Play, parody, intertextuality and interaction: Postmodern Flemish picture books as semiotic playgrounds

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Abstract

Because of their prominent use of artistic illustrations, contemporary Flemish picture books have often been referred to as "aesthetic picture books" in Flanders. In this article, I will argue that the use of art and references to art by no means is a feature that is unique for contemporary Flemish picture books. The use of artistic allusions is only one of many characteristics that contemporary Flemish picture books share with what internationally has come to be described as "postmodern picture books". Typical postmodern features such as play, parody, intertextuality and interaction (between text and reader) will consequently be identified and analysed in works by several Flemish picture book artists. Because of these postmodern features, picture books are furthermore described as "semiotic playgrounds" where readers can become (inter)active readers.

Keywords: *Picture books; postmodernism; visual intertextuality; interaction; play; Carll Cneut; Tom Schamp; Little Red Riding Hood; fairy tales; wimmelbooks*

Because of social, economic and political reasons, the Flemish children's book market has been dominated by the Netherlands for a long period of time (Ghesquière 1992; Leysen 2005; Van Coillie 2007). Flanders is the Dutch speaking part of Belgium situated in the north of the country inhabiting more than half of the country's population. When Belgium was founded in 1830, French was the only official language and this remained so until 1898, the year that Dutch also was recognised as an official language. Despite this, a so-called "language struggle" between French and Dutch continued for several decades, and it was not until the 1920s that Dutch was accepted and implemented for the first time as an official language at a university in Flanders. The specific language situation in Flanders has played a considerable role for the relatively late development and establishment of the Flemish children's book market. While freeing itself from the French domination, Flanders had to simultaneously position itself against the Netherlands, its neighbouring country with which it shares its official language and by which literary and linguistic norms traditionally have been dictated.

Because of this many, publishers of Dutch (children's) literature have traditionally been located in the Netherlands, publishing books in both Flanders and in the Netherlands. It was not until the decades after the Second World War that Flemish publishing houses were able to emancipate themselves more fully thus creating a more independent Flemish book market and establishing a more Flemish literary identity (Absillis 2009).

In the case of Flemish children's literature and the Flemish picture book specifically, there has been a clear process of emancipation since the end of the 1980s (Leysen 2005; Van Coillie 2007, 369; Vermeulen 2006, 19–27). It was during this and the following decade that Flemish illustrators, such as Lieve Baeten, Koen Fossey and Klaas Verplancke who had long been confined to illustrating children's magazines, came out in the open and made their debut as picture book illustrators. Some of these illustrators stood out by their explicit artistic approach. This artistic approach would come to be considered one of the central characteristics for contemporary Flemish picture books which consequently, in Flanders have often

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been referred to as "aesthetic picture books" (cf. Vermeulen 2006; Nauwelaerts 2008).

In this article, I want to question the extent to which the artistic trend really is unique for contemporary Flemish picture books. Furthermore, I will argue that contemporary Flemish picture books should instead be seen as part of a more broad development within the Western picture book scene which has been referred to as "postmodern" in recent international picture book research. I will start off describing Gregie De Maeyer's pioneering role in the establishment of a more artistically oriented Flemish picture book scene. Following this, the notion of 'aesthetic picture book' is discussed and illustrated with the picture book *Dulle Griet* (2005) by Geert De Kockere and Carll Cneut. The notion is then critically examined and compared to what other researchers have come to refer to as 'postmodern picture books'. Finally, some typical postmodern features will be analysed in contemporary Flemish picture books by artists such as Isabelle Vandenabeele, Gerda Dendooven, Pieter Gaudesaboos and Tom Schamp.

GREGIE DE MAYER, A POSTMODERN PICTURE BOOK PIONEER

Graphic designer, illustrator and author Gregie De Maeyer (1951–1998) is often seen as an important artistic pioneer within the Flemish picture book scene (see e.g. Van Coillie 2007; Vermeulen 2006). In 1984, De Maeyer was the first Flemish person to receive the *Premio Grafico* prize at the International Children's Book Fair in Bologna. De Maeyer considered the picture book as a total work of art. He freely explored its visual, artistic and semiotic boundaries by, for example, integrating poetry, philosophical texts and other (visual) art forms into his books (Vermeulen 2006, 23; see also Van Coillie et al. 2004, 221).

An interesting example of this is the picture book *Juul* (1996), which De Maeyer made in collaboration with the Flemish conceptual artist Koen Vanmechelen. In this book, the illustrations consist of a series of photographs showing a wooden sculpture representing the main character of the story, the boy Juul (see Figure 1). Throughout the book, Juul is being bullied in school because of his physical appearance, for instance his curly red hair. For each page, the wooden sculpture representing Juul is shown to be more and more mutilated as the bullying worsens and Juul starts to harm himself; Juul pulls out his hair,

Figure 1. Wooden sculptures in *Juul* by Gregie De Maeyer and Koen Vanmechelen, Altiora Averbode, 1996.

rips off his ears and pushes out his eyes. Eventually he even loses his limbs, and by the end of the story only his decapitated and delimbed wooden torso and his head depraved of ears, eyes and hair are left to be seen. The book does not only strike the reader with its confronting story. The tragic course of events within the story and the seriousness of the issue are also intensified by the symbolic use and the 'rawness' of the systematically mutilated and abstract wooden sculpture in the pictures. Internationally, this book also

stands out because it was among the first to deal with dark and heavy themes such as bullying and self-harm which together with other taboo themes such as violence or death, had traditionally been avoided in picture books (Beckett 2012, 241–272; Reynolds 2007, 91–101).

AESTHETIC PICTURE BOOKS

De Maeyer's experimental and artistic way of working cleared the way for a whole new generation of Flemish picture book artists that defined and influenced the Flemish picture book scene to a great extent throughout the 1990s and up to the present day (Van Coillie 2007, 369; Vermeulen 2006, 21–25). Because of their extensive use of artistic images, often with more or less explicit intertextual references to (Flemish or Belgian) art and painting history, combined with literary texts and a conscious use of graphic design, Nauwelaerts (2008), in reference to Vermeulen (2006), describes the work of this new generation of Flemish picture book artists as *aesthetic picture books*.

A typical example of such a picture book is *Dulle Griet* (2005—'Mad Meg') written by Geert De Kockere and illustrated by Carll Cneut. In a very explicit way, this picture book refers to the well-known 16th century painting with the same name by the Flemish painter Pieter Brueghel the Elder. The story of the picture book is constructed around the main character Griet (Meg), the woman in the war helmet shown in the centre on Brueghel's painting. In addition to the main character, the images in the picture book also show clear and direct intertextual reference to the painting and its detailed scenery. Just like the painting, the book has a very dark and ominous atmosphere, which is already announced by the dark brown cover and the black title pages. Throughout the book, many grotesque scenes are shown with horrid looking people and creatures bearing a remarkable resemblance to the scenery on the triptych *The Last Judgement* by 15th century Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch; this painting has often been said to have been a direct inspiration for Brueghel's *Mad Meg*. One image in the book shows Meg drawn by Cneut placed against a background fragment cut out directly from Brueghel's painting (see Figure 2). Here, a direct and explicit intertextual reference is made to the painting. The reference is materialised visually through a mixture of collage and pastiche where the old and the 'copied new' are literally

Figure 2. Fragments from *Dulle Griet* by Geert De Kockere and Carll Cneut, De Eenhoorn, 2005.

combined into a new unity. To conclude the circle, the original painting by Brueghel is shown on the backside of the book serving as a direct visual source of reference (see also Beckett 2012, 175).

The picture book by De Kockere and Cneut clearly shows a multi-layered play with different types of more and less explicit intertextual references to specific aspects from Flemish art and painting history. Many contemporary Flemish picture books contain not only references to art, they also frequently feature an intricate play with other types of intertextual references to aspects from other (popular) media, genres or literary and visual traditions. While Nauwelaerts (2008)

mainly in connection to the art references speaks of 'aesthetic' Flemish picture books, these other types of play, parody and intertextuality have been described by other picture book scholars as typically belonging to the so-called *postmodern picture book* (see e.g. Pantaleo & Sipe 2008).

Before any further analysis of particular post-modern Flemish picture books, let us take a closer look at the notions 'aesthetic' and 'postmodern' in connection to picture books.

AESTHETIC OR POSTMODERN PICTURE BOOKS?

Nauwelaerts (2008) considers the intertextual relations to art as an important and almost defining characteristic for contemporary Flemish picture books, which he consequently refers to as aesthetic picture books. At the same time, it is important to point out that the use of intertextual references to art is by no means a characteristic that is unique for (contemporary) Flemish picture books. This becomes clear when looking at the detailed discussions of artistic allusions in contemporary picture books presented in Beckett (2010) and Beckett (2012, 147–208). While allusions to art in contemporary picture books tend to have a strong playful and parodic character which Beckett (2010, 83; 2012, 147) describes as typically postmodern, the influence of art on picture books should be seen as a phenomenon of all times (at least for as long as we can speak about picture books).

Proof of this can, for example, be found in the historical discussions about the development of Dutch and Flemish picture books presented in Vermeulen (2006) and Van Coillie (2008).[1] The latter discusses, among other things, the influence of Jugendstil in the many picture books illustrated by the Dutch illustrator Rie Cramer around the turn between the 19th and 20th century (these Dutch books were also spread in Flanders as pointed out in the introduction of this article). The work of Rie Cramer shows many interesting parallels to other Jugendstil-inspired illustrators and picture book artists of that time, even abroad, such as the Swedish Elsa Beskow and Jenny Nyström.

An example of the use of art in picture books from the 1950s and 1960s is the work by Dutch picture book artist Dick Bruna (see Figure 3). Although greatly commercialised during later years, Bruna's picture books were initially designed within the artistic context of modernism
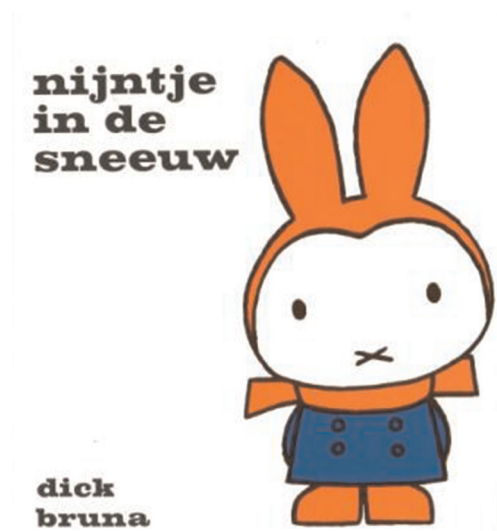

Figure 3. *Nijntje* (1963), *Nijntje in de sneeuw* (1963) and *De koning* (1962) by Dick Bruna, Mercis.

and functionalism using a minimalistic design, relatively abstract forms and mainly primary colours (Van Meerbergen 2010, 36–44, 2012, 10–11). Important inspiration sources for Bruna

were modernist artists such as Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and Ferdinand Léger, but also artists from the Dutch functionalist art group *De Stijl* of which Piet Mondriaan was a prominent member (see also Kohnstam 1991; Linders et al. 2006; Reitsma 1989). Modernist and functionalist inspired picture books can additionally be found in other countries around this time period, for example in the Nordic countries which is discussed in more depth by, e.g. Christensen (2003) and Druker (2008b).

The notion 'aesthetic' thus tends to be slightly misguiding when used to describe a unique feature for contemporary Flemish picture books which seems to be suggested by Nauwelaerts (2008). The use of the notion 'aesthetic' is furthermore problematic as it tends to be too closely connected to certain qualitatively evaluated characteristics in a picture book. It inevitably evokes questions such as: 'What is to be considered as artistic and therefore aesthetic? What is not?'

Besides their intertextual connection to art, Nauwelaerts (2008) describes some other important characteristics of what he refers to as aesthetic picture books. Because of their artistic character, according to Nauwelaerts (2008), aesthetic picture books place a stronger demand on the reader from whom it is, for example, expected and assumed that (s)he has some background knowledge about art. These types of books often also use what Nauwelaerts (2008) refers to as 'layered images', i.e. images which through their complex composition can encourage different interpretations and readings. Nauwelaerts (2008) further mentions visual intertextuality as a typical characteristic for the aesthetic picture book. He makes a distinction between intertextual references that are realised on a *text–internal* level (i.e. when certain images or aspects appear repeatedly within one and the same book) and those that are realised on a *text–external* level (i.e. when images refer to art or other reference objects outside the book).

Interestingly enough these descriptions by Nauwelaerts (2008) bear a great deal of resemblance to what is described as postmodern picture books by Pantaleo and Sipe (2008). In contrast to the notion 'aesthetic', the notion 'postmodern' offers a broader and more neutral reach as it can be used to describe more general tendencies occurring in picture books within the context of the postmodern society. As also pointed out by Lewis (2001, 93–94), postmodern fiction (including the picture book) is to be seen as an historical phenomenon rather than to be based solely on qualitative criteria.[2]

Postmodernism is often used as a term to describe certain changes and tendencies which started occurring within western culture and society during the last half of the 20th century. As this definition is rather broad and vague, there is no real consensus on what postmodernism exactly entails, and consequently this term is often used and interpreted in different ways (see discussion in Pantaleo & Sipe 2008). Flieger (1991) summarises the debate on postmodernism by distinguishing between four main positions; it is seen as either "a reaction, a denial, a residue or an intensification of modernism" (cited in Pantaleo & Sipe 2008, 1–2). In any case, one central and reoccurring theme within postmodernism seems to be the establishing of a critical and ironic dialogue with the past (Grieve 1993, 15; see also Beckett 2010, 83; 2012, 147).

Leaving this particular discussion aside, Pantaleo and Sipe (2008) discuss and line up some typical characteristics for what has come to be described as postmodern picture books in picture book research (see also, e.g. Anstey & Bull 2004; Grieve 1993; Lewis 2001, 87–101; McGuire & Sipe 2008; Pantaleo 2007). A first characteristic is the mixing of genres. The border between 'high' and 'low' culture is often blurred and thereby (implicitly) challenged and put into question. The breaking of (literary) traditions and conventions can also be mentioned as a typical feature together with the mixing of reality and fiction. Furthermore, there is the occurrence of explicit forms of (visual) intertextuality, combined with play, parody, pastiche and irony. This involves aspects or fragments from other works of art, (well) known stories and other forms of (popular) culture (e.g. board games, (animated) films or computer games) being picked up and combined into a new semiotic unity.

All of the features mentioned so far can be seen as metafictive devices as they all in some way draw attention to the picture book text as an artefact (cf. Grieve 1993, 17). The postmodern picture book text can further be seen as an 'open text', i.e. text that invites different interpretations and readings, which in many cases is combined with an open ending or a circular and therefore never-ending structure. The reader is often given an active role as a participant in the story as (s)he is expected to connect certain points and to create all sorts of meanings. In some cases, a direct form of interaction between text and reader is established as the reader is addressed personally

and/or is instructed to perform certain tasks. All of these postmodern features make the picture book text into what can be referred to as a *semiotic playground* where play, parody, intertextuality and interaction between text and reader are central features. Many of these postmodern features can be found in contemporary Flemish picture books of which some examples will be discussed below.

RED CAP REVISITED

The postmodern retelling of traditional fairy tales has become an internationally spread phenomenon in Western (children's) literature during the last four decades (Joosen 2011, 1–8). Since the 1990s, the retelling of traditional fairy tales has also become a reoccurring theme in Dutch and Flemish (children's) literature (Joosen 2011, 6; see also Joosen & Vloeberghs 2008, 69). Sandra Beckett has shown that the story of "Little Red Riding Hood" (or "Little Red Cap" as it is sometimes referred to) has been retold in numerous ways in contemporary (mostly Western) children's literature (Beckett 2008), but also in works of fiction for all ages (Beckett 2010). Some interesting examples of these Little Red Cap retellings can be found in several contemporary Flemish picture books.

In 2003, two Flemish postmodern picture book retellings with clear intertextual reference to "Little Red Cap" were published: *Rood Rood Roodkapje* ('Red Red Red Cap') by Dutch author Edward van de Vendel and Flemish illustrator Isabelle Vandenabeele, and *Roodlapje* ('Little Red Rag') by Flemish picture book artist Pieter Gaudesaboos. Both books typically establish what Joosen (2011, 11), in reference to Nikolajeva (1996), calls an 'open intertextual dialogue' with the traditional story through their title and through the name of the main character ('Roodkapje' in Dutch). Both books also start in a slightly ironic tone with the traditional (Dutch) fairy tale opening words, "Er was eens . . ." ('Once upon a time . . .'), after which each book presents its own version of the traditional tale.

Rood Rood Roodkapje can be read as a feminist parody on the original story as Red Cap takes the right into her own hands and cold bloodedly kills the wolf with an axe (Beckett 2008, 53; Joosen & Vloeberghs 2008, 72–76).[3] The limited use of colour (black, white, red and tones of grey) in combination with the rough woodcuts, a technique that Vandenabeele typically uses, gives this book an almost grotesque horror-like character

(see Figure 4). The colour red is further stressed through the repetition in the protagonist's name which is Rood Rood Roodkapje or 'Red Red Red Cap'. In the pictures, the colour red signals danger and disaster and eventually blood as the killing of the grandmother and later also the wolf take place. Although Vandenabeele expresses a highly individual style in and through her woodcuts, the use of the technique in this case also makes the book into a modern version or 'remake' of Perrault's traditional version of the tale that was illustrated with the famous woodcuts by Gustave Doré. Compared to the later and extended version by the Grimm Brothers where the girl and her grandmother are saved by the hunter, Perrault's early version ends in a rather brutal and abrupt way when Red Cap is eaten by the wolf. Also *Rood Rood Roodkapje* ends in an abrupt and highly macabre way showing Red Cap in a blood covered room watching the lifeless body of the wolf that is spread out widely over the floor.

Despite its very traditional opening line, *Roodlapje* by Gaudesaboos also proves to be anything but traditional. The book consists of what appears to be an associative collage where, for example, photographs, games, postcards, handwritten texts and drawings, 19th century looking writings and typography, mirror-reflected images, sequences of films and fragments of computer games follow each other freely (see also Joosen & Vloeberghs 2008, 76–79). This technique almost works as a visual 'stream of consciousness', the literary technique typically used by modernist authors such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. A central theme in Gaudesaboos' story is the loneliness of the protagonist Little Red Rag who seems to be moving in a grim, desolate, decayed and, through the structure of the book, also literally fragmented modern society (see Figure 5).[4] By using multiple photographs of everyday objects and sceneries in combination with the artificially

Figure 4. Fragment from *Rood Rood Roodkapje* by Edward van de Vendel and Isabelle Vandenabeele, De Eenhoorn, 2003.

Figure 5. Fragment from *Roodlapje* by Pieter Gaudesaboos, Lannoo, 2003.

manipulated visual material in the collages, fiction and reality (or what we would like to perceive of as reality) are mixed and also indirectly put into question (what is manipulated, and what is not?). This fragmentary collage technique and the tension between fiction and reality are key features in the picture books by Gaudesaboos. The fragmentary structure also forces the reader to become an active participant in the reading process connecting all of the details throughout the book into a meaningful unity.

A third picture book that can be named within the theme of Little Red Riding Hood is *De wonderlijke reis van Roosje Rood* (2007—'Rosie Red's marvellous journey') by Flemish picture book artist Gerda Dendooven.[5] Contrary to the previously discussed books, this one starts at the end of the traditional story. On the first spread, we see the gigantic black wolf lying on its back while our red-capped protagonist Rosie Red is professionally sewing up the wolf's belly. It is left

unclear how this opening scene should be read exactly; maybe Rosie just escaped from the wolf's belly after she had been eaten by him? In any case, the wolf is depicted on his back with its paws upwards and his gigantic red tongue hanging loosely out of his mouth, both of which can be read as signs of subordination (almost like when a dog lies over to be cuddled). Rosie is on top of him and clearly dominates the situation; she is depicted as being empowered over the wolf. After this Rosie wants to head home, but where is her home and where is her mother? These are the leading questions throughout the rest of the book where the reader follows Rosie on her on-going search for her mother through day and night and through different seasons and landscapes.

On her journey, Rosie meets several characters from more or less well known fairy tales and popular stories such as the seven dwarfs, the three little pigs, Thumbelina and Thumb. She also meets a 'sleeping beauty', named Belle, lying in a forest between thorn bushes. Belle has been sleeping for over 100 years and through this character, clear intertextual references are thus made to Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty", originally named "La Belle au bois dormant" in French ('The beauty in the sleeping forest'). Belle is shown in a position similar to the old stone sculptures of important people in churches, her body is stretched out, she has her hands on her chest and her body is arranged symmetrically (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Fragments from *De wonderlijke reis van Roosje Rood* by Gerda Dendooven, Querido, 2007.

At the same time Belle also is reminiscent of a huge Russian matryoshka doll, as she has a rather tall and static figure, clear red painted lips and a reoccurring pattern on her colourful dress which at several points has horizontal cutting lines (as if she could be opened here to get to the next doll inside). Her dress also continues over her head covering her hair. This matryoshka doll can be seen as a symbol for the on-going search in the story which continues from page to page.

Besides fairy tales and toys, references are also made to known (Dutch) children's songs and nursery rhymes. A reference is made to the finger rhyme about Duimeloot (Thumb) who appears as a character in the book and who is always depicted while clearly showing his five fingers to the reader. In one scene, one of the seven dwarfs is shown swinging on a red mushroom with white dots on it which for Dutch speaking readers becomes a clear reference to the famous children's song "Op een grote paddestoel, rood met witte stippen …" ('On a big mushroom, red with white dots …'—this song uses the same melody as "Itsy Bitsy Spider").

Dendooven borrows visual techniques from other genres, such as the cartoon. While the main story line is told through small white text boxes at the bottom of the pages, the dialogue and words of the characters are shown in speech bubbles in the pictures (see Figure 6). Some of the characters are shown in black and very often also in profile, which is suggestive of the early newspaper cartoons made in black and white with limited printing techniques. Another feature typically used in cartoons—but also in other popular media for children (e.g. Manga, computer games or animated movies)—is that several of the characters are depicted with relatively large heads and eyes (cf. Gould 1980; Van Meerbergen 2010, 129–132, 227–228 on 'juvenile' depictions of picture book characters; Van Meerbergen 2012). For some of the characters' clothes and also for some of the background elements (e.g. the trees in Figure 6), a technique of digital collage is used. This technique is common in several contemporary postmodern picture books. Similar analogue expressions can be found in several modernist picture books, which are discussed in more depth by Druker (2008a).

Dendooven uses a special technique to create a certain form of sequentiality in the story and movement between the pages. Throughout the search for Rosie's mother, each page refers to the next one as a small strip or fragment on the right side of the page which already shows the begin-

ning of the picture on the next page (see Figure 6). This is reminiscent of, for example, techniques used in modernist picture books, such as the Finland–Swedish Tove Jansson's picture book *Hur gick det sen?* (1952—translated into English as *Moomin, Mymble and Little My*). In this book, physical holes in the pages are used as so-called 'page turners' to create suspense in the story by showing fragments of the next page which makes the reader curious to turn the pages (Druker 2008b, 79–97). In the story about Rosie Red, the characters are also often depicted (in profile) moving toward the right which together with the horizontally oriented format of the book enhances the page turning even more.

Another aspect used to create suspense in the story is the reoccurring tail of the wolf shown discreetly in the background on several pages, popping up behind a cactus or behind a tree, without it being mentioned in the written text. This can be described as a form of text–internal intertextuality where elements repeatedly reoccur throughout the story (see earlier discussion of Nauwelaerts 2008). By the end of the story Rosie, together with her helpers, finally finds her mother, and at this point the wolf also comes out of hiding. The wolf confesses that he wants to have a mother as well, and after Rosie's mother has tied up his mouth (for safety) the wolf is allowed to join the others on their way to grandma. But where is grandma …? With this question, the story gets an open ending and the search can begin all over again.

REALITY REVISITED AND INTERACTIVE PLAYSCAPES

As mentioned earlier in this article, several of the picture books by Flemish Pieter Gaudesaboos consist of associative collages and experiments with images, materials and graphic design. Frequently, the border between reality and fiction is also explored. A clear example of this last feature is the book *Negen schijfjes banaan op zoek naar een plekje om te slapen* ('Nine slices of banana looking for a place to sleep') published in 2004. The pictures in this book consist of manipulated photographs where the reader can follow the protagonists, nine slices of banana, each time shown against a new background on their search for a place to sleep. Everyday sceneries are mixed with the absurd story about the 'living' banana slices (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Cover from *Negen schijfjes banaan op zoek naar een plaatsje om te slapen* by Pieter Gaudesaboos, Lannoo, 2004.

The manipulation of reality and the play with reality and fiction are driven to the extreme in the two books about the made up boy Briek, *Briek* (2008) and *Herr Luna* (2010), which Gaudesaboos made in collaboration with the Flemish radio documentary maker Annick Lesage. These books document the life and mysterious disappearance of the fictional character Briek, a former supposed child celebrity. Because of the great amount of manipulated documentary material used in the books, great effort is placed in convincing the reader that Briek existed in real-life. *Briek* contains an audio CD with a documentary made by Annick Lesage (whose radio voice sounds relatively familiar to many Flemish people) where the reader/listener is presented with, for example, news reports and interviews with so-called eyewitnesses. *Herr Luna* also includes a CD which requires listening to while looking at the pictures in the book. On the CD, Annick Lesage gives the reader/listener clear instructions and tells him/her exactly what to do in order to find Briek in Berlin of which pictures are shown in the book.[6] As is announced on the cover of the book ('Lead your own investigation. Hugely thrilling audio detective.'—my translation), this is a true detective story where the reader is assumed to play the role of the detective.

Interaction with the reader is also a central feature in *123 piano!* by Gaudesaboos from 2005. The title of this book refers to a playground game with the same name (in Dutch) that has been popular for several decades in many Flemish schools; it will therefore be recognised by both children and their parents. As is suggested by the title, play is one of the central themes in the book along with childhood (days) and everything that can be associated with this such as toys, games and candy. The photographs and pictures often have a slightly nostalgic tone and play with references to a childhood in past times. Some of the pictures show, for example, diary pages or fragments of a calendar combined with old and discoloured photographs. These types of images are then varied with visual games where the reader is assigned to perform certain tasks. On one page, for example, different sorts of (photographed) candy are shown, and the reader is asked to compose his/her own little bag of candy (see Figure 8). The element of play is thus used as an interactive resource in the text, and through play the reader is invited to become an active participant in the reading process.

On another page in *123 piano!*, several rows of houses are drawn and the reader has to look for the Easter eggs that are hidden in some of them. The houses and the style in which they are drawn reoccur in other books by Gaudesaboos. On some other pages the nine slices of banana from the previously discussed book suddenly reoccur in a new adventure, this time looking for a place in the sun. By doing this Gaudesaboos also establishes a clear play with intertextual references to his own

Figure 8. Double-spread from *123 piano!* By Pieter Gaudesaboos, Lannoo, 2005.

here's where the book switches from horizontal to vertical

Figure 9. Fragment from *Otto in de sneeuw* by Tom Schamp, Lannoo, 2010.

work, which will be picked up by readers who are familiar with his work.

Gaudesaboos' books can be described as "visual–verbal playscapes", where play is used to engage the reader, a postmodern feature that has been discussed earlier by, e.g. Pantaleo (2007, 50). In an interview for the Flemish magazine *Leeswelp,* Gaudesaboos compared his books to a fairground where "you can walk around freely, see all kinds of things, take a big tour or a small one" (Bulcaen 2008, 322—my translation). He further describes them as books to be read, 'used' and 're-used' by the readers as it suits them. The idea of the picture book as a functional object made to be 'used', played and worked with is already present in some of the modernist picture books discussed by Druker (2008b), but it is also described as a typical feature for postmodern picture books by Lewis (2001, 98).[7]

Functionality, intertextuality and play are also central features in the three cardboard books about the little cat Otto by Flemish picture book artist Tom Schamp. In the first two books, *Otto rijdt heen en weer* (2007—'Otto drives back and forth') and *Otto in de stad* (2008—'Otto in the city'), the reader can follow Otto on a car trip to and through the city.[8] In the third book, *Otto in de sneeuw* (2010—'Otto in the snow'), Otto goes on a skiing trip by car.[9] In each of the three books,

a circular structure is used which makes it possible to read the books in two directions (in Dutch the books are called 'lusboeken' which literally means 'loop books'). The reader can follow Otto from the first page to the last and then turn around the book to follow Otto's journey back home. In the last book the reader has to continue reading the last pages in vertical direction instead of horizontally (see Figure 9). Schamp gives his books a highly material and functional use by exploiting the large format and the thick cardboard pages. Because of these features the books are almost suggestive of a game board or a play mat for cars that can easily be spread out, for example on the floor, while the young reader follows Otto on his journeys and is able to turn the books in whichever direction.

The large format of the books also provides an opportunity to create large scenes and landscapes with many details. Schamp's pictures and sceneries contain numerous small details and separate story lines which can engage the reader for hours. They also make the books highly 're-readable' as the reader can choose alternative reading paths and/or discover new details in each reading. These features are typical of what Rémi (2012) has described as 'wimmelbooks', books crawling with details such as the well-known cardboard books (with a similar large format) by

German picture book artist Rotraut Susanne Berner. Although wimmelbooks normally do not contain any written text (apart from words integrated in the pictures such as signs in a shop or a train station; cf. Rémi 2012, 117–118), Schamp's books still contain a basic storyline formulated in short sentences that are integrated in the pictures on each spread.

In his detailed visual compositions, Schamp typically uses many visual and verbal puns making intertextual reference to a great variety of things ranging from, for example, existing places, buildings, persons and objects to art, children's literature, comic books and advertising. In a documentary about his work made by the Flemish television channel Canvas, Schamp states that his work is constantly influenced by whatever is happening around him, be it art exhibitions, work by other artists, youth memories or other aspects from his personal life.[10] In the book about Otto in the city, clear references are made to the city of Brussels (where Schamp grew up and studied), its shops, buildings and squares. The name of the protagonist cat Otto, who throughout the books is depicted sitting in a car with his father, is a pun in itself as the word 'otto' is often used in the Flemish dialect around Brussels to refer to a car (in standard Dutch 'auto').

The third book, where Otto goes on a skiing trip, is partly inspired by Schamp's youth memories and his own family's skiing trips to Switzerland. Many elements in the book reflect the landscape that can be seen when driving to Switzerland from Belgium. The river Rhône, for example, appears and is renamed to TobleRhône referring to the famous Swiss chocolate (see Figure 9).[11] Just next to the river there is a chocolate factory with a roof made of a triangularly shaped Toblerone chocolate tablet. Outside the factory there is a truck shaped like the triangular yellowish wrapping of a Toblerone chocolate bar with the name "Tomi" spelled on it in red letters. On the side of the truck, the letter "S" can be found thus referring to Tom(i)'s last name, Schamp. The name of the factory is "& the chocolate factory" which then together with the name on the truck ("Tomi") forms an allusion to the famous Roald Dahl story *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. This is only one of the many puns and intertextual references in the details appearing on each double-spread.

Schamp's 'wimmel style' and his prominent use of cars and animal characters also evoke images of the busy worlds in the books by Richard Scarry,

which Schamp has pointed out as an important inspiration source along with the work by French picture book artist Marc Boutavant.[12] In the book where Otto goes on a skiing trip even a copy of Scarry's little cat protagonist can be found in one of the pictures. In addition to this, other well-known children's literature characters, such as Babar, Mickey Mouse and a cat in a boot, (re-) appear throughout the three books. Other than Tom Schamp's own name and/or initials that can be found at least once on every spread, characters can also be found wearing the name or initials of his children on their clothes. Furthermore, the same cars and characters constantly reappear in new constellations throughout the three books making them tightly interconnected.

These different types of internal and external intertextuality are also typical features in the wimmelbooks by Rotraut Susanne Berner and Thé Jong King that are discussed by Rémi (2012). The reoccurrence of characters adds to the suspense as the experienced Schamp-reader will learn to know the characters and might even go in search of them. With all its forms of playful intertextuality constantly activating the reader, Tom Schamp's postmodern landscapes make each reading into a unique experience.

CONCLUSION

While studies such as Vermeulen (2006) and Nauwelaerts (2008) have mainly focused on the artistic allusions and qualities in contemporary Flemish picture books, the goal of this article has been to describe and analyse the contemporary Flemish picture book within a more neutral, broad and international context of postmodern picture book research. The many examples discussed in this article have clearly shown that besides artistic allusions, many of the postmodern characteristics that have been described in earlier research are clearly present in contemporary Flemish picture books by artists such as Isabelle Vandenabeele, Gerda Dendooven, Pieter Gaudesaboos and Tom Schamp. Through their use of play, parody and intertextuality, these books are typical examples of postmodern semiotic playgrounds activating the reader in different ways and up to different degrees. While some of the books activate the reader by their intertextual playfulness, depending on the reader to recognise and connect aspects from different tales, genres and other media, other books take one step further using play, parody and intertextuality as tools to make the reader into an

active participant in the story and/or an interactive creator of meaning in the reading process. In the latter cases, exemplified in this article by the books by Pieter Gaudesaboos and Tom Schamp, the picture book in itself becomes a functional object of play, a semiotic playground where the reader can move around freely and become an interactive reader.

Notes

1. See also De Bodt (2010) about Dutch picture book illustrations and art.
2. However, also here opinions are divided and some researchers make a clear difference between what they consider to be 'outstanding' postmodern picture books and picture book artists and what not (cf. Grieve 1993).
3. For a further discussion of feminist fairy tale retellings, see Joosen (2004) and Joosen (2011).
4. Fragments of the books by Pieter Gaudesaboos are shown on his webpage; accessed September 11, 2012, http://www.gaudesaboos.be
5. This book was first published in French as *Où est Maman?* in 2006 by Editions Être.
6. Teasers can be found on Pieter Gaudesaboos webpage; accessed September 11, 2012, http://www.gaudesaboos.be/boeken/13_herr_luna/?width=1680&height=1020
7. As is pointed out by Lewis (2001: 82), picture books that can be worked and played with are not something entirely new; popup books and other "movables of all shapes and sizes" have been popular since the 1800s. Within research and amongst critics, these books have often not received great attention as they have been considered to be more similar to toys than to books (Lewis 2011: 98).
8. These first two books were bundled into one in 2011 and also feature some new material.
9. While this article was in its finishing phase also a fourth book in the series about Otto was published, *Otto in de luchthaven* ('Otto in the airport' – Tielt: Lannoo, 2012).
10. The documentary *Vormgevers. Tom Schamp* (2010) can be found on Tom Schamp's webpage; accessed September 14, 2012, http://www.tomschamp.com/about.html
11. An animated fragment of this book can be found on Tom Schamp's webpage; accessed September 11, 2012: http://www.tomschamp.com/about.html
12. See documentary made by Canvas (note 10).

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