the aforementioned elements that Mikkonen underlines as relevant when talking about characterisation in first-person narratives.

Focalization / Point of view

The problem of believability emerged very early in my research. Any event I choose to present in the book will be through a particular perspective or point of view. To discuss perspective or point of view, the terminology should be introduced.

Within the theory of visual narrative, the use of the term “focalization” has many, sometimes even contradictory, meanings. Mikkonen¹⁹ presents how the understanding of this concept changed over time. He starts with Gerard Genette coining the new term “focalization” as a replacement for “perspective” and “point of view” in order to make the distinction between narrative mode and voice in literature. For Genette, focalization answers the question *Who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?* while the voice relates to the question *Who is the narrator?* In other words, Genette²⁰ adds, this difference can be seen through the questions *Who sees?* and *Who speaks?* Genette further states that if a story is focalised through a particular character, it is not the point of view that explains to us if this character is also the narrator, speaking in the first person, or if the narrator is someone else speaking of him in the third person. In this case, the point of view is the same in both instances. What is different is the voice, or who speaks. However, in traditionally called first-person narrative, the point of view can vary. Events are either focalised through the perception of the narrator at the moment of narration, or through his perception at the time in the past when the events occurred.

19 Mikkonen, K. (2017) op. cit. p. 150.

20 Genette, G. (1983) *Narrative discourse: An essay in method*, volume 3, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 186.

This specific case will be examined further for the needs of my graphic narrative.

These differences made possible for Genette to establish the terms *internal*, *external*, and *zero-level focalization* for the cases where, the narrative is focalised through the perception of a character, the narrative is focused on a character, not through him, and finally, the narrative has an omniscient narrator. Later in *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette²¹ redefines the concept of focalization, and changes the question *Who sees?* to *Where is the focus of perception?*

After investigating the understanding of these terms through time, Mikkonen adds a significant conclusion. Regarding visual narratives, an investigation of the relation between what characters are believed to be seeing and the image field as a whole is of crucial importance. As he states,

*“The re-emphasis of focalization as a relation between the focalizer, the focalized, and the image field is significant in the context of comics storytelling since the person or character who is the focus of attention always has the potential to import perceptual information and subjective vision into the image.”*²²

With that in mind, another term is used to explain the relationship between what the image shows and what a particular character is supposed to see. Referring to the character’s looking, Surdiacourt²³ uses the term “ocularization” that he borrows from François Jost.²⁴ Jost employs the term ocularization to speak about narrativity in cinema.

In order to distinguish a visual point of view from a cognitive point of view, Jost suggests the following terminology:

“[...] ocularization has to do with the relation between what the camera shows and what the characters are presumed to be seeing; focalization designates the cognitive point of view adopted by the narrative, with the equalities or inequalities of knowledge expressed at their full strength.”²⁵

Jost distinguishes two significant ocularization types: internal ocularization and zero ocularization. In “internal ocularization”

21 Genette, G. (1988) *Narrative discourse revisited*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 64.

22 Mikkonen, K. (2017) op. cit. p. 151.

23 Surdiacourt, S. (2015) *Comics and storytelling. Towards a medium specific narratology*, thesis-dissertation, Leuven: p. 118.

24 Jost, F. (2004) *The look: From film to novel. A Companion to Literature and Film*, Malden — Oxford — Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 71–80.

25 Jost, F. (2004) op. cit., p. 74.

the view is fixed in the subjective vision of the character (the shot is identical to what the character sees). “Zero ocularization” describes the situation in which camera is not positioned within the character in the story or using his words “/.../the image is not seen by any entity within the diegesis”²⁶. He further divides internal ocularization to “primary internal ocularization” and “secondary internal ocularization”. “Primary internal ocularization” is evident by the presence of a body or element of the body that allows us to recognise the character not present in the image. “Secondary internal ocularization” takes place when the internal ocularization is constructed through contextualization, by montage, by the visual qualities of the image, or by the coexisting verbal text. He explains: “Any image that is edited together with a shot of a person looking, within the rules of cinematic “syntax”, will be “anchored” in the visual subjectivity of that person or character”. As Smelik²⁷ mentions, referring to the mental images, such as fantasies or hallucinations, Jost designated the term “modalized ocularization”. This type of ocularization suggests a change between two narrative levels, but that does not refer to the perception of the character.

Although he finds these definitions to be “a good base for the study of ocularization in comics” Surdiacourt²⁸ argues that at the same time they conceal “the complexity of visual perspectivization in graphic narratives.”. He adapts these definitions to be used in comic studies.

I will apply these definitions to the examples from my own artistic practice and try to see to what extent my book is adhering to the aforementioned definitions. In the book, I rarely used “primary internal ocularization”, and the example can be seen in Figure 1. In this example, I use “primary internal ocularization” quite literally. My main character needs to calculate months until the school-break and uses her hands to do it, which helps the reader to believe that it is the character’s field of vision.



Figure 1: Example of primary internal ocularization

26 Jost, F. (2004) op. cit., p. 75.

27 Smelik, A. (1998) *And the mirror cracked: feminist cinema and film theory*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 67.

28 Surdiacourt, S. (2015) op. cit., p. 118.

If considered in relation to the sequence, this example could as well be an example of “secondary internal ocularization”, since the whole comic “syntax” is built up to help the reader believe that the visual subjectivity of the character is shown. The “secondary internal ocularization” can be seen in Figure 2. In the first panel, the main character is in the same space as the rest of the characters. In the context of the sequence, the next panel can be assumed to be a subjective point of view.



Figure 2: Example of secondary internal ocularization

The element that I used very often is the mental picture. In Figure 3, one of the first mental images is shown. Together with the text, the image works to assure the reader that he sees a mental picture of the main character. Literally, the text accompanying the image says that the imagination of the girl is presented. Depicted elements that do not exist in the “real” world confirm that this is not a real event; therefore the reader sees a fantasy.



Figure 3: Example of modalized ocularization

In Figures 4, 5 and 6, the same rules apply. The elements depicted are not possible in the “real” world, and the text suggests that the panel illustrates the character’s thoughts.



Figure 4: Example of modalized ocularization

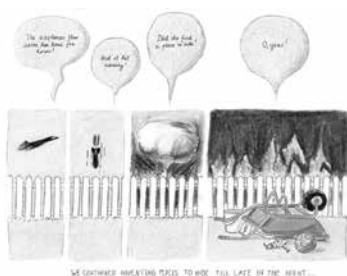


Figure 5: Example of modalized ocularization



Figure 6: Example of modalized ocularization

It is noteworthy that most of the panels in the book are presented in zero ocularization. However, these panels are not formally different from the panels presented in secondary internal ocularization. Subjectivity in these panels is not shown through the presence of a body part of a character, or by the quality of the image. It is shown through contextualization, by the narratorial text, or by the spatial and sequential arrangement of the panels. As Mikkonen²⁹ illustrates, it is possible for the perspective in films to be simultaneously 'inside' and 'outside' a character. For example, to see the character from the outside, but the perspective to be from the character's perception and experience. This technique is widely present within my book, and it leads me to the aforementioned term of focalization. In Mikkonen's opinion "[...] *despite the absence of a camera in comics, the manipulation of the relation between what the image shows (from some perspective) and what some character supposedly sees is an essential means through which comics can create a sense of a subjective vision*"³⁰. With this in mind, I would agree with Mikkonen that the concept of ocularization (perceptual focalization) proposed by Jost is not necessary for comics narratology. Specifically, it does not play a significant role in my work but studying the differences between perceptual and cognitive focalization can enhance our understanding of the complexity of focalization in graphic narratives. Mikkonen

29 Mikkonen, K. (2017) *The Narratology of Comic Art*, Abingdon: Routledge, p. 158.

30 Mikkonen, K. (2017) op. cit. p. 158.

proposes that the investigation should be focused on the relation between the point of view and what is seen in the image, on an interchange between perceptual and cognitive focalization in a sequence of images and the relation between visual and verbal focalization. The significant question is how visual perspective is created and employed to be identified as a particular subjective vision or cognitive attitude.

As reflected in Figure 6, the three basic categories of focalization are not clearly distinguishable and can be very flexible. One of the specific cases is the appearance of various internal and external focalizers at the same time at different points inside and outside the image frame.

This section displays an overview of the development of terms used to define a character's point of view in comics. It appears that for this specific medium the most suitable term is the term "ocularization" that helps us unriddle the complexity of point of view in the graphic narratives. The high flexibility that the explored terms are working within shows us that the theoretical research in the field has much potential.

Voice

Voice is one of the elements that help distinguish children from adults. In a graphic narrative, the voice of a character can only be read. To construct a narrative voice, one needs to combine text with the language presenting the voice of the character. This text needs to be carefully planned and included in the picture, so that it can create a specific meaning together with the image. According to Morison:³¹

"Typography may be defined as the art of rightly disposing printing material in accordance with specific purpose; of so arranging the letters, distributing the space and controlling the type as to aid to the maximum the reader's comprehension of the text."

I use this definition to underline the importance of the text design to help the reader in his reading experience. Nowadays, with the new technologies and ways of printing, this definition should include other aspects too, but it is still useful in further discussion. Gallagher reveals other characteristics of the relationship between the narrative voice and the typography:

"[...] it becomes clear that the relationship between the construction of narrative voice and the typography used

31 Morison, S. (1951 [1936]) *First principles of typography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 5.

to present it can have a profound effect on the creation of meaning. Those texts which embrace the inherent multimodality of the book, and indeed consciously use it as a tool to construct narrative voice, show us the potential of a symbiotic relationship between language and typography, in which the verbal and the visual reify and amplify each other during the act of reading.”³²

There are many styles of typography that can be used in a graphic narrative. Some were examined to see the potential they have in the construction of a narrative voice. Additionally, using two original handwriting samples of nine-year-old children helped me decide the design of the typography I want to use in my book. The original handwriting samples can be seen in Figure 7.

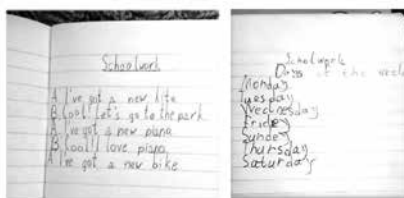


Figure 7: Original handwriting of two nine-year-old children. These two examples show the diversity that is possible in the design of the letters. The common pattern for both types is irregularity of the position of the letters on the lines. Imagining that these lines form a square grid, we can say that the letters are not accurately fitting in the lines of the grid. The first example is more readable, but it also proposes that the child who wrote it has stringent rules to follow to complete the schoolwork. On the other hand, the second example shows a child who is not obliged to follow such rules, who is more independent and rule-breaking. However, the writing is not easy to read which can obstruct the reader's comprehension of the text. Undoubtedly, I need to find a compromise between these two types of typography for my own book. In Figure 8, four different font designs are presented.



Figure 8: Font design versions

32 Gallagher, L. (2018). *Typography and Narrative Voice in Children's Literature: Relationships, Interactions, and Symbiosis*. A Thesis submitted to the School of English at the University of Dublin, Trinity College, for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Dublin: p. 234.

The first one is a generic digital one (PF Din Display) that seemed to be the closest to the first original handwriting sample. Not going into detail about the fonts, the history and application of this specific one, it looked too impersonal, and the narrative voice created by it sounded too distant from the characters of children. After trying various digital fonts, it was clear that all the repeated letters always looked the same, giving the same feeling, namely that the presented voice is not the voice of a child. At this point, I decided to abandon the idea of using computer-generated fonts and focus on handwritten typography only. The next goal was to try to imitate the children's handwriting to some degree. The second example shows my handwriting that was carefully written on the imaginary square grid. The letters are organised and the text is clearly readable. In the balloon I used cursive, to differentiate between the narrator's voice and the voice of the actors in the panel. The most significant benefit of this design is readability, and the text looks more connected to the voice of the child. The third and fourth images are showing similar style, with randomised letters and less organised placement on an imaginary square grid. It resembles the child's handwriting more, but the text is less readable. The difference between these two images is in the typography in the balloons. The first image has letters in capitals, while the second one has letters in cursive. In my opinion, cursive lettering in the balloons feels more intimate and personal.

Additionally, the last example is the most expressive, possibly because of its non-uniformity in both the shape of the letters and the position on the imaginary grid. It presents the uninhibited voice; the voice of someone who does not worry about correctness or other people's expectations. This voice itself, when coming from a child character, is rule-breaking, and the carrier of this voice seems free to express itself. The problem of this design can be readability. One must be cautious about deforming the letters only to the degree that is still clear and readable.

The use of handwritten typography to present the child's narration can create another layer of believability that the narrative voice is really of the child character.

Moreover, the first-person narration in the present tense can support the idea of bringing the audience closer to the story and helping them engage and form their own opinions on the mentioned events. These discoveries pose the ground base for a more "objective" narration in my graphic novel.

Cognitive abilities, priorities, and focalized objects

This section presents findings of the narrative theory researchers and places the base of work on my graphic novel.

*“Once again: since the narrator in a children’s book is most often an adult, while the character is a child, if writers want to create an illusion of an authentic child perspective, they must pretend that the narrator does not know or understand more than the focalizing character. In this case, too, the difference between personal and impersonal narration is of less importance. In internal focalization, we take part in the character’s thoughts and feelings in the same way as in a personal narrative, and sometimes even better.”*³³

Limiting the narration to the cognitive abilities of the main character is useful to evade suggesting an adult narrator behind the child character. That means the introduction of events for which the perception of the child and the adult reader will be the furthest from each other. To illustrate that, Bal and Van Boheemen³⁴ mention an example valuable for my research. Following their analysis of the novel *What Maisie Knew*³⁵ and applying it to my own story, the upcoming conclusions were drawn. The focalization in my story is mostly character-bound. It always lies with my main character, a girl who does not understand much about the event which abruptly occurred in her life. The reader sees the events through the narrow perception of the girl. If the reader is anyhow more experienced than the main character, he or she will interpret the event differently and use the given information to construct deeper meanings. When the main character experiences an early school break, the more experienced reader will know that this is a suspension of teaching due to a state of emergency. When the teacher sends the children home earlier, we can assume that the adults already know that there could be a war coming. However, the reader hears the story from the perspective of a nine-year-old girl who thinks that aliens abducted the teacher and that they got an impostor in exchange. By Bal, the difference between the childish perception of the events and the interpretation that the adult reader gives to them determines the novel’s special effect.

33 Nikolajeva, M. (2003) Beyond the grammar of story, or how can children’s literature criticism benefit from narrative theory?, *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, Volume 28, Number 1, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 12.

34 Bal, M. and Van Boheemen, C. (2009) *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of Narrative*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p. 150.

35 James, H. (1897) *What Maisie Knew*, London: William Heinemann; Chicago: Herbert S. Stone.

I used this method several times and is still to be determined what happens with this effect if the reader has the same age/ experience as my main character.

It is also important to explore which objects are focalised by the child character. An analysis of the relationship between the focalizer and the focalizing objects can give more information about the focalizer itself. If we determine WHAT is focalized by the child character, it can give the focalizer's interpretation of the elements. After this, it is necessary to notice HOW the elements are focalised.

In the same situation, adults and children in my book have different priorities. For example, when the first siren started, the mother's only concern was to get to the shelter as soon as possible. On the other hand, the children's priority was homework, which shows that homework is the highest responsibility of my children characters, while the existence of the family is the main priority of the mother. For adults in my book, the main priority is safety and survival. For the children, priorities did not change because they are unaware of the danger. They search for the dog, panic about homework, make food out of mud, etc. During the entire book, the children do not understand the implications of the situation at all.

Besides, the same objects have a different meaning to adults and children. The way they use the objects reveals different points of view of these two groups. For adults, the emergency tunnel is the last resort for getting out of the shelter. For children, it is a part of a different plan, a solution to their problem in case the adults do not find the dog. The same applies to the duct tape for the windows; adults use it to protect the windows from shattering in case a bomb falls nearby. In children's eyes, the same object is seen as a decoration for the windows.

Together with other elements such as point of view and voice, limiting the narration to the cognitive abilities of the main character helps the reader to believe that the presented perspective is really that of the child. However, this technique suggested in the fields of literature and picture-books reveals the potential for the further study of its use in comics where the sequentiality of the medium and its visual qualities provide more space for experimentation and discoveries.

Difficult topics examples

This text is a condensed version of the respective chapter of my thesis. The interested reader should refer to the full version.³⁶

The section reviews several art narratives with difficult topics. *Pequeñas Voces (Little voices)* by Carrillo³⁷, is a short animated documentary that gave voice to children in Colombia who are victims of armed conflict. *Silence*³⁸ is an animation movie that speaks about a child that is a Holocaust survivor. The comic book *Persepolis*³⁹ follows the author and her growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution and her adolescence in Europe. Children's graphic novel *Louis undercover*⁴⁰ tells the story of young Louis and difficult relationships in his family. The last example I use to conclude from is the graphic novel *Jane, Fox & Me*⁴¹ that talks about struggles of growing up.

Some of these narratives use unique methods to close the gap between adult creators and children as characters. These methods range from using children's drawings as a base for the animation to using memories of the children instead of adults to tell the story. All mentioned works testify about the ways that theoretical knowledge can be implemented in practice.

Conclusion

The presented work shows to what extent a graphic novel is suited for departing from the power structure in children's literature. I believe that the formal qualities of the medium, mainly its implied way of reading, provide an intimate experience, which engages the reader to form individual opinions. It deploys distinct elements in order to present the story from a specific perspective, namely focalization, mental pictures, voice, style, etc. All of these elements can be used to establish or depart from power structures. Additionally, the sequential form of comics allows temporal shifts that are not possible in picture books. This allows the characters to develop through a longer period of

36 Radanović, D. (2019) *Challenges of creating an authentic child's perspective in a documentary graphic novel — artistic research*, master thesis, LUCA School of Arts, Brussels.

37 Carrillo, J. (2004) *Pequeñas voces, an animated short movie*, Colombia; Spain; UK.

38 Bringas, S. and Yadin, O. (1998) *Silence, an animated short movie*, UK.

39 Satrapi, M. (2000) *Persepolis*, Paris: L'Association.

40 Britt, F. and Arsenault, I. (2017) *Louis undercover*, Toronto: Groundwood Books Limited.

41 Arsenault, I. and Britt, F. (2013) *Jane, the fox and me*, Toronto: Groundwood Books Limited.

time, which is a necessary precondition for making characters more authentic.

After extensive research in theoretical and practical fields, the methods I want to use for my art project became clearer. Investigating medium-specific conventions assisted me in understanding which elements in my book are of crucial importance. Development of these specific elements helped me to deliver the message to the reader, without compromising the goal to communicate it as objectively as I could. Given the theoretical study, I changed the elements that were not fitting with my goal. I excluded words that an adult would use to explain situations, I narrowed the narration to the cognitive abilities of the protagonist, and I changed the typography that I intended to use in the initial stages of my art project.

It must be underlined that the specific use of these elements can help to abandon the practice of using children's literature only to educate, socialise, and restrict children as a particular social group. Instead, these elements can be employed in a way that will sensitise young readers to the fact that the norms and rules posed by adults can be questioned. We might also consider the significance of radical themes in establishing the necessary space for a fictional child to explore the world and empower its independent quests beyond the boundaries usually set in children's literature. This is important as it allows the reader to relate to the fictional child and gain experience and knowledge without actually needing to go through a difficult situation.

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ИЗАЗОВИ СТВАРАЊА АУТЕНТИЧНЕ ДЕЧЈЕ
ПЕРСПЕКТИВЕ У ДОКУМЕНТАРНОМ ГРАФИЧКОМ
РОМАНУ

УМЕТНИЧКО ИСТРАЖИВАЊЕ

Сажетак

Дечије књиге о тешким темама представљају само делић објављених књига. У дечијој литератури, наративи у првом лицу подразумевају одраслог аутора сакривеног иза детета као лика у причи. Неравнотежа између наративног гласа одрасле особе и фокализујућег лика детета указује на структуре моћи и дечијем читаоцу намећу сентименталне (а често и образовне) идеје одраслог аутора. Исти образац се појавио у почетним фазама стварања графичког романа о бомбардовању Србије, које сам проживела као деветогодишње дете. У жељи да избегнем овај патерн, одлучила сам да креирам аутентичну перспективу детета које пролази кроз трауматично искуство. Тај захтев условио је следећа питања: У којој мери је графички роман као медиј погодан за одступање од структура моћи у дечијој литератури?; Колики је значај радикалних тема у стварању простора за оснаживање деце?; Који елементи овог специфичног медија чине перспективну фиктивног детета аутентичном? Овај рад описује академска и практична истраживања која сам подузела да одговорим на поменута питања. Описује и наглашава важност аутентичног гласа и перспективе дечијих ликова у литератури. Фокусира се на значај књижевности са радикалним темама у успостављању неопходног простора да фиктивно дете истражи свет и подржи самосталне потраге изван граница које су обично постављене у дечијој литератури. Штавише, предлаже начине на које аутор може да их искористи како би испричао причу кроз аутентичну перспективу детета. Описује и оправдава употребу интерпретативних оквира позајмљених из других области студија културе како би се испитали начини на које се стрип може користити за успостављање или одступање од традиционалних структура моћи. На крају, овај исечак сажима начине на које је моје академско истраживање утицало на практично истраживање и обогатило стварање моје књиге.

Кључне речи: *стрип, наратив, дечија литература*