A framework for creating and analysing wordless picturebooks

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ABSTRACT

Wordless picturebooks are texts that convey a narrative through a series of images with little or no written information and have gained popularity among academics, readers, and illustrators. These books have evolved from purely educational tools to complex and experimental works, attracting prominent artists and addressing challenging themes. Described as "crossover", wordless picturebooks frequently defy traditional age, addressing and attracting readers of all ages.

While research on wordless picturebooks is growing, literature generally focuses on wordless picturebooks as educational tools for a younger readership and the aesthetic qualities of the finished picturebook – rarely examining the complex process of creating a wordless, visual narrative. In this article we reflect on the creation of a wordless crossover picturebook to gain insight into this process from Maria van Os's perspective as a practising illustrator and illustration lecturer. The practice-based approach sheds light on the wordless crossover picturebook as an artefact and the process undertaken by an author-illustrator when creating a wordless narrative. A framework for creating wordless narratives was conceptualised by distilling the findings from the practice and framing them within narrative theory. The framework is intended to aid students, lecturers, and practitioners in creating and analysing wordless picturebooks.

Keywords: Wordless picturebooks, practice-based research, illustration research, wordless narrative framework.

Original research

Stories Worth Telling - crafting stories through the art of design

Introduction

Evelyn Arizpe (2013:165) describes wordless picturebooks as texts 'where the visual image carries the weight of the meaning' and in which the absence of words in itself carries meaning. Contemporary wordless picturebooks range from board books with simplistic narratives for toddlers to lengthy, challenging narratives that deal with abstract or complex themes more suited to older audiences (Walters 2012). While the absence of words has in the past delegated wordless picturebooks to an assumed audience of young children who cannot yet read words, Serafini (2014:24,26) argues that given the increasing complexity and quality of wordless picturebooks, this perception needs to be reconsidered.

Crossover picturebooks cater to both children and adults, operating within two age demographics simultaneously, often labelled as 'dual audience books' (Falconer cited by Bintz & Moini Chaghervand 2022:37). Terrusi (2018:1) refers to wordless picturebooks as 'a real crossover', as the visual narratives can be read and enjoyed by audiences of all ages. Mourao (2015:181) notes that many contemporary wordless picturebooks are crossover, as they are 'highly sophisticated pieces of literature'. Beckett (2018:212) explains that crossover picturebooks challenge the 'conventional codes and norms of the picturebook genre', often employing innovative narrative and discursive devices. Along with an increasing interest among readers from all age groups, wordless storytelling has attracted the attention of contemporary artists, with growing numbers of wordless picturebooks published worldwide in recent years (Arizpe 2021:264).

The study of picturebooks tends to be centred on their combination of images and text, as most experts in the field focus their studies on the interaction between these two modes of communication (Bosch 2018:191). However, Arizpe (2021:264) notes that the past decade has seen a rising interest in wordless picturebook research. The existing literature on wordless picturebooks deals predominantly with their use in an educational context, investigating their role in language development, storytelling, and the development of other skills within a classroom context (Arizpe 2013:164). More recent studies continue to explore the various educational applications of wordless picturebooks, such as reading interventions within low-literacy households and the use of picturebooks as an aid for migrant children learning a new language (Arizpe 2021:264-265). Arizpe (2014:103) notes that much work needs to be done in researching the 'history, categorisation, visual conventions, illustrators' views, and readers' responses' to wordless picturebooks.

Salisbury (2018:339) argues that most picturebook research presents a view 'from the outside, looking in', focusing on the published text and giving little consideration to how and by whom these texts are created. Similarly, Gannon and Fauchon (2018:216) note that within broader illustration research, the emphasis is primarily placed on the stylistic characteristics and the message conveyed by an illustration, rather than on the process and mechanisms involved in creating an illustrative work. The illustrator and illustrator's process are thus largely left without consideration, both within the greater field of illustration research and the current investigations of wordless picturebooks.

In her PhD study, Manolessou (2012:34) identifies a knowledge gap 'situated in the area of research carried out by picturebook illustrators, through their own individual practice, that offers a record, contextualisation, and critical reflection of that practice'. Salisbury (2018:347) notes that PhD research that is rooted in practice bridges a gap between makers and academics and contributes 'new knowledge and insight into the processes that underpin the art of the picturebook maker'. Maria van Os's practice-based PhD study[1] aimed to address the gaps in research by undertaking and documenting the process of making a wordless crossover picturebook, thus investigating the wordless format while simultaneously shedding light on the illustrator's process. The findings from the practice-based research were used to conceptualise a framework for creating a wordless narrative, combining the creative process undertaken by an author-illustrator with narrative theory, thus bridging the gap between theory and practice, and between academics and practitioners. The research thus arguably fits within the broader concept of the "Theoretical Turn", which has seen illustrators embracing theory, following on the earlier "Pictorial Turn", which saw the legitimisation of illustration within academia (Grove 2018:181). The framework serves as a guide for creating wordless narratives that visual storytellers can use and adapt, while simultaneously highlighting the unique characteristics and challenges of creating a wordless narrative.

We start this article by introducing wordless crossover picturebooks, briefly discussing the methodology of practice-based research utilised within Van Os's PhD, and unpacking the framework for creating and analysing wordless picture books. The discussion focuses specifically on the unique characteristics and challenges of creating a wordless narrative. We will also reflect on and context-ualise findings from the creative practice by employing narrative theory, drawing specifically on sources that analyse the narrative characteristics of picturebooks and wordless comics.

1. Wordless picturebooks – an overview

While wordless picturebooks were in use before the 1970s, they had purely pedagogical purposes and were intended for an audience of young children (Beckett 2021:81). This has shifted significantly in the past decades, as Terrusi (2018:4) notes that the 'contemporary wordless children's book is … one of the lively and continually changing heirs of the many "silent" narrations by images which have always characterised man's expression'. These picturebooks have moved away from the purely educational function of their earlier counterparts and are embraced by crossover audiences, while contemporary artists are increasingly experimenting with the exciting storytelling possibilities that wordless picturebooks offer (Beckett 2012:82-83).

The majority of wordless picturebooks are not entirely wordless, and at the very least, contain the name of the author, a title, and peritextual elements, while others may contain a blurb, summary, or teaser (Serafini 2014:24). In instances where written text is so limited, it assumes a particularly crucial communicative role in identifying the work and defining the focus or topic (Becket 2012:116; Serafini 2014:24). Artists working on wordless narratives often utilise every aspect of the peritext[2] in the storytelling, using it to provide clues to decoding the narrative, such as providing the name of a character, an emotion, a timeframe, an event, or genre (Beckett 2012:117; Walters 2012). The visual narrative often begins on the cover and unfolds with each turn of the page. While many wordless narratives employ large images which occupy full spreads like those typically found in picturebooks, a common feature of contemporary wordless picturebooks is their crossover with comics and graphic novels, with the boundaries between the genres becoming increasingly blurred (Salisbury & Styles 2012:98; Walters 2012:[sp]). This includes using gutters, panels, and other narrative devices traditionally associated with the comic book genre (Serafini 2014:24).

Terrusi (2018:9) argues that wordless picturebooks offer 'precise paths of meaning set forth by the author, often on several levels, which the reader must follow, using – often openly declared – clues, in the several readings required of this type of book, a synthetic and yet complex form of poetics, just like poetry'. Wordless picturebooks tend to attract artists and illustrators who are interested in experimenting with visual perception and the narrative challenges the format presents (Terrusi 2018:9). Salisbury and Styles (2012:97) note that 'wordless picturebooks require detailed planning as the author becomes director, stage manager and actor in a theatrical production'. Notably, a significant amount of wordless picturebooks are

authored by a single individual, with some author-illustrators specialising in this type of book (Beckett 2012:83). Mallan (2018:12) defines the term 'author-illustrator' as 'an individual who writes and illustrates with equal or varying proficiencies of skill, creativity, and ingenuity'. Internationally recognised author-illustrators of wordless picturebooks include Shaun Tan, David Weisner, Raymond Briggs, Mitsumasa Anno, Shirley Hughes, Quentin Blake, Tord Nygren, Istvan Banyai, Juan Gedovius, Suzy Lee, and Bill Thomson, to name a few (Arizpe 2013:164).

David Weisner (1992) argues that the reader's experience of the wordless picturebook differs from a regular picturebook because 'there is no author's voice telling the story. Each viewer reads the book in his or her own way ... I don't have to concern myself about whether the reader's interpretation of each and every detail is the same as mine'. Similarly, Tan (2009) believes that wordless narratives compel readers to fill the silence with their own interpretations and narratives. The author-illustrator's experience of creating a wordless picturebook is arguably a unique one – the format allows for self-expression, but presents the artist with the challenge of creating a coherent narrative in the absence of written text while remaining open to the reader's interpretation. Scanu (2021:2) notes that constructing a wordless narrative relies heavily on visual means; however, few studies discuss the medium-specific choices made by author-illustrators when constructing the narrative. By engaging in and documenting the artistic practice of wordless picturebook development and distilling it into a framework, Van Os aimed to shed light on the author-illustrator's process and the particular challenges of creating a wordless narrative.

2. Research methodology

The study employed a practice-based methodology, defined by Skains (2018:86) as a creative act 'designed to answer a directed research question about art or the practice of it, which could not otherwise be explored by other methods'. While it is somewhat difficult to define, practice-based research is distinguished by the creation of an artefact, whereby the process of 'making, reflecting and evaluating' feeds back into the artefact itself (Candy & Edmonds 2018:65). The artefact cannot be separated from the creative process, and forms an integral part of the research process, resulting in knowledge that is 'contained and described within a creative work' (Gannon & Fauchon 2021:22).

The research was guided by Skain's (2018) four-step practice-based process, namely establishing the research problem, conducting background research,

conducting empirical research while continuing contextual research, and forming an argument leading to the exegesis. For the purposes of Van Os's study, this was adapted into a three-phased process, namely conducting background research, the creative practice, and the post-practice analysis. This article deals predominantly with the outcomes of the third phase, which encompasses the reflection on the practice, and the conceptualisation of a framework for creating a wordless narrative. The creative practice entailed creating a wordless crossover picturebook from the initial concept to the finished artefact, while constantly documenting, reflecting and doing further research when required. As a picturebook illustrator, Van Os has worked on commercial picturebooks which combine words and images to convey a story. Having had no experience with wordless narratives, Van Os employed narrative theory (or narratology) to guide the creation of a wordless picturebook.

According to Kovac (2018:409), 'picturebook research benefits from narratological investigation because it is well-suited to clarifying specific multimodal configurations of the picturebook and offers a theoretical frame which explains its unique and manifold structure, its potentials, and its relationships with other kinds of narratives'. Similarly, Gannon and Fauchon (2021:26) argue that the 'the construction and delivery of narratives is a highly skilled endeavour … it requires much deliberation, planning and development, both intellectually and through creative practice'. Narratology is a semiotics-based discipline exploring how narrative is structured and how meaning-making functions (Narancic Kovac 2018:409). While they share a basic structure, narratives differ in how they convey meaning, and narratology describes how medium-specific strategies are employed to express meanings (Narancic Kovak 2018:409). Due to the crossover between wordless picturebooks and comics, which Postema (2014:318) notes are at times 'barely distinguishable from one another', it is important to consider the theory of narrative as it is applied to both mediums. Drawing on the work of Nikolajeva and Scott (2001) in picturebooks and Mikkonen (2012; 2015; 2017) in comics, Van Os derived seven narratological concepts that apply to both mediums, namely temporality, focalisation, characters, events, setting, graphic style, and peritext. These concepts were used to guide the wordless picturebook development to ensure that the narrative is well-considered and coherent, and they proved to be so integral to the practice that they became the building blocks for the proposed framework. The following section unpacks the framework and defines and describes the narratological concepts and their relevance to constructing a wordless narrative.

3. The wordless narrative framework

The development of the framework was approached from Van Os's perspective as a practising illustrator and illustration lecturer. It was conceptualised as a tool that students and practitioners can use and adapt to their practice when developing and constructing a wordless narrative. The framework is based on Van Os's process of creating a wordless picturebook while assuming the role of author-illustrator. However, in order to account for the individual nature of creative practice, the framework is designed to be flexible and adaptable to be incorporated within an existing practice.

Creating a wordless narrative presented marked shifts from Van Os's experience as a commercial picturebook illustrator. Within picturebook illustration, an illustrator is most often provided with a manuscript and brief. The characters, settings, and graphic style are then developed (typically in a sketchbook), followed by layouts and storyboarding, while the visual elements continue to be developed and refined. Finally, the completed and approved layouts are executed, scanned, and compiled into a book format. The process involves external input, most often from a publisher or editor, who guides the process with regular feedback.

The main observable shifts in the practice when working on a wordless picturebook were the absence of a manuscript and the lack of feedback, as the role of author-illustrator allowed for an independent, self-directed process. The manuscript provides the basis and guide for the narrative development for everything from characters to page layout. Additionally, words aid the interpretation and continuity of a picturebook narrative. As Tan (2009) notes, 'words have a remarkable gravitational pull on our attention, and how we interpret attendant images'. The narrative development thus lacked a starting point in the form of a pre-existing story, and the duration of the narrative and sequencing of images were unknown, as they did not have a pre-determined limit or structure. The lack of words to aid reader interpretation made the narrative development more challenging, as the clarity of each individual image and the transitions from one image to the next had to provide a coherent and consistent narrative thread for the reader to follow.

In the framework depicted in Figure 1, the process of wordless picturebook development is divided into four stages, depicted as large light grey overlapping circles – the basic story development (which took the place of a manuscript), discourse development, storyboarding, and final execution. The first and second stages are based on the distinction between story and discourse that exists within
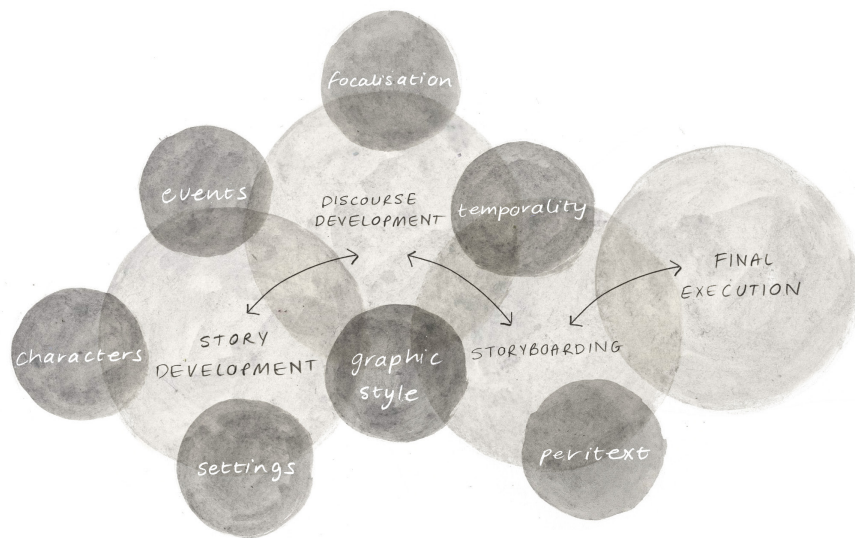
FIGURE **Nº 1**

The Wordless Narrative Framework, 2023. Maria van Os.

narrative theory. Stephens (2010:52) explains that 'story' refers to characters, settings, and the sequence of events, whereas the 'discourse' is 'the complex process of encoding that story which involves choices of vocabulary, of syntax, the presentation of time and space, the order of presentation', as well as how the narrating voice is situated, and how the character's point of view is constructed. Story and discourse development was followed by storyboarding, which involved visually plotting the narrative before executing the final images.

Within the creative practice, the narrative concepts that are attributed to story and discourse were intuitively incorporated into the corresponding stages of wordless picturebooks development. The narrative concepts, depicted in Figure 1 as smaller dark grey circles, are distributed based on their relevance to the various stages of wordless picturebook development. The creative practice was fluid and iterative, moving between the various stages of narrative development through trial and error. The framework depicts the creative practice as following consecutive stages; however, the stages and narrative concepts overlap, allowing movement back and forth between stages and reconsidering the narrative concepts at various stages.

3.1 Story development

FIGURE **Nº 2**

Title page spread, 2023, Maria van Os.

The first step in developing a narrative is establishing an idea or set of ideas from which the narrative can be constructed. The story's development primarily focuses on establishing the events, characters and setting. The nature of the story often becomes the determining factor in the choice of format. Postema (2018:59) notes that 'silence … is always a choice made by the creator'. Similarly, Tan (2009) states that 'the kind of stories we want to tell, or are able to tell, end up being realised in an unusual form; they often demand an experimental approach, and the artist has to do what the idea tells him or her to do'. Author-illustrators often choose the wordless format to challenge their practice, or to bring specific topics or themes into focus (Postema 2018:59). The story concept should therefore have some relevance to wordless storytelling through theme, genre, or the specific nature of a character or environment. For instance, Tan's The Arrival (2006) features a migrant character in a foreign land. *Small Things* (2021) by Mel Tregonning tackles the topic of childhood anxiety, in which the protagonist keeps his fears a secret, while JiHyeon Lee's *Pool* (2015) takes place underwater. Inspired by these examples, Van Os elected to focus the wordless narrative on her childhood immigrant experience from Russia to South Africa, which left her almost entirely silent for a year as she couldn't speak or understand English. Intertwined with her migrant experience was that of a bird, the Willow Warbler (Figure 3), which migrates along a similar route. The two protagonists of the wordless narrative are thus unable to speak, as one is an immigrant in a new language environment, and the other is a bird (Figure 2), linking the story conceptually to the wordless format.
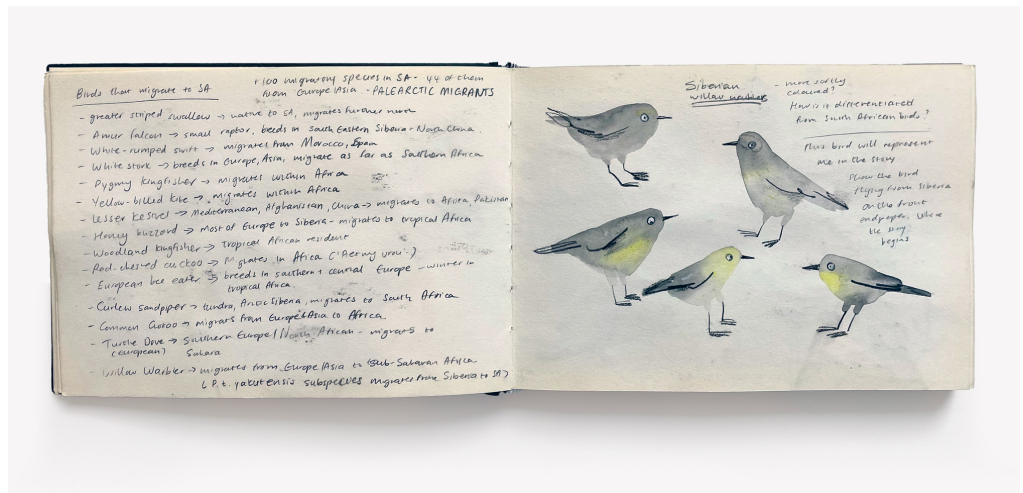
FIGURE **Nº 3**   ‹

Sketchbook image, 2023. Maria van Os.

3.1.1 Events

According to Köppe (2014:103), 'a narrative is a text that presents two (or more) events temporally ordered and meaningfully connected'. The presence of a sequence of events are thus vital to a narrative. Köppe (2014:103) further elaborates that 'to say that an event occurs is to say that something happens'. Events are intrinsically linked to characters and settings, as they often impact or involve the characters and their environments. Within the framework, events span both the story development and discourse development phases because the events that are established in the story development phase may be ordered into meaningful sequences in the discourse development phase. The development of Van Os's wordless narrative entailed several transitional events, such as interactions at school and the central event of the physical migration between countries. While this was established during the story development phase, the order and number of events and the visual prominence given to each event were established in the discourse development phase.

3.1.2 Characters

FIGURE **Nº 4**   ‹

Sketchbook image, 2023. Maria van Os.

Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer (2014:139) note that literary character is considered critically important in modern narratology, both within adult and children's literature. Character development is often one of the first aspects of narrative developed when working on a picturebook, and establishing the characters visually can entail various methods and approaches. Characters can be people, animals or animated objects – even an abstract shape is capable of becoming a character in a visual narrative 'provided that it behaves to some extent like a person, can speak or think, or engages in goal-oriented action' (Mikkonen 2017:183). Within wordless narratives in particular, characters serve the purpose of aiding narrative continuity. A central character or a group of continuing characters thus appear throughout the narrative and become a basic tool for maintaining coherence and continuity, creating a visual bridge between images (Mikkonen 2017:90-91). To successfully create this visual bridge, the character must have an unchangeable visual trait that distinguishes them from other characters, providing a consistent sense of identity for the entire narrative duration (Mikkonen 2017:185).

In the absence of written text, character development becomes purely visual. The spatial positioning of a character and their visual dynamic in relation to other characters can reveal psychological relationships, comparative status and attitudes (Nikolajeva & Scott 2001:83). The personality traits and characteristics of a character, as well as their inner psychological landscape can be communicated through
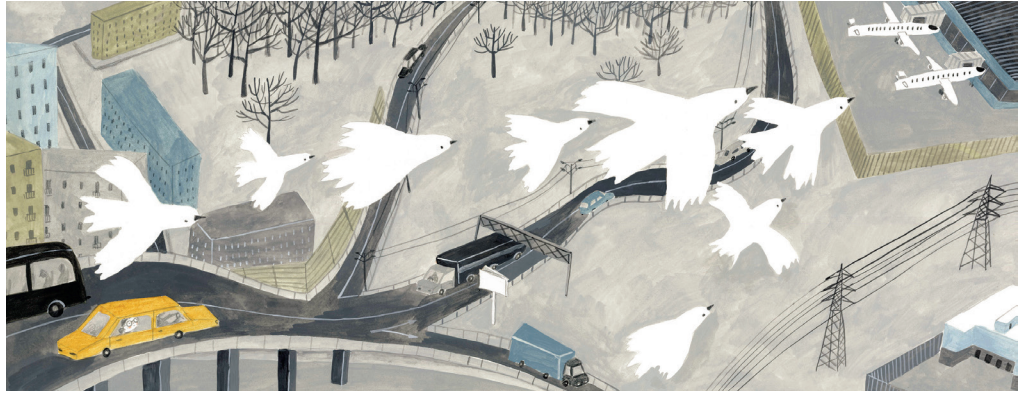
FIGURE **Nº 5**

Wordless picturebook spread, 2023. Maria van Os.

postures, gestures and facial expressions (Nikolajeva & Scott 2001:82). According to Mikkonen (2017:107), 'the mere depiction of a character's action or movement … already provides the reader with much information about the character's experience, intentions, and perception of the world'. Within Van Os's narrative, the central characters are a childhood version of the author-illustrator (Figure 4) and a bird character embarking on a parallel migration (Figure 2, Figure 5). While there are examples of wordless narratives with a central character that is not human, such as the paper boat in Peter van den Ende's *The Wanderer* (2020), Van Os felt that a human character was necessary, because she wanted to utilise gestures, facial expressions, and body posture as communicative tools in the absence of verbal description or dialogue.
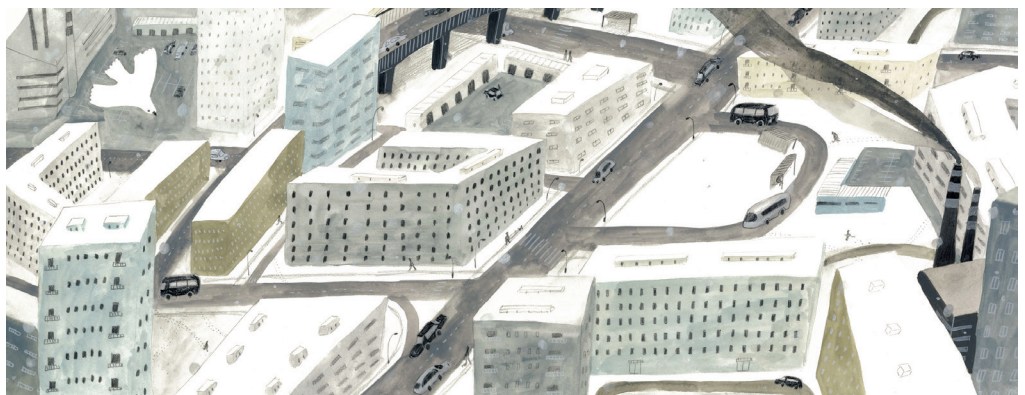
3.1.3 Setting

FIGURE **Nº 6**

Wordless picturebook spread, 2023. Maria van Os.

Visual narratives are particularly effective at conveying settings and spatial configurations and communicating the nature of the world where the story takes place (Ryan 2014). At their simplest, settings can provide a time and place for the plot; however they can also indicate the passing of time (through changes in lighting and seasons), enhance characterisation, set the mood, and provide information that is vital to narrative progression (Nikolajeva & Scott 2001:61, Nikolajeva 2010:33). At their most complex, settings can move into the foreground of the storytelling and function as a character (Nikolajeva & Scott 2001:72). In wordless narratives, it is crucial to consider how a scene is cropped, balanced, and positioned, as this influences a reader's perception and sense of their position in the fictional world (McCloud 2006:19). For instance, the use of frames impacts the reader's relationship to the scene – while frames create distance between the reader and scene, the absence of a frame invites the reader into the picture and allows the setting to merge with the reader's world (Nikolajeva & Scott 2001:62; McCloud 2006:164).

Wordless picturebooks take vastly different approaches to setting. Some rely on minimal settings, such as Issa Watanabe's *Migrants* (2020), which focuses on a group of animal characters suffering through a harsh migration experience on a mostly black backdrop, with very few contextual details in the landscape. However, *The Arrival* (2006) and *The Wanderer* (2020) rely on highly intricate, surreal and constantly changing settings to aid the storytelling and narrative progression. In Van Os's narrative development, the setting became integral, as the change in environment between the two countries offered a stark visual contrast. The focus was therefore on creating detailed environments, highlighting the visual change from a snowy city in Russia (Figure 6) to a summery suburban landscape in South Africa (Figure 7), centering the visual storytelling on finding one's place in a new landscape.

FIGURE **Nº 7**

Wordless picturebook spread, 2023. Maria van Os.

3.2 Discourse development

According to Tan (2002), 'what is original is not the ideas themselves, but the way they are put together'. The ideas generated in the story development phase are further conceptualised, sequenced and assembled in the discourse development phase. While discourse development is fluid and can move between concepts, this stage within the framework focuses primarily on focalisation, temporality, and graphic style.

3.2.1 Focalisation

Focalisation, a term coined by Gerard Genette, refers to the perspective or point of view from which a narrative is conveyed and is defined as the 'restriction of narrative information' to the point of view of a narrator, character(s) or other entities within the narrative (Niederhoff 2013). Nikolajeva and Scott (2001:118-119) argue that images have a limited capacity to portray focalisation and are best suited to convey an omnipresent or general point of view that lacks an individual perspective. However, this idea is contested by Mikkonen (2017:165), who argues that there are several techniques to portray focalisation visually, including 'different formal choices with regard to the position, angle, field (or scope), distance from the regarded object(s), depth, and focus of vision—the latter involving, for instance, foreground-background relations, level of specificity, and detail'. Details such as the positioning of a character's gaze and point of view, the use of optical effects (such as blurring), and spatial organisation can thus indicate a specific character's involvement in the narrative.

According to Mikkonen (2012:76), a consistent focalised entity becomes central to understanding focalisation within wordless narrative. The entity could be a character, landscape, object, or building that is consistently repeated 'from one moment to another, being embedded in a setting and engaging in action' and thus perceived by the reader as conveying a point of view (Mikkonen 2012:76). Within Van Os's narrative development she relied on the notion of the consistent focalised entity, as both the girl and bird characters are repeated on each spread. The narrative was developed from the perspective of the bird character as focaliser. Therefore, the images were drawn from the bird's perspective (Figure 5, Figure 6, Figure 7), with the majority of the landscapes shown as aerial views from above. Additionally, the bird appears in the foreground of every scene, while the girl appears in the background, thus making the bird more prominent and indicating to the reader that the girl is viewed from the bird's perspective.

3.2.2 Temporality

FIGURE **Nº 8**

Sketchbook image, 2023. Maria van Os.

Temporality is the primary organisational principle of narrative which presupposes the presence of the main components of a plot (the introduction, compilation, climax, and resolution) and the cause-and-effect relationship between actions and events (Nikolajeva 2010:29). Temporality within wordless narratives is primarily concerned with establishing connections between consecutive images, and the passing of time between images. Lamothe (2019:81) notes that visual narratives move at varying rates and 'between one panel and the next, a fraction of a second, an hour, a week, or a year may pass'. Author-illustrators often employ panels to sequence the temporal progression and vary the narrative pace within a wordless narrative. McCloud's (2006:15) classification of various panel transitions varies from 'moment to moment' transitions, which show a single action split between multiple panels, to 'scene to scene' transitions, which take place over significant distances of time or space. Typically, the temporal progression of a visual narrative speeds up in a sequence of smaller panels and slows down with larger images (McCloud 2006:37). Additionally, the passing of time can be indicated visually by utilising images of clocks, calendars, changing seasons, light and shadow, pictures within pictures, and details in the landscape (Mikkonen 2017:40, Nikolajeva & Scott 2001:139). The illusion of motion, which progresses in space and time, can indicate temporal progression, with the position, repetition, rhythm, and sequencing of images indicating movement and progression in time (Narancic Kovac 2018:413; Schwarcz 1982:23).

Within the framework, establishing the temporal progression of the narrative spans both the discourse development and storyboarding phases as events are sequenced, and the time elapsed between events is established and indicated. In Van Os's practice, much consideration was given to the duration of events and how including certain events may aid or hinder the temporal progression (some early experiments can be seen in Figure 8). Within the storyboarding phase, establishing temporality, therefore, became a central consideration, as the transitions between images or frames play a significant role in the temporality of wordless picturebooks. The temporal progression of the narrative was intentionally somewhat ambiguous, showing sequences of events represented as large illustrations on double-page spreads that may be separated by significant periods of time, with the characters maintaining continuity. In contrast, significant moments in the narrative are represented as sequences of panels portraying a single action to draw the reader's attention to the event (Figure 9).
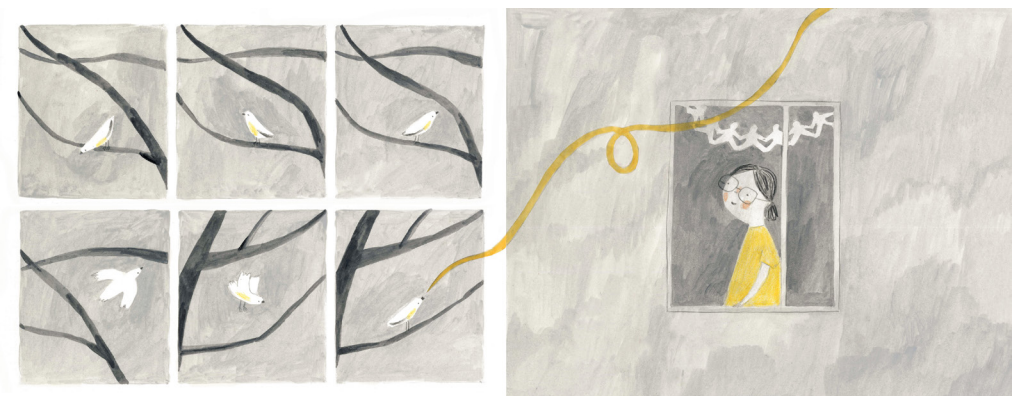

FIGURE **Nº 9**   ‹

Wordless picturebook spread, 2023. Maria van Os.

3.2.3 Graphic style

Visual mediums such as picturebooks and comics use images in a way that is instrumental to narratological meaning. Therefore, a narratological approach to these mediums must consider the image's contribution to the overall meaning. Mikkonen (2017:112) conceives the term "graphic style" as one of the dimensions within the broader definition of style, referring to stylistically relevant choices such as the types of visuals, drawing techniques, and their combined effects within the narrative. Graphic style is not automatically assumed to originate from the artist and can be attributed to the characters and entities within the narrative (Mikkonen

2017:112). Shifts in style (which can manifest in variations in colour or line use, for instance) can thus be attributed to shifts in the narrative and could be used to highlight a change in a character's perspective, or a shift to a different storyline (Mikkonen 2017:115). The choice of graphic style contributes significantly to characterisation and can communicate a character's experiences, perceptions, and mental state (Mikkonen 2017:136). Thus, graphic style combines a 'potential means of narration, perspective-taking (from without or within the depicted world), and the creator's subjective expression' (Mikkonen 2017:124).

FIGURE **Nº 10**   ‹

Sketchbook image, 2023. Maria van Os.

As wordless narrative communication is (almost entirely) visual, graphic style development can extend to all of the phases of narrative development. The way images in the narrative are drawn and what they show is vital to the narrative communication. Therefore, graphic style can be continuously revised as other narrative concepts develop. Within Van Os's practice, the graphic style was established through a process of medium experimentation in the story and discourse development phases and further revised during the storyboarding phase. The way characters are drawn, how they are depicted, the colour schemes and mark-making were tested and altered on multiple occasions (Figure 8, Figure 10) to establish a style which communicated the maker's perspective (as the story is autobiographical) with entirely new ways of drawing that communicated the story in an interesting and coherent way. For instance, while Van Os does not normally draw landscapes, the nature of the narrative made physical locations important to depict, and the process therefore involved developing intricate settings (Figure 5, Figure 6, Figure 7).
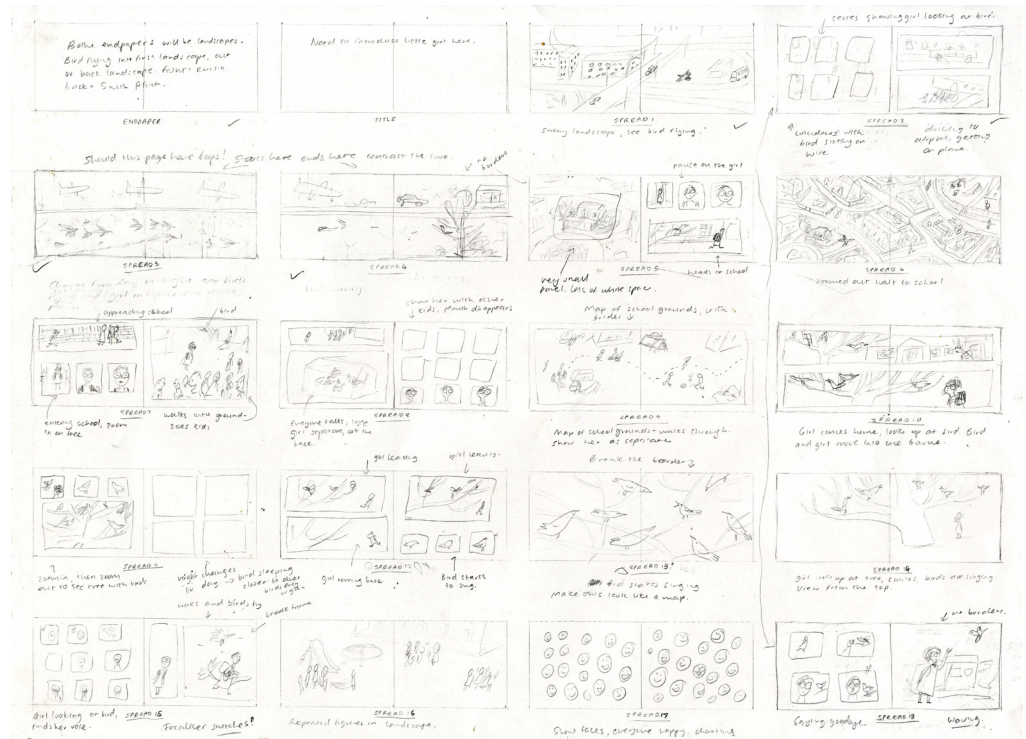
3.3 Storyboarding

FIGURE **Nº 11**

Storyboard for *I'm like a Bird*, 2023. Maria van Os.

According to Salisbury (2004:81), the biggest challenge of creating a picturebook is to 'edit down from an excessive amount of words and pictures to a ruthlessly trimmed, manageable and well-structured sequence'. Storyboarding is an integral part of wordless narrative development, in which the author-illustrator determines the key elements and how they will be distributed within a set number of pages. The timing of creating a storyboard can vary greatly, depending on the nature of the practice – for instance, in Van Os's experience of commercial picturebook development, a storyboard may be one of the first deliverables. The storyboard can be developed before or after discourse development, as the two phases overlap significantly; however, in the case of Van Os's practice, all the discourse elements need to be developed before sequencing them in a storyboard. Along with temporality and graphic style, peritext becomes a key consideration of the storyboarding phase.

3.3.1 Peritext

Genette (cited by Pantaleo 2018:38) defines paratext as the threshold, an 'undefined zone between the inside and outside' of a book. The paratext is divided into the epitext and peritext, the former referring to texts and writings outside of the book (such as book reviews and any external material pertaining to the book), while the latter is located within the physical book (Pantaleo 2018:38-39). Within picturebooks, the peritext refers to all the elements of the book which are not considered to be part of the primary narrative, such as the cover, endpapers, dust jacket, and title page, as well as the physical attributes of the picturebook, such as format and size (Nikolajeva & Scott 2001:241). Within picturebooks, the peritext often becomes an integral part of the storytelling – this is particularly true of wordless picturebooks, in which the written narrative does not mark the beginning of a story, and the peritext is often the only source of written information (Beckett 2012:116). Written elements such as the title, author's preface or afterword[3], reviews and publisher's notes can contribute to the reader's interpretation of the wordless narrative. Peritextual elements can thus contribute to a reader's interpretation and understanding of the text by providing clues about plot events, introducing characters and settings, and establishing a particular atmosphere or mood (Pantaleo 2018:47).

FIGURE **Nº 12**

Title page, 2023. Maria van Os.

Within the framework, the development of the peritext is linked to the storyboarding phase. From the experience gained by Van Os working within the South African children's book publishing industry, it is generally required to include all the elements of a book within the storyboard. This allows the author-illustrator to

conceptualise the interaction and contribution of the peritextual elements to the primary narrative. Within Van Os's narrative development, the peritext was given more consideration due to its potential to enhance the reader's understanding of the text. This included the choice of a long title (*I'm Like a Bird – An Immigrant Story*), which serves the dual purpose of introducing the two characters and contextualising the book as a journey narrative. The narrative begins on the cover, and the visuals on the endpapers and title page reinforce the connection between the characters. At the same time, a short epilogue positions the story as an autobiography and identifies the two countries and the two primary characters (Figure 12).

3.4 Final execution

Following the discourse development and storyboarding, the final images are executed in the author-illustrator's chosen mediums and techniques, according to the selected graphic style. The process can shift back and forth between the final execution and the previous phases of narrative development. In Van Os's creative practice, there was significant overlap between the storyboarding and final execution, and the storyboard was amended on several occasions as new discoveries were made while working on the final spreads. For instance, some additional settings needed to be developed and contextualised within the storyboard before execution. When working on commercial projects, Van Os does not typically execute spreads sequentially; however, within the wordless picturebook development, it was discovered that working on consecutive spreads ensured that the transitions between spreads were clear and coherent. Once the final images are complete, they are compiled (most often digitally) into a completed book.

The proposed framework is fluid in nature, and the phases and narratological concepts that become central to each phase can be shifted and adapted to the individual practice of a specific author-illustrator or the demands of a particular wordless narrative. Furthermore, while it is conceptualised from the perspective of an author-illustrator who takes complete creative control of the narrative development, the framework could be adapted and re-shaped to include a collaborator, such as a writer, or feedback loops, should a publisher be involved. For instance, while it was not relevant in the context of this study, the final execution phase may be further expanded or followed by a phase which includes various publishing processes.

Conclusion

Wordless picturebooks are a simultaneously challenging and fascinating format, crossing audience ages and language barriers and garnering interest from both academics and artists. With most existing studies focusing primarily on the potential educational applications of wordless picturebooks, or the aesthetic attributes of the finished artefact, the perspective of wordless picturebook creators is underrepresented. The practice-based research undertaken in Van Os's PhD study explores the nature of wordless picturebooks, while illuminating the author-illustrator's process of constructing a wordless narrative. As noted by Skains (2018:86), the outcome of practice-based research reveals 'knowledge that has remained implicitly within the artist, made explicit and seated within the context of the scholarly field'. The Wordless Narrative Framework presented in this paper merges the experience and knowledge of an illustrator. It frames it within narrative theory to better understand both the author-illustrator's process and the finished artefact of the wordless picturebook. Gannon and Fauchon (2021:28) assert that theories of narrative 'provide an intellectual framework through which to understand the mechanisms in operation within specific narratives. This is a useful tool that can help inform the illustrator-storyteller's individual practice and visual work. The framework thus provides a practical guide for wordless narrative development and can be utilised and adapted as a practical tool for wordless narrative creation by author-illustrators, students and academics, as well as a tool to analyse existing books.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Van Os's practice-based thesis is titled *A practice-based investigation of the illustrator's process in the creation of a South African, wordless crossover picturebook*, and was supervised by Dr Adrie Haese and Prof. Deidre Pretorius.

2.   Within picturebook publishing and analysis, the term 'peritext' encompasses the cover, endpapers, title pages, and other components typically seen as separate from the main narrative (Nikolajeva 2001:241).

3.   These can be found in authorial wordless picturebooks such as in *The paper boat: A refugee story* by Thao Lam (2020).

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