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Visual Journeys through Wordless Narratives: An International Enquiry with Immigrant Children and 'The Arrival'

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Reviewer

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The Arrival (2006) by Shaun Tan is a story of immigration, initial estrangement and eventual accommodation, set in a world populated by familiar people and imaginary creatures, a world at once recognisable and bizarre. *The Arrival* belongs to the growing sub-genre of purely pictorial narratives, or graphic novels without words and is about a man who leaves his family looking for better prospects in an unknown country. According to Tan it collects 'stories of struggle and survival in a world of incomprehensible violence, upheaval and hope' (Tan, Picturebooks, *The Arrival*, n.d.).

Visual Journeys through Wordless Narratives: An International Enquiry with Immigrant Children and 'The Arrival' (hereafter *Visual Journeys*), for which Shaun Tan has provided a foreword, is a fascinating account of an international research project, conducted by teams from the University of Glasgow, the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and Arizona State University, with additional data contributed by two researchers from the University of Bologna after the completion of the main research. The project was designed to investigate the use of wordless visual narratives with children from different ethnic minority and immigrant backgrounds and to explore the learning affordances of such material through different forms of reader response, prompted by a range of approaches to teacher mediation.

The authors of *Visual Journeys* have consciously adopted the journey metaphor, particularly appropriate in the discussion of a project concerned with the perception and telling of migrant experience, entitling the first two parts of their story 'Embarking on the Journey' and 'Navigating the Interpretive Process'. Moreover, Part 1 includes chapters

called 'The Vessel' (outlines of theoretical frameworks), 'The Passengers' (information about contexts and participants) and 'The Voyage' (description of the research process).

The succinct theoretical discussion in 'The Vessel' reminds us of the extent to which globalisation has produced an acceleration of trans-national migration, but also of the fact that migration has been a universal experience throughout history. As the focus of *Visual Journeys* is on the child's experience of immigration, Arizpe, Colomer and Martinez-Roldán are particularly concerned with the position of the child in relation to the often-contested notion of multiculturalism. As an alternative to both the cultural mosaic model, referring to different cultures maintaining discrete cultural identities side by side within the larger community, and the assimilation model that aims at total identification with and absorption into the host culture, the research teams propose a model of transculturation, whereby 'individuals learn various cultural codes allowing them to build bridges between the many spaces in which they move' (Bueno, 1996: 26). This captures precisely the mediating role so often played out by the children of immigrant families who are educated and socialised with a foot in both cultures and as such provides a relevant theoretical perspective from which the entire study proceeds.

Arizpe, Colomer and Martinez-Roldán go on to examine the specific impact of emigration and immigration on children, and the challenges implied for educators. In the field of education, it is above all through language and literacies that the children of immigrants, who may or may not themselves be immigrants, can be enabled to explore Bueno's 'many spaces in which they move'. And, they suggest, it is through developing visual literacy in particular that they can enjoy the opportunity to make sense of their own experience by making their own meanings.

The next chapter, 'The Passengers', provides important background information about the three research contexts as well some of the back stories of the participant children, while Chapter 3, 'The Voyage', describes the research process and the pedagogic/research methodologies employed. Teacher-readers may be tempted to skip the first part of *Visual Journeys* and move straight on to the data analysis in Part 2 and the discussion of implications for teaching in Part 3. This would, however, be a mistake, as to fully appreciate the significance of the research, it is important to understand the principled

frameworks of enquiry that informed the project and the contexts in which it was undertaken.

Teachers working with young learners and language teachers working with learners of any age will be well aware of the potential of picture stories as a basis for speculation, interpretation and narrative building. *The Arrival*, in common with many postmodern visual narratives, is an open text, full of ambiguity and indeterminacy, which invites its readers to co-construct the story, bringing to it their own experiences of reading and their own life experiences. With its story of arrival in a strange, new country, and its dreamlike visual language, populating its world with almost photo-realist depictions of human beings and creatures of the imagination, it 'defamiliarises' (see Shklovsky, 1990 [1925]) the reader in much the same way as the immigrant-protagonist is himself defamiliarised. The book thus provides a space in which readers can recognise themselves, speculate not only on what they can see, but also on the experience behind the images, and in quite a literal sense become co-authors of the book.

The teacher-researchers, whose work is reported in the second part of *Visual Journeys*, employed a range of data collection techniques, all of which were designed to open up spaces within which they could prompt children's memories, observations and interpretations. For example, this involved the children in various forms of 'textual intervention' (see Pope, 1995), such as producing their own drawings, taking their own photographs, creating their own picture strips and most fruitfully, annotating pages of *The Arrival*. For this, double-page spreads from the book were stuck onto A3 sheets of paper, providing a white frame around the copied pages, where children could add their annotations (for an example, see *Visual Journeys*, p 112).

Once the initial data had been collected, the three teams, working on their common enquiry in their very different contexts, referred to different analytical frameworks as a basis for their content analysis. Thus, the diversity of contexts was reflected in the application of distinctive approaches to content analysis, which nevertheless shared quite a high degree of mutuality. A common analytical approach was then devised with four intersecting processes which successfully provides a set of perspectives that account for the often complex range of those responses.

Part 2 of *Visual Journeys* consists largely of discussion of representative examples of children's responses. Chapter 4, 'Reclaiming the Migrant Experience', provides us with insights into the children's understanding of such profound issues as the factors influencing migration, the stressful nature of the immigrant experience and the immigrant's negotiation of identity. What the data demonstrates, again and again, is the way in which the textual indeterminacy of a wordless narrative offers children a peculiarly rich and suggestive ground, both for articulating their own experience and for empathetic understanding of the experience of others.

Chapter 5 focuses on 'Making Meaning through Retellings and Inferences'. There is a wealth of examples here of how children instinctively, or with minimal prompting, 'write' their own experience, real or imagined, into a text that admits such personal reading. Unbidden, they dramatize texts, inventing dialogue and filling the gaps of indeterminacy. And unselfconsciously, they form a writing partnership with an author who has created a narrative space that allows for, indeed invites, such collaboration.

In Chapter 6, 'Intertextual Journeys into Intercultural Spaces', we are reminded how much of children's response to what they read is conditioned by previous reading (or viewing). Intertextuality here is not an abstruse literary theory, but a real experience that for these children embraced sources as diverse as James Cameron's *Titanic*, the video game *Mafia Wars*, *Poseidon*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Finding Nemo*, the Mexican statue 'The Angel of Liberty', the Cyrillic alphabet and the Great Wall of China.

The fourth and final chapter in Part 2, 'Engaging with the Visual Affordances of *The Arrival*', examines the ways in which the book acted as an instrument for developing visual literacy, as the children were asked not just to describe what they could see, but to speculate on why the author had presented the images in particular ways; they were prompted to unpack the images, to talk not only about what they showed, but also what they represented.

Part 3 of the book, 'Mediation and Pedagogy: Transforming Literacy Learning and Teaching', draws together the implications of the research for teachers using visual narratives with young learners. Despite the specificity of this enquiry into the potential of a particular wordless narrative to empower young immigrant and ethnic minority children through processes of sensitive scaffolding, the book's conclusions should have a high level

of transferability to a range of different contexts – not just the teaching of children from similar backgrounds.

The Arrival provided an ideal vehicle for the children involved in the four locations around the world to relate to the immigrant experience represented in the book. But the considerable achievement of *Visual Journeys* is that through what the authors admit (p. 245) was a ‘messy’ research process, it has provided ‘thick’ data that should inspire teachers to adopt similar approaches to working on wordless narratives with young learners. *The Arrival* is a unique work – a wordless narrative that speaks volumes; *Visual Journeys* does full justice to its subject and its subjects – *The Arrival* and its young readers.

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