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BACHELOR'S THESIS

How to use the picture book, "The Rabbits", to strengthen pupils' visual literacy and cultural awareness.

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Sammendrag

I den engelske læreplanen for 7. og 10. årstrinn står det at elevene skal være i stand til å lese og forstå ulike typer tekster. I tillegg understrekes viktigheten av å utvikle en kulturell forståelse. Denne oppgaven tar blant annet utgangspunkt i de gjeldende læreplanmålene, og trekker frem *visuell leseferdighet* og *kulturell forståelse* som viktige kompetanser som elevene bør få muligheten til å utvikle. Videre legges det vekt på hvordan bildebøker kan benyttes til dette formålet. Oppgaven har hovedfokus på utvikling av nevnte kompetanser, men trekker også frem implisitt språkinnlæring som en integrert faktor.

Oppgavens formål er å fremheve hvor mange muligheter som ligger i å benytte seg av bildebøker i undervisningen. I denne oppgaven trekkes flere av disse mulighetene frem, med bildeboken «*The Rabbits*» (1998) av John Marsden og Shaun Tan som eksempel. Denne boken har et gjennomgående kulturelt tema som fungerer godt som et startpunkt for å diskutere og arbeide med både visuell leseferdighet og kulturell forståelse. Oppgaven forsøker også å trekke frem hvordan bildebøker gir muligheten til å integrere innlæring av flere kunnskaper samtidig, noe som er en fordel med tanke på alt elevene skal lære gjennom skolegangen. Også flere konkrete aktiviteter knyttet til utvikling av visuell- og kulturell forståelse blir foreslått, med utgangspunkt i «*The Rabbits*».

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The importance of pictures has been widely discussed in relation to learning, and shows that there is a lot of unused potential that should be utilized. Pictures are powerful because they are processed faster than words by us, and help us remember information better as they activate a bigger part of our brain than what the written words do (Kouyoumdjian, 2012). Furthermore, there are multiple advantages in using pictures in teaching, such as e.g. decreased learning time, improved comprehension, increased motivation and it can encourage participation (Kouyoumdjian, 2012; Birketveit, 2013, p. 17). These advantages can also be linked to the use of picture books, where pictures and verbal text interact.

The research of this paper was conducted based on an interest in picture books and a curiosity in regards to how they can contribute to develop different sets of knowledge. The background is a research study I read that shows that English teachers in Norwegian schools more often use the course books provided rather than other materials (Birketveit & Rimmereide, 2017, p. 103), and that there is a tendency to focus mostly on verbal texts (Birketveit & Rimmereide, 2017, p. 101). Moreover, another Norwegian research study by pedagogical researchers, Ane Malene Sæverot and Marit Ulvik (Sæverot & Ulvik, 2018), concluded that pupils need to further develop their visual literacy as a part of their formative process. This might prove challenging, as this research referred to several other research studies that implicate that teachers may lack a visual competence. Looking at the connection between the findings in the presented research studies, and the obvious advantage of using picture books, I decided to take a closer look at how picture books can be used.

1.1 The assignment's structure

I will begin by presenting definitions of terms mentioned in the research question, as well as definitions of terms that will be used in the following picture book analysis. These terms include *picture book*, *visual literacy*, *cultural awareness*, *iconotext*, *intertextuality* and *symbolism*. In an analysis, there are multiple aspects to consider, but the latter three terms mentioned above are chosen as they invite to a quite complex analysis and interpretation that is linked to the visual- and cultural aspects. In addition, they apply to both the verbal text and the illustration. The theory section's aim is to emphasize each term's relevance and importance in relation to the research question, showing a connection between visual development, cultural insight and literature.

Moving on, the chosen method for this assignment will be explained before presenting an analysis of *“The Rabbits”*, where a selection of the relevant features will be offered. The analysis does not aim to represent the entire book, but rather to highlight relevant parts that will serve as a guidance when creating activities to enhance the pupils’ visual literacy and cultural awareness. There will not be given examples of how to use the picture book in the analysis itself, as this will be addressed in the didactic implications section below. This section will include a suggestion of activities that can be used to enhance the pupils’ visual literacy and cultural awareness.

1.2 Research question

How can the picture book, “The Rabbits”, be utilized to help Norwegian 8th to 10th graders further develop their visual literacy and cultural awareness?

With this research question in mind, I will look into the importance of visual literacy and cultural awareness, and present how these competencies are relevant to understand literature and the world we live in. I will be using *“The Rabbits”* by Shaun Tan and John Marsden (Marsden & Tan, 1998a) as an example of how these competencies can be developed by working both implicitly and explicitly with related themes.

An important argument for looking closer into the picture book’s potential in relation to visual and cultural understanding, is the emphasis on these competencies in the English curriculum. Both the curriculum for year 7 and year 10, and the new Core Curriculum that takes effect in 2020, emphasizes the ability to read and understand different types of texts and develop cultural understanding (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training [NDET], 2013a, p. 7-10; Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 5).

By reading the picture book, the pupils are able to listen to, interpret and use English in communicative situations to develop their linguistic abilities. Rather than focusing explicitly on language learning, I have chosen an implicit approach where the language is used while working with other important aspects, namely the visual and cultural aspects. As a result, I will not focus on the potential advantages for language learning that the suggested activities may have. I will however, emphasize that the pupils will develop linguistic skills through an implicit language learning approach, which can be considered even more favourable than an explicit approach (Dahl, 2015).

2.0 THEORY

2.1 Picture book

The picture book is a medium, not a genre on its own, and can contain both non-fictional and fictional genres (Bjorvand, 2014, p. 130). There have been multiple attempts to define the term “picture book” throughout the years, but what they all seem to have in common is the agreement in regards to the illustrations’ importance. Professor in Education, Lawrence R. Sipe, has collected quite a few of these definitions in his book, *Storytime*, where every definition mentioned speaks about the cooperation between verbal text and illustrations (2008, p. 13). As a result, the definition used in this paper, is a merger of the most widespread and accepted definitions available: “A picture book must have at least one picture on each double spread (opening).” (Birketveit, 2013, p. 19). Furthermore, the picture(s) have to be a significant element that can not be left out without altering the story’s meaning and message (Bjorvand, 2014, p. 130).

While picture books may resemble illustrated books, the distinction between them is the significance of the illustrations, where illustrated books simply contain illustrations to amplify the verbal text. If we were to remove the illustrations from illustrated books, it would not alter the story’s meaning and message in the way that it would in picture books (Sipe, 2008, p. 13-14).

2.1.1 Multimodality

The cooperation between verbal text and illustrations makes the picture book a multimodal text. A multimodal text is more than a written, verbal text, and requires an expanded understanding of the concept of text. The word “text” includes verbal text, illustrations, different forms of audio, and audio-visual productions (Liestøl, Fagerjord & Hannemyr, 2011, p. 13). These different forms of text are referred to as modalities, and by combining two or more of them, we get a multimodal text where the modalities work together to convey meaning (Bjorvand, 2014, p. 130).

A modality is defined as a unit that carries meaning, (Hennig, 2014, p. 154) where each modality has its own opportunities and limitations in regards to what it can express. In a multimodal text, the modalities present are interdependent on each other. Sometimes, a verbal text can offer the majority of the information needed to comprehend the multimodal text,

while other times, the information is mostly given through pictures (Bjorvand, 2014, p. 136). A further explanation of the interdependence between the modalities verbal text and pictures will be given when addressing the term “iconotext”.

2.1.2 Dual Audience

Traditionally, picture books were considered literature for toddlers, but the medium has developed and become more complex and age- including. Several modern picture books are now targeting a so-called “dual audience”, a term used about literature categorized as Children’s literature, where the story can be read and understood at different levels by children, adolescents and adults (Bjorvand, 2014, p. 129). The term is often associated with picture books, as the multimodality opens up for several different interpretations and offers both mature and immature readers a story (Slettan, 2014, p. 11-12).

2.1.3 Why picture books are appropriate to use

There are multiple reasons as to why picture books should be used when teaching language. First, there are different types of picture books available that can engage pupils of all ages in varying ways. According to Professor in English Education, Janice Bland, this includes wordless/ nearly wordless picture books, postmodern picture books, picture books with an implicit sociocultural agenda and picture books with an environmental perspective (Bland, 2013, p. 40-64). Secondly, picture books may reinforce motivation amongst pupils and help them acquire a habit of extensive pleasure reading, which is proved essential to learn a new language and develop cultural awareness (Bland, 2013, p. 35-36). Furthermore, as picture books tell their story through both verbal text and illustrations, they invite to “[...] multiple constructions of meaning, and engage and challenge readers across the boundaries of age and reading skill.” (Birketveit, 2013, p. 17). Because picture books are relatively short, the pupils will be able to finish the book and therefore get the satisfaction of having read a full story instead of an extract, which is commonly used in language teaching (Birketveit, 2013, p. 18).

Even though picture books traditionally have been considered literature for children, especially the postmodern picture books have proven to appeal to the more mature readers. These picture books in particular, appeal to the adolescents’ visual competence, which they have acquired using social media, films, video games and similar visual/ audio-visual texts (Bjorvand, 2014, p. 129).

2.2 Visual literacy

Visual literacy is a concept with multiple definitions that was coined by co-founder of the International Visual Literacy Association (IVLA), John Debes, in 1969 (IVLA, 2019). Debes explains that visual literacy is about developing a visual competence where you are able to both see and at the same time integrate other sensory experiences. He further emphasizes the importance of having such a competence, and expresses that it is “[...] fundamental to normal human learning.” (IVLA, 2019). As we can see, visual literacy is a concept inevitably linked to multimodal texts. As multimodal texts consist of two or more modalities that function together to convey meaning, being visually literate is necessary to understand the relation between them.

English teacher, Ben Goldstein, has dedicated an entire article to explain the importance of visual literacy; an underrated proficiency that in his opinion needs more focus. He explains how the written texts have had the lead role in teaching language, while the visual aspects of the text often has been ignored (Goldstein, 2016, p. 2). The research study by Sæverot and Ulvik presented in the introduction, supports Debes’ and Goldstein’s statements, and also shows some consequences of not practicing visual competencies. The research included adolescents from Norwegian high schools and it found that illustrations mainly are used to illustrate a verbal text, and that there are tendencies to teachers lacking a visual understanding. This might explain why Sæverot and Ulvik’s study showed that the illustrations’ potential are not utilized in teaching. There seems to be a connection between the teachers’ lack of visual competence and the fact that illustrations mainly are presented as a tool to amplify the verbal text. Many teachers do not know how to utilize the illustrations’ potential, and the result is a lacking vocabulary amongst many pupils in relation to visual literacy (Sæverot & Ulvik, 2018).

As stated by Debes, a well-developed visual literacy is extremely important when learning. In addition, Goldstein’s article, and Sæverot and Ulvik’s study highlight the many opportunities created by using illustrations.

2.3 Culture and cultural awareness

2.3.1 Culture

The concept of culture is very complex and broad, and impossible to give one correct definition or central theory (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2016, p. 12). Still, simplified definitions of the concept exist, e.g. that it is “[...] pervasive, all-encompassing, and inescapable.” (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2016, p. 12) and that it can be viewed as “[...] the set of fundamental ideas, practices, and experiences shared by a group of people.” (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2016, p. 14).

The reason why one definition is hard to find is that the concept of culture involves a sum of many elements that work together and create an entirety. A suggestion of important cultural elements is beliefs, values, norms and attitudes. These factors influence each individual’s personality and behaviour, and are the base in regards to how we interact and interpret the world we live in (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2016, p. 20-25).

As every culture is different and based on various interpretations of the world, people sometimes tend to overgeneralize members of other cultures, something that might lead to stereotyping (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2016, p. 15). Individuals understand the world based on their own cultural background, and when interacting with people belonging to other cultures, misunderstandings can occur (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2016, p. 10). As a result, it is important to educate pupils about different cultures and help them develop a cultural awareness so that they are able to see different perspectives.

2.3.2 Cultural awareness

Cultural awareness can be defined as “Someone’s [...] understanding of the differences between themselves and people from other countries or other backgrounds, especially differences in attitudes and values.” (“Cultural awareness definition and meaning”, n.d.). It is about acknowledging that people are different and influenced by their cultural background. Even though the foreign language teacher’s job is to help the pupils acquire a linguistic competence, their role is also to teach about culture so that the pupils become more tolerant and open minded (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2016, p. 34). This is also clearly stated in the English curriculum for Norwegian 7th and 10th graders, where it amongst other things is emphasized that the pupils have to converse about different cultures in English-speaking countries and reflect upon the situation of indigenous peoples (NDET, 2013a, p. 7-10).

Developing a linguistic competence is unarguably linked to culture awareness, as “[...] culture and language are inseparable (Munden, 2014, p. 309). To be able to communicate with and understand people from other cultures, being aware of cultural differences is the key (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2016, p. 34) Moreover, using literature can be a great way to amplify the pupils’ cultural awareness, as it is a significant carrier of cultural meaning. By utilizing the opportunities that literature gives us, we are able to teach both language and culture at the same time in a way that creates a greater whole, instead of dividing these two inseparable factors (Bland, 2013, p. 60).

2.4 Iconotext

As mentioned, a picture book is a multimodal text where the modalities verbal text and illustration are dependent on each other to convey meaning. To fully comprehend a multimodal text like this, there is need for competence within visual literacy to interpret the relation between the two modalities. This competence can be practiced by studying the modalities and how they function together in different ways.

Many textbook authors have discussed the picture book as a medium, amongst them, Bland (2013, p. 37), Sipe and Professor of Education, Maria Nikolajeva. The discussions show that there are several different terms available to describe the text-image relationship, including “imagetext”, “interanimation” and “synergy” (Sipe, 2008, p. 23; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000, p. 225). Nikolajeva and Scott, authors of the comprehensive textbook, “*How Picturebooks Work*”, have chosen to use Kristin Hallberg’s term “iconotext” (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000, p. 226), which also will be used in this paper when referring to the interdependence of verbal text and illustrations.

The definition of “iconotext” is that it functions to describe how the fundamental interaction between verbal text and illustrations in picture books are realized, and how this interaction convey meaning when interpreted by the reader. In other words, iconotext refers to the interaction between the two modalities and the reader, and how this results in an entirety (Bjorvand, 2014, p. 131).

The iconotext can present itself in several manners, where the modalities work together to communicate meaning in different ways. Nikolajeva and Scott divide the interaction between verbal text and illustrations into five categories. (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000, p. 225-226). The terms used to describe the iconotext are quite complex and at a higher level than you would

expect a typical 13-16 year old to be on. Furthermore, as the analyses presented will be used to give examples of how we can use “*The Rabbits*” in the classroom, we will focus on two of the five ways of which the modalities can interact in the iconotext.

An *enhancing* interaction appears when one of the modalities amplify the other by adding some reinforcing information (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000, p. 225). To give some examples, the illustration can for instance amplify the verbal text “she is very sad”, by portraying a girl crying with a dark, rainy cloud placed over her head. If the illustration shows a boy smiling happily, the verbal text can amplify the illustration by explaining why the boy is so happy. Another interaction that is possible, is the modalities telling quite different parts of the same story, and therefore being truly interdependent on each other. This is referred to as a *counterpointing* interaction. The modalities communicate meanings that are not clear unless both are regarded (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000, p. 226). An example of this can be an illustration only showing an injured bee lying in the grass, with a verbal text explaining how the global changes have affected the lives of animals. By understanding both modalities in relation to each other, a story about the endangerment of bees is told.

2.5 Intertextuality

The term “*intertextuality*” was first introduced in an article by linguist Julia Kristeva in 1967, and has proven to be a multifaceted term used in different ways to describe how texts are influenced by each other (Iversen, 2000, p. 155). It refers to how a text must be regarded as a textual meeting place, where different texts are partially composed and elements such as citations, allusions and loans from other texts occur (Skei, 2019).

When describing how texts influence each other, this includes both verbal and visual texts (Birketveit, 2013, p. 31), and an intertextual reference can appear in several manners. Sometimes the reference provides the reader with an obvious connection to another text, like when using loaned, direct quotations or including identical figures. Other times, the intertextual reference might not seem that obvious (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001, p. 227-228). This might be because the reference is vague and demands a thorough interpretation, but another reason can be that the reader is unfamiliar with the text referred to (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001, p. 228). Furthermore, some intertextual references are culturally dependent and have to be understood within a certain cultural aspect. The reader might fail to recognize the reference if he or she is unfamiliar with the culture (Birketveit, 2013, p. 34).

The reasons why it is important to work with intertextuality in the classroom are many. First, considering that all texts are influenced by other texts and are depending on the reader to connect and make meaning of these references, an intertextual awareness is needed. Even though the reader might not always understand the reference, being aware of these textual relationships can possibly prompt a curiosity that otherwise could have resulted in confusion or misinterpretations. Being aware of intertextual connections is also important in relation to visual literacy, as part of visual literacy is to be able to read and understand visual representations. By not paying attention to or recognizing the interaction between texts, important information can be ignored and alter the text's meaning. In addition, intertextuality is closely linked to cultural awareness as texts always are influenced by and considered a bearer of culture. When having an intertextual understanding while reading a text, cultural aspects might be more available to recognize and put into context.

2.6 Symbolism

A symbol is defined as “[...] something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance. Especially: a visible sign of something invisible.” (“Symbol”, n.d.). Some examples of commonly recognized symbols include the heart to symbolize love, the cross to symbolize faith and the anchor to symbolize hope. These objects are symbolizing abstract ideas and concepts, and bear a deeper meaning than the concrete object itself communicates.

Picture books are dependent on their visual elements, and to be able to understand them, the reader must be visually literate. A central part of being visually literate is to be able to interpret symbols and other visual elements “[...] to gain meaning within the cultural context the image was created and exists [...]” (Bamford, 2003, p. 1). The ability to understand and use symbols is not explicitly mentioned in the English curriculum, but it is specified in the Norwegian curriculum after year 10 (NDET, 2013a, p. 8-9). Even though specific literary devices are not mentioned in the English curriculum, it emphasizes the pupils' ability to read and understand different types of texts (NDET, 2013b, p. 3), and working with literary devices is a natural part of this. Furthermore, teaching symbolism is important as symbols are directly linked to culture and are used in all cultures with varying meanings (Swidler, 1986, p. 277). By learning about symbols and how they can symbolize different things to different people, the pupils will be encouraged to further develop their cultural awareness.

3.0 METHOD

In social science studies, there are mainly two different approaches when it comes to methods: qualitative and quantitative (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2012, p. 17). The approaches have different strengths, where the quantitative methods are quite static and tend to generalize (Grønmo, 2016, p. 144), in contrast to qualitative methods that are flexible and allow quite open questions (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2012, p. 17). While quantitative methods are usually used to gather numerical information, e.g. to compare the frequency of something, qualitative methods are used when the research is based on texts, pictures and audio (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2012, p. 19).

There are several different ways of conducting a qualitative research, where observation, interview and group conversations are most common (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2012, p. 19). Document analysis also plays a big role and multiple types of documents can be subject to a qualitative analysis. The word “document” in document analysis requires a broad understanding as it includes all written texts that reflect upon a person’s thoughts, actions or creations. This wide definition includes everything from deeply personal to public and official texts (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2012, p. 87). Usually, a qualitative document analysis involves systematization of chosen quotes, illustrations or other content elements, where the aim is to highlight specific research questions (Grønmo, 2016, p. 142).

The research presented in this paper is conducted using a qualitative method, more specifically a document analysis of a picture book. The aim of the document analysis is to get to know the picture book well before creating and presenting well-thought out activities. It is important to know whether the text you will be using with the pupils is an appropriate choice in regards to what you intend to teach them. It is also essential to review the text properly beforehand, considering the pupils’ different learning levels, as every pupil has a right to an adapted education (Ministry of Education and research, 2007, p. 76). By knowing the text well, the teacher will be able to see its opportunities and limitations and prepare questions that enhance the intended competencies. By finding examples of iconotext, intertextuality and symbolism, it will be easier to give concrete examples of how the book can be utilized to develop the pupils’ visual literacy and cultural awareness. It is important to include that when analysing a fictional text, there are multiple possible interpretations. As a result, there is no facet (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2012, p. 88).

3.1 Criteria for choice of picture book

When choosing an appropriate picture book to use as an example of how it can help develop pupils' visual literacy and cultural awareness, several books were considered based on certain criteria. First of all, the illustrations had to include details to be interpreted, hopefully in relation to the book's theme and message. This criterion served as a background when choosing to focus on symbolism in the analysis of the book. Secondly, it was important that the illustrations were able to challenge the verbal text in a way that can open up to wonder and curiosity. This led to the focus on the iconotextual factors in the analysis. And finally, the content of the story itself was very important, as not all books are able to communicate a clear cultural message.

After doing some research and with these three criteria in mind, I stumbled upon John Marsden and Shaun Tan's picture book, "*The Rabbits*". Both the author and the illustrator are from Australia and write about the colonization of the continent that happened in the 18th century, from the viewpoint of the colonized (Tan, n.d.). I found that it was a great example of a book dealing with cultural awareness because of its many intertextual references to historical events and cross-cultural experiences. As a result, intertextuality became a natural part of the analysis.

3.2 Contextual assessments

Contextual assessments are essential when conducting a qualitative document analysis, and several factors can be considered in the process of choosing the most beneficial sources. (Grønmo, 2016, p. 178) While there are many contextual assessments to consider, the assessments presented below will in this case be on the particular book analysed in this paper and its reliability and relevance.

3.2.1 Reliability

Reliability is assessed in relation to the purpose of the document and addresses whether the information presented is to be trusted. When assessing the document's reliability, it is important to ask if the chosen source is appropriate for what you intend to research. Furthermore, the content must be critically evaluated to see whether there is any incorrect information or academic weaknesses that may indicate that the information is unreliable (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2012, p. 90).

Due to its visual presentation and the important cultural questions that can be raised, “*The Rabbits*” can be considered an appropriate book to use when teaching visual literacy and cultural awareness. Even though the picture book met all the criteria listed above, there is one factor that can be considered problematic and that is important to be aware of. Marsden has made an attempt to present the Aboriginals’ story from their point of view, where the possibly problematic factor is that Marsden himself has an English-Australian background (Marsden, n.d.). He is in that case trying to write “the other side’s” story. This can of course be disputed, as he is writing about a culture and experience he does not have any personal experience with. In addition, an author is always subconsciously affected by his or her own cultural background, which might lead to misinterpretation when describing other cultures (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2016: 26). Still, looking closer at the short verbal text it is clear that what he is presenting is mostly facts; he is not actively trying to ascribe the Aboriginals specific feelings or cultural ways. Tan has emphasized that when creating the illustrations for the book, he felt that it was important to avoid any specific reference to the Aboriginal culture, as this would be problematic (Tan, 1998). By showing cultural awareness when creating the book, they have actively tried to avoid cultural stereotyping.

3.2.2 Relevance

“*The Rabbits*” was published in 1998, and is a very relevant book to use with pupils, even 21 years later. The reasons why is because it thematises issues that have been, and on many levels still are, existent in our world. Even though the book tells a story about the Aboriginals and Australia, the Europeans have, throughout centuries colonized a large majority of the world’s nations (Blakemore, 2019).

Colonization is considered history by many, as a wave of decolonization took place in the late 20th century. Even though colonization is not as prevalent as it once was, it is still present in our world today and very relevant when discussing culture (Quintero, 2012; United Nations, 2019). If disregarding the colonization, the book’s theme is still relevant as it can be linked to racial issues, repression, war and climate changes, to mention a few. The rabbits are white, sovereign creatures that overtake the land of the possums, trying to educate them in “their ways”, historically referred to as “the white man’s burden” (“White man’s burden”, 2010). Closely linked to this, the book thematises repression based on race, cognitive functions and culture, and can be generally associated with acts of war throughout world history.

Furthermore, the destruction, industrializing and pollution of the land can be linked to climate changes that are extremely relevant in our world today.

4.0 ANALYSIS OF THE RABBITS

4.1 Iconotext

4.1.1 Enhancing

“At first we didn’t know what to think. They looked a bit like us. There weren’t many of them. Some were friendly.” (Marsden & Tan, 1998a)



Illustration 1. The Rabbits. (Marsden & Tan, 1998b)

This is an example of an enhancing iconotextual relationship as the verbal text and the illustration are quite similar in meaning at first glance. The illustration supports the verbal text by both concretizing and at the same time offering an expansion of meaning when considering the details. When studying the iconotext closer, we might experience the modalities' relationship a bit different. When looking for details with potential meaning to the story, the

reader might notice the use of colours, the fingerprints on the soil or the difference in appearance between the rabbits and the possums. Furthermore, details such as flowers, birds, the wheel tracks and the old- fashioned vehicle can be regarded as relevant to the story. These details might not directly amplify the verbal text, but rather function as extra information or hints related to the mood, the theme, important symbolism or cultural differences. The question is whether the reader finds this information so significant to the meaning of the story that he or she experiences the iconotext as counterpointing, which might be the case. As there are no facets in interpretation, there is not only one correct way to categorize this iconotext.

“They brought new food, and they brought other animals. We liked some of the food and we liked some of the animals. But some of the food made us sick. And some of the animals scared us.” (Marsden & Tan, 1998a).

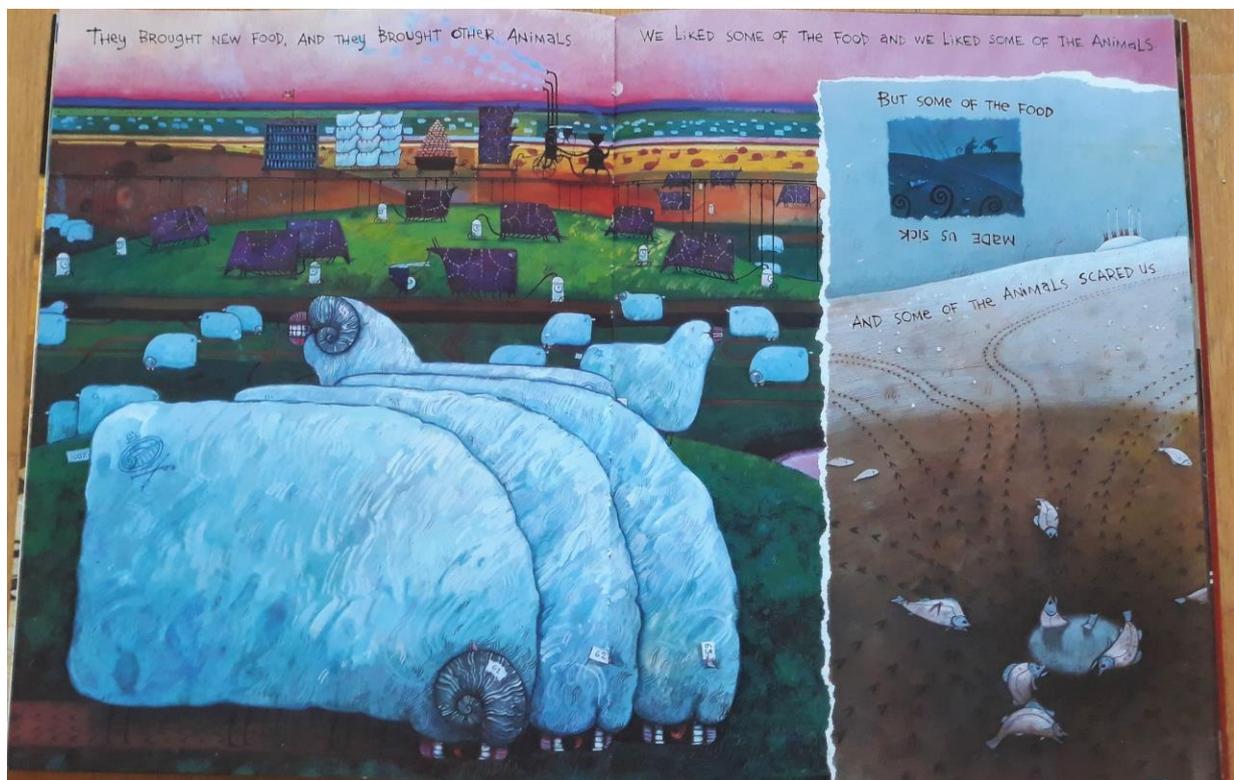


Illustration 2. The Rabbits. (Marsden & Tan, 1998b)

This double spread can be divided into two contrasting sides, showing the action on one side, and the consequence on the other. The part of the illustration picturing the “action” amplifies the verbal text by showing loads of food and animals stacked up, while the “consequence” side of the illustration underlines the other half of the verbal text. We see a rabbit handing a possum some kind of food with other possums seemingly lying on the ground with an empty bottle near them. Their fright for some of the animals is amplified by an image of the possums

hiding behind a rock, looking at the dry soil covered in animal tracks and dead fish. Again, whether or not this is an enhancing iconotextual relationship can be argued. There are several details to find, including stamps and numbered markings on the animals, tanks with clocks on them and giant rams functioning as grass clippers. If considering these details very significant to convey meaning, also this can be regarded as a counterpointing iconotext.

4.1.2 Counterpointing

“But our old people warned us: Be careful. They won’t understand the right ways. They only know their own country. More rabbits came.” (Marsden & Tan, 1998a).

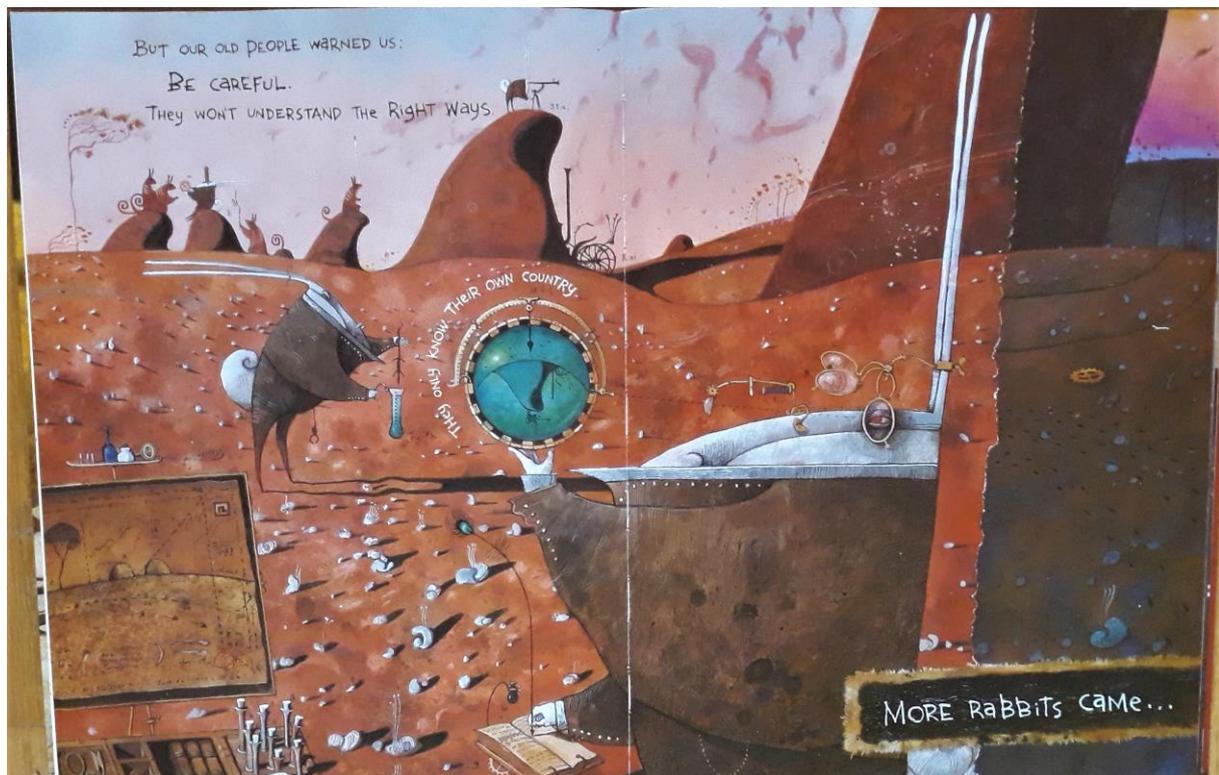


Illustration 3. The Rabbits. (Marsden & Tan, 1998b)

This is perhaps one of the most obvious counterpointing iconotexts in this book. The verbal text tells one part of the story, namely that the newcomers will not understand their way of living, while the illustration possibly functions as a reference to what the old people are worried about. The modalities are truly interdependent and use their respective strengths to communicate and convey meaning. Even though picture books always require both modalities to be in an interdependent relationship, their reliance can vary. Sometimes, the modalities communicate near identical information, but a counterpointing iconotext takes full advantage of the opportunities each of the modalities have to present the story. The illustration in *“The Rabbits”* does not only add a possible context to the old people’s statement, but includes

multiple details to be interpreted, such as sample glasses, fossils, numbers and mechanical parts.

“They didn’t live in the trees like we did. They made their own houses. We couldn’t understand the way they talked.” (Marsden & Tan, 1998a)

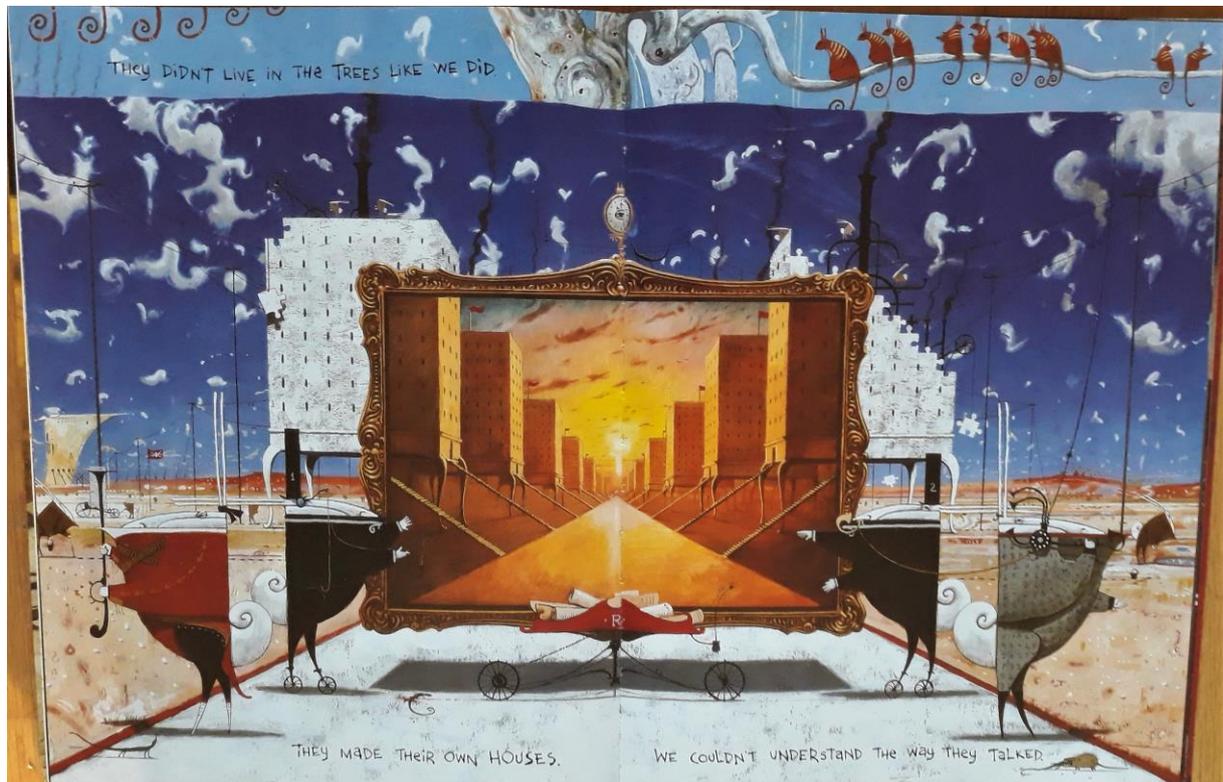


Illustration 4. The Rabbits. (Marsden & Tan, 1998b)

This double spread is another example of a counterpointing iconotext that contains a lot of visual details and require the reader to be attentive to piece it all together. The verbal text addresses the differences in lifestyle and language between the cultures, and while the illustration amplifies most of the verbal text, it also adds layers of details. By studying the visual elements, we see that they add relevant information to the story through the use of symbolism and contrasts. While the verbal text tells us that the rabbits made their own houses, the illustration shows us these somewhat special houses that look like furniture pieced together as a puzzle. It is doubtful that this representation of their houses is coincidental; it is more likely that they symbolize something that the reader must interpret. Furthermore, as mentioned when discussing the book’s relevance, the illustration can be seen as telling a story about climate changes. We see a rat eating a salamander and another one lying crushed. A small lake is about to dry out, somewhat similar to the dried out lake in illustration 2, and we see thick, black smoke coming out of pipes, polluting the area. Combing all the details creates

a broader understanding of the story and connects the different illustrations to give an entirety in regards to the theme and message. These small details in the illustrations are good examples of how iconotext works, where the meaning of visual elements throughout the book can be combined and tell a deeper story than the verbal text alone.

4.2 Intertextuality

4.2.1 The story itself

First of all, the story and events taking place in the book is an intertextual reference itself. It is based on a true story of what happened in Australia in the 17th century when the Englishmen started colonizing the continent (Genger, 2018). The verbal text is quite sparse, so it is mainly the illustrations that help us link the story more accurately to Australia and the Aboriginals. Even though the illustrations might give the reader a hint of the picture book's theme, there is a need for prior knowledge to connect the dots between the historical events that occurred and the picture book. If the reader is unfamiliar with the Aboriginals and the colonization, the resemblance to several other historical events is still present. Looking at the rabbits' clothes, weapons, technology, and how they treat the possums, one can easily relate the story to other acts of war in history.

4.2.2 E. Phillips Fox's "Landing of Capt. Cook at Botany Bay, 1770" (Fox, 1902).

The front cover is an illustration from the story in the book with the verbal text "They came by water" accompanying it. The resemblance between Tan's illustration and the painting by Fox is striking. We see the leader and his apparent subordinate pointing towards something in both pictures. Furthermore, both pictures include two figures in the distance on the right hand side, holding spears. A flag bearer is present in them both, followed by people/rabbits coming from small boats entering the shoreline. The clothing style of the people in Fox's painting and in Tan's illustration is very similar, but there are some apparent differences between the pictures as well. The most obvious difference is the size of the ship. Whereas Fox's ship is further away and looks quite small, the rabbits' ship in Tan's illustration is huge and dominates the double spread. The rabbit leader's hat is also much larger in scale compared to the hat of the leader in Fox's painting.

The similarity between these pictures does not seem to be accidental, but is rather a good example of how intertextuality works. The artist has been inspired by another work of art, and used his inspiration to create something new. As Fox's painting and Tan's illustration are visual representations and interpretations of the same historical event, namely the arrival of the Englishmen to Australia, both works of art include intertextual references.



Illustration 5. "Landing of Capt. Cook on Botany Bay, 1770". (Fox, 1902)



Illustration 6. The Rabbits. (Marsden & Tan, 1998b)

4.2.3 Rabbits

The way Tan has chosen to portray the figures in this book can be interpreted as both symbolism and as an intertextual reference to historical sources. When the Englishmen started colonizing Australia, they severely affected the life of the native population, the Aboriginals (Australians Together, n.d.). When the Englishmen about a hundred years later decided to release European wild rabbits into the Australian landscape, the consequences were devastating. The rabbits destroyed even more of Australia's flora and fauna and spread like a pest throughout the entire continent (National Museum Australia, n.d.). Tan has most likely included the rabbits as an intertextual reference to the history of rabbit invasion in Australia. Through the illustrations, he shows how the landscape is ruined and taken over by the rabbits. In one of the illustrations, he has presented the viewer with something that looks like a factory, where dozens of rabbits seem to be produced on an assembly line. This further underlines the prevalence of these animals.

4.3 Symbolism

4.3.1 Clocks

Clocks are an apparent symbol throughout the book. Even though they are perhaps most associated with the concept of time, they can also symbolize several other things, such as

automatics, mechanism and autonomous existence (Cirlot, 2001, p. 50). The latter symbolic meaning is especially interesting in relation to “The Rabbits”. In the book, we can find over 60 clocks in total spread around on different double spreads, which sends the message that they must mean something. The term “autonomous” is defined as “Not being controlled by others or by outside forces; independent.” (“Autonomous”, 2014). A definition we can ascribe the rabbits. They are in control and do not seem to be particularly affected by anything surrounding them. If assuming that the clocks symbolize an autonomous existence, this underlines the rabbits’ self-appointed superiority to the possums and creates a clear contrast between the two groups.

As mentioned, the clock can also, amongst other things, symbolize automatics and mechanism. One could argue that the recurrent clocks also bear these symbolizations. They take over, build huge houses put together by pieces of puzzles, expand their territory in a large scale and label animals with numbers. It almost seems like they are following a pre-set scheme, moving automatically and mechanically through the process.

4.3.2 Fingerprints and flags

Something you notice if you study the illustrations is the recurrence of fingerprints. They mainly occur on the untouched and unwrought soil, where the rabbits have not yet taken over. One possible explanation of why these fingerprints are present in the book can be that they serve as a symbol for the possums’ culture and environment. Everyone’s fingerprint is unique and a part of their identity, where the latter can be defined as “who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group that make them different from others [...]” (“Identity”, n.d.). The possums have lived on this land for a long time and might consider their environment as a part of who they are. If we then connect the dots between the fingerprints and identity to the differences between the possums and the rabbits, we see that there might be a connection here.

The rabbits and the possums have contrasting ways of living, and seemingly appreciate different things. While the possums live in the untouched nature, the rabbits build huge houses, destroy the grass fields and pollute the environment. A possible interpretation when linking the fingerprints, identity and the differences of the two groups, is to regard the fingerprints as a symbol of the possums’ identity. This is further underlined by the Aboriginal beliefs in real life, where the land is considered “[...] the core of all spirituality [...]” (Australian Museum, 2019), and most of the people are religiously connected to their land,

sea, other people and culture (Australian Museum, 2019). Therefore, it will be natural to suggest that the fingerprints symbolize the possums' culture, heritage and ancestry.

The illustrations where only the rabbits are portrayed do not include any fingerprints at all, but rather flags. While the fingerprints seem to be representing the possums, the flags seem to be representing the rabbits as their red flag is present in all the illustrations where we see them.

Flags represent a country or a group and are defined as a symbol ("Flag", n.d.). The rabbits' use of flags can reflect upon known European history between the 15th and 19th century, where flags were planted to establish territory and sovereign authority. Moreover, the Englishmen did plant several flags on the Australian land when they came (Mee, 2018, p. 7-10). By emphasizing the use of flags, as Tan has done in one of the illustrations, the sovereign authority is further underlined and highlights the rabbits' power in contrast to the possums' impotence.

4.3.4 Rabbits and possums

Tan's choice of portraying the Englishmen as rabbits are, as mentioned, possible to call an intertextual reference to the history of rabbit invasion. However, also their appearance can be considered symbolic as they are quite square shaped, with pointy angles. The square shape of the rabbits is impossible to ignore, and one of several interpretations is that their shape symbolizes their materiality in contrast to the possums' love of nature. The material world is often symbolized by squares, as most buildings and other human made things are based on a solid, square foundation. In the light of this symbolic reference, squares can also symbolize civilization, as cities are full of square structures while the nature mostly has different naturally shaped forms (Beyer, 2019). The possums, on the other hand, are round in shape and love their nature, and therefore serve as a contrast to the square rabbits and the potential meaning of them being materialistic.

5.0 DIDACTIC IMPLICATIONS

While the intention of working with the picture book is to enhance the pupils' visual literacy and cultural awareness, that does not mean that language learning is not part of it. English teachers are responsible to teach both language and culture, and by using picture books, it is possible to create a gateway where several competencies can be enhanced at the same time. Using picture books creates opportunities for implicit learning of grammar and vocabulary, where the illustrations often help the pupils understand the words in the verbal text. This association between word and image is very successful in acquiring new vocabulary (Drew & Sørheim, 2014, p. 160). In addition, a natural part of analysing and interpreting literature is to discuss the text and its possible meanings, thereby practicing their oral competence and communicative abilities. By using the language in different interesting and relevant situations, the pupils will be more likely to be able to communicate naturally and fluently (Drew & Sørheim, 2014, p. 55).

The approach to teach visual literacy and cultural awareness using *"The Rabbits"*, is based on communicative group work and class discussions. While the suggested activities are linked together as part of a bigger project with the picture book and related themes, they can be used separately with other related activities.

5.1 Introduction to activities

"The Rabbits" offers opportunities to enhance the pupils' visual literacy through its different types of iconotextual relationships, as well as opportunities to develop a cultural awareness through its cross-cultural theme and the questions that can be raised by reading it.

Before we address the visual aspects of this assignment, the first activity is to read the book and start a discussion towards the cultural aspects. The visual aspects will then be addressed by working with the picture book's different iconotextual relationships. As intertextuality and symbolism are closely linked to the understanding of iconotextual relationships, suggestions on how these aspects can be taught will be proposed. Teaching cultural awareness will also be an integrated part of interpreting the iconotexts, as the verbal text and several details found in the illustrations can be linked to culture. The aim of this section is to show how all the terms presented are connected, and that the pupils' visual literacy and cultural awareness can be developed by combining relevant activities.

5.1.1 Activity 1: Reading the book

We start by reading the picture book, both to experience the story and its illustrative art, but also as an introduction to the activities based on the book's theme. To get familiar with the story and the words that are used, one suggestion is to first let the pupils read the book individually, followed by them taking turns reading a double spread each to the class. This so-called "shared reading"; where the pupils are actively participating in telling the story, can be very motivating and enhances their competence in linking oral language and verbal text (Drew & Sørheim, 2014, p. 82). As the picture book consists of both verbal text and illustrations, the pupils are developing their visual literacy without focusing explicitly on the iconotextual relationships when reading and interpreting.

After reading the book, it will be beneficial to get the pupils to reflect upon their interpretation of the story and share their thoughts on possible themes and messages in the text. By giving them the opportunity to respond to what they just read and asking them to share their opinions of the text, they will experience that there are no facet answers (Bland, 2013, p. 32). The teacher can ask open questions that are linked to culture to get on the right track; *who do you think the rabbits and the possums are? What do you think this story is about? Why do you think the rabbits and the possums look different? Do they behave differently?* After discussing questions like this, the pupils' will hopefully move towards the theme of culture and the following activity can begin.

5.1.2 Activity 2: What is culture?

After examining the book closer, and leading the conversation towards the cultural aspects, it is important to introduce the concept of culture. We need to make the pupils aware of the width of the concept, but also apply one simplified definition to relate to when working with it. To make culture understandable for the pupils, it can be a good idea to start talking about their own culture. This can be done in many ways, where one example is to ask the pupils to think about the Norwegian culture. *What do you feel defines a Norwegian person? Do we have different cultures within Norway? How do you think people from other countries would define a Norwegian person?* With their understanding of culture and cultural differences, we can ask the pupils to take a closer look at the book. The questions asked in activity 1 served as an opener to the theme, and in this activity, they will be looking for details. They can be asked to find traces of culture in both the verbal text and the illustrations, focusing on the use of

words, details and symbols that can be linked to culture. Furthermore, they can point out differences between the rabbits and the possums that they believe are linked to cultural differences between the two groups.

5.1.3 Activity 3: An introduction to iconotext

Once the pupils are familiar with the story and the cultural theme, we can go deeper into the iconotextual relationships to see *how* the story is told. “*The Rabbits*” presents different iconotexts, where two examples of an enhancing and a counterpointing interdependence are given in the analysis. It would be a good starting point to challenge the pupils’ visual literacy by asking them to take a closer look at these double spreads, and to pay attention to what the verbal text tells us and what the illustration shows us. *Is the verbal text and the illustration telling the same story? Do we get more information from either the verbal text or the illustration? Do we need both to understand the story, or could we understand everything by only having the verbal text or the illustration present?* Even though the entire book thematises the meeting between two cultures, this is perhaps even more apparent in the mentioned double spreads, as both the illustrations and verbal texts clearly communicate this interaction.

Working with and discussing the double spreads would be a good introduction to an explicit approach to teach iconotextual relationships. The teacher can talk about how a story can be told in different ways, and teach the pupils about the different levels of interdependence that is possible. As mentioned under the definition of “iconotext”, a combination of theoretical input and practical work with the picture book is necessary to develop their visual literacy.

5.1.4 Activity 4: Intertextuality and symbolism

While the previous activity mainly touches on the surface of what iconotext is, the following suggestion goes deeper into each modality and their respective opportunities. This is where it is natural to present how intertextuality and symbolism can influence the modalities’ relationship, as they further explains the complexity an iconotext can embrace. When assessing intertextual- and symbolic references, the cultural aspects of the book become especially apparent. By expanding the pupils’ understanding of the complexity, they will develop their visual literacy and be able to understand multimodal texts in a deeper manner.

The teacher cannot expect the pupils to be familiar with “intertextuality” as a term, but it might prove useful to ask them questions that can prompt their knowledge of the interaction between different texts. This way, the teacher will get an understanding of the pupils’ prior

knowledge, and is able to use this to make the term understandable in relation to “*The Rabbits*”.

The term “symbolism” is perhaps more easily understood by the pupils, as this is a literary device they have been working with in school earlier. In addition, as varying symbols are used in all cultures, an understanding of the most central ones within their culture will have been acquired in an early age. Even though, it is a good idea to repeat the definition and highlight the importance of understanding symbols to interpret iconotexts and cultural connections (Bamford, 2003, p. 1). As when working with intertextuality, it is a good idea to activate the pupils’ prior knowledge by asking questions.

When defining the terms, a suggestion would be to explain how everyone is affected by what they see or read, and that people bring their experiences with them into the making and interpretation of texts. This applies to both intertextual- and symbolic references, as they both are heavily influenced by the creator’s cultural background. This explanation can be linked to their newly acquired knowledge about iconotexts, by reminding them of the different interpretations they had to the questions asked in activity 3. It is beneficial to include examples of intertextual references and symbols when explaining, to make it more concrete and understandable. As the pupils need to be challenged, the examples should not include too many examples from “*The Rabbits*”. It is better if the pupils understand how intertextuality and symbolism works and are able to find connections in the book themselves.

When applying their new knowledge to the interpretation of “*The Rabbits*”, there is a possibility that the pupils will not mention culture in relation to intertextual- and symbolic references. As this is one of the main aims working with the picture book, the teacher may have to ask open questions to help the pupils get started. This is where the teacher’s prior knowledge of the book is especially important, as he or she needs to know the book well to be able to help. Questions that may be useful are; *does the story seem familiar? Why do you think that the characters are presented as rabbits and possums? Do you think that their shape means anything? What is the purpose of all the mechanical parts? Have you noticed the fingerprints? What about all the numbers and letters present? Does the front page remind you of anything?* This might lead to them finding similar references as presented in this assignment’s analysis, but they might also find other interesting things to discuss further.

As everyone interprets things differently, and practical work reinforces their learning outcome, a good idea would be to let the pupils work in groups with a double spread each.

Their task would be to analyse the relationship between the modalities and interpret any potential symbolism and intertextuality found in the verbal text and/or the illustration. This activity will enhance their understanding of multimodal texts, and creates opportunities to teach and discuss cultural awareness. The activity can be altered in different ways and include several relevant cultural questions. The result is that the pupils are able to become more visually literate, develop their cultural awareness and at the same time practice their critical- and reflective thinking skills.

5.1.5 Activity 5: Cultural stereotyping

Considering that cultural stereotyping can be very negative, it is important that the pupils are aware of this problem. Even though stereotyping is a natural part of being human (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2016, p. 75), ascribing people characteristics based on generalizations is far from ideal. To confront this issue and avoid stereotyping people, it is important to step back and examine our assumptions about others. If we do not recognize the issues that arise by having prejudice opinions about other people, this can lead to an “us vs they” perspective (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2016, p. 75).

We can work with cultural stereotyping in the classroom to arise awareness of these issues, by using the picture book as a resource. First, by underlining that stereotyping is something everyone does. This will hopefully make it easier to engage the pupils, as they are explained that it is in fact normal. The teacher can ask the pupils to share their thoughts about the rabbits and the possums, alternatively Englishmen and Aboriginals, and explain why they are making these assumptions. *What are your assumptions based on? Do you identify more with the rabbits or the possums?* The latter question serves as an opening to discussing how we often favour our own culture and cultures similar to our own, which can lead to an interesting exchange of different views.

5.1.6 Activity 6: Examining cultural stereotypes

An interesting approach when working with the book is to discuss stereotyping, a highly relevant issue related to culture. One suggestion is to present different pictures of indigenous people, e.g. Aboriginals, Native Americans and Sami people wearing their traditional clothing and accessories, and ask the pupils to share their immediate thoughts on the peoples’ culture. Afterwards, we can show people from these cultures wearing their every-day outfits. This

could prove interesting and educational and will show the pupils how humans tend to judge entire cultures or groups of people based on sparse knowledge. It is important to talk about stereotyping with the pupils and explain why it is problematical, especially because it is prevalent in several English course books (Lauritsen, 2016). Furthermore, discussing how stereotypes arise can be an interesting topic for a classroom discussion.

Considering that the author and illustrator of *“The Rabbits”* do not have a known Aboriginal heritage, this is a matter to address with the pupils. As the creators of the picture book are writing about a traumatizing experience for the Aboriginals from their perspective, and as they are not part of that culture, this might rise some issues. It would be interesting to see if the pupils find this aspect problematic, based on the emphasis the picture book project has on stereotyping and the different cultural perceptions of the world. When looking for any potential problems connected to the creators’ lacking Aboriginal heritage, the pupils have to study the picture book’s modalities to see how the culture is portrayed. Are there any possible examples of cultural stereotyping? The teacher can be of some help here, carefully suggesting random details and questioning whether the pupils interpret this as stereotyping or not.

5.1.7 Activity 7: “Us vs they”- perspective

Part of stereotyping is the “us vs they” perspective, which is based on the prejudice and generalization of people different from our culture (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2016, p. 75). First, it would be a good idea to ask the pupils what they think of when they hear the phrase “us vs they”, before examining the picture book closer. *“The Rabbits”* has several interesting examples of this perspective to examine, for instance the use of “they”, “them” and “we”. One of the double spreads in the book also addresses this issue quite clearly, where the verbal text says; “But our old people warned us: Be careful. They won’t understand the right ways. They only know their own country.” (Marsden & Tan, 1998a). Even though the story is told from the perspective of the colonized, there is reason to believe that also the rabbits would refer to the possums the same way. This is something the pupils would be able to interpret and examine closer, and an idea is to present them with this statement: “[...] stereotypes arise in part when members of one culture regard their way of doing things as the way to do things and see other cultural ways of doing as less valid because they are foreign and different.” (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2016, p. 75) Following the presentation of this statement, one could ask the pupils to look for specific symbols representing the rabbits to see if there are any signs that they regard their cultural ways to be “the right way”. Other questions that can be

discussed is whether it is acceptable to distinguish between “us” and “they”, alternatively when this kind of distinction can be made. Is this kind of categorization dangerous?

6.0 SUMMARY

The aim of this assignment has been to emphasize the picture book's potential, using "*The Rabbits*" as an example of how a broader visual- and cultural understanding can be developed. Multiple advantages and opportunities in using picture books in general have been presented, where we see that several competencies can be practiced simultaneously. Some examples of how this can be done have been suggested, but only represent a handful of possibilities available.

Through this assignment, the importance and relevance of enhancing the pupils' visual literacy and cultural awareness has been pointed out, and I have argued that these competencies are inevitably linked to the understanding of literature and our world. Being visually literate and culturally aware does not only apply to reading picture books, but is important to interpret the world around us. The suggested activities meet several of the learning aims in the English curriculum, and gives the teacher the opportunity to integrate different linguistic-, visual and cultural aspects in their teaching. By working with this simultaneously, the pupils will get a greater understanding of how things are connected, and hopefully achieve a greater learning outcome.

While the focus has been on other aspects than explicit language teaching, discussing picture books and enhancing other important competencies enables the pupils to learn language implicitly. The examples of how "*The Rabbits*" can be utilized, has in this assignment been based on the book's apparent theme of culture, which serves as a great tool to teach cultural awareness. Considering that this book also contains multiple details and different iconotextual relationships, using this book to enhance the pupils' visual literacy gives many opportunities.

Some research studies have implied that teachers' may lack competence within visual literacy, and by presenting this assignment, my hope is that more teachers will open their eyes to using picture books in teaching.

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