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Children's Picturebooks as cultural and geographic products: actors of spatialities, generator of spaces

Christophe Meunier

Abstract

The work presented in this paper fits in the field of cultural geography and hopes to prove that there exists a spatial turning point as defined by Edward Soja in 1996, which will allow a further look into societies, analyzing them by means of the cultural objects that they produce.
Children's picturebooks, these books conceived for the young public which combine images, props, and very often text in a relationship of interdependence, constitute the objects of this research work.
Drawing from a body of narrative, iconotextual picture books published in France between 1919 and 2012, this paper intends to demonstrate that the interdependence among text, pictures and props generates and imagines not only space for the reader but also a spatial intentionality, a transmission of living such as envisioned by the author-illustrator.
Another part of this paper, more exploratory, proposes seeing in children's books a place of communication in which the spatial intentionality would help the child-reader to act on the space. The reception, the esthetic experience, the performative reading of the picturebook would allow the child to construct for himself a spatial cultural capital in which he could delve to "play with" the space in which he lives or that he will have to live.

Keywords: space; spatiality; picturebooks; transfer; transaction; iconotext; enchantment; mobility

> "A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design ; an item of manufacture and a commercial product ; a social, historical document ; and, foremost, an experience for a child.
>
> As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning of the page." (Bader 1976, 1)

This is how, in 1976, Barbara Bader defined children's picturebooks, this "création pleine de la littérature pour enfants[1]", that is to say a cultural product. Carrying within itself the influence of time and society which gave it birth, the perceptions of its contemporaries, it conveys representations of the world which surrounds it.

The picturebook constitutes an explicit system in three dimensions: picture, text, and support. What Michael Nerlich decided to call an *iconotext* (Nerlich 1990, 255). If we attribute primary functions to it, they are aesthetics and pedagogical. Like fairy tales, picturebooks attempt to teach a moral, to open the child to the world in which he is growing up, to guide him towards his knowledge of himself and his immediate environment. For my part, I see in the iconotextual picturebook a "spatial system" which offers creators and artists the possibility of playing with dimensions which are both physical and physiological in order to put time into spaces and to tell stories. On the physical level, authors play with the height, width, and thickness of the book as an object. The turning of the pages often gives rise to changes in the atmosphere or scenery. On the physiological level, the mechanics of the book cause a verbal narration which echoes an iconic narration, and thus creates space.

I could say that picturebooks are much more than vectors of imagination. In my opinion, they are real places of transfer of an ideology which generate spaces and contribute to the construction of readers' *modus habitandi*. This theory contains three hypotheses that constitute the three main axes of research I began two years ago in Geography with Michel Lussault and in Children's Literature with Cécile Boulaire.

My first hypothesis is based on the principle that a good number of stories contained in picturebooks generate space and also at the same time the applications of this space (what I call *spatiality*). My second hypothesis is to consider that children's picturebooks contain a "spatial ideology" which is up to the child to decipher. My third and last hypothesis proposes that this spatial ideology is capitalized by young readers who, in their own way, appropriate spatiality to inhabit the spaces in which they will be led to live. In this article, I have chosen to present some results of my research which are based upon examples taken from a corpus of 312 picturebooks published in France between 1919 and 2012[2].

Generating spaces

By their form and the interdependence between pictures and narrative, picturebooks generate spaces. These spaces are actually created by the course which is accomplished by the main

characters and shared with the readers. As Michel de Certeau said, a narrative produces *de facto* "des géographies d'action[3]" :

> "Les récits […] traversent et […] organisent des lieux; ils les sélectionnent et les relient ensemble; ils en font des phrases et des itinéraires. Ce sont des parcours d'espaces […]. Ces lieux sont liés entre eux de façon plus ou moins serrée ou facile par des 'modalities' qui précisent le type de passage conduisant de l'un à l'autre […]. Tout récit est un récit de voyage, - une pratique de l'espace.[4]"

I think that the iconotextual narrative goes beyond a very simple dualism between "dreamt space" and "real space". In the universe of perceptions and representations, these two spaces are not separated. There is not one space, on one hand, which would be what we would like whether it is and, reality on the other hand. In our mental representations, these two spaces are linked together. And that is also the case in picturebooks. Narratives build spaces fed by different perceptions and actions. As geographer Michel Lussault wrote, "toute *praxis* spatiale peut être étudiée comme une veritable structure narrative[5]".

[ill.1 : G.Dorémus 2000, cover]

To illustrate my point, I will take an example which I find representative. *Plus tard* by Gaëtan Dorémus is a little square book published by Editions du Rouergue in 2000. The cover shows a map of the town where Gustave, the main character, lives. The city is represented like a big knot tied by different communication channels: road, railway and a canal. The town is incomprehensible. The reader is unable to read its organization. But, with the turning of the pages, the city awakes, as Gustave does. The knot is slowly untied. And, while we follow Gustave on his way to school, we discover the city and its inhabitants. Thus, gradually, the town becomes comprehensible and, at the end of the story, it has become possible to draw its map easily. For example, the first double-page of the book shows Gustave leaving his house. On the left page, his mother is at the door and says goodbye to him. The house is situated at the bottom of a cul-de-sac and Gustave is running away from this narrow street with only one exit on the right page. Pages after pages, Gustave goes through different spaces, his block, streets, a park, until he reaches in a very crowded and animated square. He

passes in front of the station, borrows a bridge and crosses a river to finally get to school. Throughout his way, he can see the inhabitants of the city, first in their bed, then in their bathroom. While the city spreads, Gustave meets more and more people in the streets.

[ill.2 : Gustrave's course in *Plus Tard*]

Besides, some pictures of this picturebook contain representations of the city that many people could call "clichés". The city is crowded, noisy and there is a lot of traffic... But I personally don't think that this perception is a "cliché". I regard it more like an archetype, a collective representation. We can compare this representation to what anthropologist Yves Winkin calls *Enchantment* (Winkin 1996, 199). As mediators of spatialities, Picturebooks need to capture readers by presenting some reassuring pictures mixed to a space in action, in movement. This is the process of *Enchantment* and it may very well be the aim of the Picturebook. As Gaston Bachelard put it in 1957:

> "In this field, all is done by simple and delicate touches. The soul is so susceptible to these simple pictures that, in a harmonic reading, it hears all the resonances." (Bachelard 1969, 99)

[ill.3 : Dorémus 2000, 18-19]

Throughout the whole of my corpus, I managed to record three types of "space narratives". Either the main character goes from point A to point B which is his goal; or he makes a loop which brings him back to his starting point; or, finally, he wanders into a given space without having a precise goal. None of these three types of paths describe a particular function even if authors usually uses the firts and the second narrative to transform the personality of their characters and the second and the third narrative to relate an appropriation of realized territory, in the course of realization or at the very beginning.

Transfering spatial ideology

I have decided to define *transfer* all the possibilities that Picturebooks offer to transmit the perceptions of a particular space. *Transfer* is based on the specific cognitive qualities of Picturebooks. For Virginia Lee Burton, there is no doubt that Picturebooks are efficient medium to prepare children for their future life:

> "[…] it seems to me that books for children are among the most powerful influences in shaping their lives and tastes. In this sense these books are important means of advancing to a better world; […] Books created primarily for entertainment can do much to form the norms of futures thought and action." (Burton 1943, 232)

According to her, the picture is primary; it is then served by a narrative and it is spaced on a double-page that constitutes a cognitive mean:

> "Remember, that children are taught reading by seeing, that is, by associating a picture with a word. If the picture is well drawn and finely designed they learn more than definition. […] Primitive man thought in pictures, not in words, and this visual conception of the outside world is much more natural and far more fundamental than its sophisticated translation into verbal modes of thought." (Burton 1943, 232)

So my first task will be to analyze the different perceptions of different spaces, to classify them and to understand how these perceptions can change. What perceptions of the city, for example, are transmitted by Picturebooks? How have they changed over the last forty or fifty years? And what about rural space? Mountain space? House space?

[ill.4 : Mizielinski 2012, 12-13]

Aleksandra and Daniel Mizilienski's *Mamoko* could be a good example of *transfer*. This Polish picturebook was translated into French in 2011 with the title: *Mamoko, 50 histoires dans la ville*[6]. Without any text, the picturebook consists of seven doublepages. Each of them represents a district of Mamoko, a utopian vision of Warsaw, the town where the authors live. In these districts, a lot of characters dwell, meet each other, talk to each other. Readers can follow them from page to page. The Mizielinskis give, in this book, a very modern perception of the city. Each district constitutes a center itself. Thus, Mamoko, as a huge metropolis, is a city with several centers where different communication channels meet: a river system, a pedestrian network, a railroad network, a road network, and an underground network. This kind of intermodality gives the impression that modern cities are built on movement and mobility.

This is why cultural geography, which is at the heart of my research, is interested in the picturebook as a *medium*. It is a cognitive *medium*; the "signing of knowledge", as French author for Children, Elzbieta (Elzbieta 2005, 69) said, is facilitated by the iconotextual picturebook through the interplay between the reader, the *medium*, the author and sometimes by the second reader who accompanies the child in his reading, but maybe also by publishers.

In France, picturebook production is an oligopoly in fringe in which some Major companies produce, spread, and distribute 37% of the books sold on the market. The remaining 53% are shared by a significant number of small still independent publishing houses. Being interested in publishing is also being interested in the actors of spatial ideologies which are transmitted by picturebooks. I would like to take an example. Between the 50's and 60's, when France was under the reconstruction and underwent a deep transformation of its townscapes with the development of large housing in the suburbs, no big publishing house for Youth depicted that phenomenon. The case of the very popular character of Caroline, by Pierre Probst in the "Grands albums Hachette" collection, is very significant. Caroline is a lovely little girl with blond hair and always wearing red dungarees. The fourty-four adventures of Caroline, written and drawn between 1953 and 2007, drive young readers through different spaces : her house, the countryside, at the mountain for skiing or climbing, at the beach, but also in India, through Europe, in North America, at the North Pole…Before the 70's, the character of Caroline fled the city. She went to the country, or she left the residential suburb to go to the mountain, the seashore or foreign countries. At Casterman's, the character of Martine by Marcel Marlier and Gilbert Delahaye did the same thing. These two rival publishing houses seemed to refuse to show little girls the world which was changing all around them. Ther was no place for cement in the children's picturebooks of this period. Their message was to let children among Nature, Heritage and Tradition.

Along with May 1968 events, a little revolution took place within new publishing houses as La Farandole, which was was founded in 1955 by the French Communist Party. Of course, it is not a propagandist publishing house but much rather a committed and partisan one. In my material between 1969 and 1979, six picturebooks on a global production of 431 have for settings towers and slab blocks, and depict the life of people in these peripheral urban areas. The publishing project is to plunge children inside the social reality of the world in which they live. Picturebook mustn't be a protected and filtered space anymore.

[ill.5 : Després, Clair 1969, 5-6]

For example, in *Nicole au quinzième étage*[7], written by Andrée Clair and Bernadette Després in 1969, Nicole is a little girl who has just moved to a nineteen story highrise building. The authors want to demonstrate the social progress which went on with the construction of towers and slab blocks. Nicole's family have left a very small and dark apartment on the first floor of a very old house and moved to a spacious, bright, functional and modern apartment on the 16th floor of a new tower. The building is situated near the main transport network including roads and railroads. Nicole – as well as the artist – is impressed by the conception of these new buildings which bring solutions to housing shortage but also comfort and modernity to the most deprived. In 1971, in *Nicole et l'ascenseur*[8], the authors will defend the modernism of the lift, a technological progress for a long time reserved to rich people.

When in 1973 construction of tower and slab blocks containing more than 500 lodgings is suddenly forbidden, Jean Garonnaire makes his young readers sensitive to the dullness of these towers. His picturebook *La tour part en voyage*[9] doesn't criticize modernism, cheap and well equipped accommodation but the greyness of the concrete which encircles the city. A very sad tower, set in the middle of grey smaller blocks, is boring. The description which accompanies the picture expresses a kind of confinement caused by this type of construction:

> "Autour de cette tour, il y avait un grillage pour que les enfants ne sortent pas dans la rue, et dans ce grillage une grande porte pour les voitures et une petite porte pour les gens : comme ç a ils ne pouvaient pas se faire écraser[10]." (Garonnaire, 1974, 6)

The tower, personified as a woman, wants liberty and she asks the cars around her to take her far from the suburb, into the middle of a clearing where children would be happy and where she would be able to discover nature, woods, birds and the forest. Finally, the cars choose to set her at the top of a hill, just in the middle of a little wood. If the suburb she came from looked like a *locus ingratus*, a very unpleasant place; the countryside is much more to see as a *locus amoenus*, a very pleasant place.

> "Elle vit le soleil monter au-dessus des arbres, et les animaux de la forêt sortir de leurs cachettes pour voir cette "grande chose" qui avait poussé dans la clairière. Les gens qui dormaient dans la tour se réveillèrent en entendant des bruits qu'ils

> ne connaissaient pas. En ouvrant leurs fenêtres ils virent, très étonnés, qu'il étaient dans une jolie forêt pleine d'animaux[11]." (Garonnaire, 1974, 16)

We can find the same critics against monotony, in 1979, in a book by Jean-Pierre Sérenne and Sylvia Maddoni, *Grégoire et la grande cité*[12]. The cover sets a green nature and a colored countryside in the foreground, and the greyness of towers in the background. Both spaces are separated by plowed lands where vegetation seems to disappear gradually.

[ill.6 : Sérenne, Moddoni 1979, cover]

Finally, contrary to this committed publishing, major companies takes a long time before reacting. We will have to wait until 1987 when Pierre Probst, with Hachette company, starts to show, at last, his interest in towers and bar buildings; and 1992 for Gilbert Delahay and Marcel Marier with Casterman to do the same. In *Caroline et ses amis déménagent*[13], only one double-page shows towers and bars which push to the demolition of the nice little detached house the girl occupied. In *Martine va déménager*[14], Martine's parents must leave the house they rent in the countryside and move to an apartment in town. The 18-19 double-page gives a short view of a building which seems to be quite a luxury residence.

Transmitting spatialities

I defined *transaction* the process that enables the Picturebook to transform the readers' perceptions of a space. In terms of communication, we could say that Picturebooks are performative. More than a simple *transfer*, the *transaction* is the reader's answer to a message sent by an author via a picturebook. To be clear, I distinguish two different processes that could be interdependent: transfer and transaction. The first concept refers to the embbeded spatial ideology that Children can interpret or not. The second concept is used to speak of the numerous possibilities of actions that the interpretation has allowed. In 1929, Walter Benjamin stated that reading is not used to increase our experiences but used to increase ourselves. He wrote:

> "Les enfants, eux tout particulièrement et tout le temps, lisent ainsi : en incorporant, mais non en s'identifiant. Leur lecture est dans un rapport très intime bien moins avec leur lecture et leur connaissance du monde qu'avec leur croissance et leur puissance[15]." (Benjamin, 2011, 136)

The use of Picturebooks in a geography class is an excellent opportunity to evaluate the process of *transaction*. In 2009, a teacher-training student decided to teach with a Third Grade class structuring in space using Gerda Müller's picturebook[16]: *Devine qui fait quoi?* This picturebook comprises no text apart from this sentence which is on the first page, that is: "Let's follow this track…". Instead, page after page, the reader follows a little boy from his bed, through his bedroom and then through his house, out to the courtyard, down to the river and all the way back home.

[ill.7 : Müller 1999, cover]

[ill.8 : Müller 1999, 8-9]

The perception of space which is transferred by this picturebook could be qualified as psychological or "proxemic", according to sociologist Edward T. Hall (Hall 1963, 1003). Indeed, we can see, as he calls it, an interlocking of "shells" that the human being has built around himself. The little boy's course is the expression of his own growth: he leaves his "intimate sphere" (his bed, under the blankets), crosses his "personal sphere" (his bedroom), then a "social sphere" (kitchen, hall). Outside the house, he is thrown into a "public sphere" where he meets people and animals. At each step, the little boy comes over barriers or limits. At first, limits are familiar, and later they are unexpected and new.

[ill.9 : Map of *Devine qui fait quoi ? Une promenade invisible*]

During the first lesson the teacher in training presented the book to the children. They described each double-page and built a narrative. On the second occasion, the children recreated the little boy's journey in a model of the house made by the teacher. They went on building the narrative. During the third step, the children were asked to draw the little boy's house and his itinerary inside it. In one of the children's drawing (ill. 10), the representation seen from above is very similar to the model: the house forms an "L shape". For Paulin, the house is a long corridor opening to the outside world where different spaces are interlocked. At the end of the corridor, we find the bed. The bedroom and the dining room are separated by a thin wall. The hall-door is as large as the corridor and is represented as an airlock between the inside and the outside. Paulin has integrated the perception of the space transferred by the picturebook. If I am using the verb "integrate" instead of "assimilate", it is because, to me, this pupil has done more than merely adopting the author's perceptions. He

has mixed them with his own perceptions, even though it may have been an unconscious process. In fact, this drawing may be regarded as a uterus, a very special and protected space. In this case, the *transaction* was facilitated by the activities led by the student teacher around the book reading.

[ill.10 : Paulin's mind map]

The reading of picturebooks seems to establish a situation of dialogue. The child receives information that he immediately reinvests or stores in a performative exchange. Paulin rearranges the space of the house that was presented to him. For example, he places the kitchen table in a "corner". We find three plates, like in the illustration in the picturebook. In the bedroom, another "corner" was occupied by the child's chair. Among these different "corners", Paulin has constructed his path towards the exit.

> "For the great dreamers of corners, angles, holes, nothing is empty, the dialectic of full and empty corresponds only to two geometric realities. The function of living forms the joint between full and empty. A living being fills an empty refuge. And pictures live. All the corners are haunted, if not inhabited." (Bachelard 1969, 133)

Paulin thus knew how to translate his own representation of the house from the one which was shown to him in the picturebook. The work of comprehension and structuring around the book brought about a new relationship to space. Children's picturebooks constitute, therefore, what can be called a non-human spatial operator, an "actant" if I refer to the expression of philosopher Bruno Latour (Latour 1987, 83).

[ill. 11 : synthetic diagram of processes of *transfer* and *translation*]

I would like to propose that spatial dimension is manifested in different instants in every day life. It is evident if we consider the waiting lines in supermarkets, in the movement of our ultramobile lives. "To live is to pass from one space to another, while doing your very best not to bump yourself" (Perec 1974, 6). To avoid this struggle of places becoming pathogenic and to favorise the process of spatial arrangement, it seems to me that certain children's picturebooks can serve for a definition of a collective ethic of spatiality.

Placing these picturebooks at the center of learning strategies allows young readers to share with the author spatialities and ways of life. Picturebooks can help a child to structure himself in space, to initiate himself in a cartographic language; they can offer tools to

integrate spaces, from the most intimate to the most social. They participate in the construction of his spatial and cultural capital. If spatiality is, as philosopher Michel Foucault stated in 1967, the evil of our time, what a magnificent response picturebooks for children can offer in addressing future generations! They can be indispensible as a precious, didactic support in learning geography, when they are used by educators not as a pretext but as an entire iconotextual work.

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[1] Nières-Chevrel 2009, 95 ; "full creation of literature for children"

[2] Meunier, Christophe. *Espaces et spatialité dans les albums pour enfants*. PhD dissertation supervised by Michel Lussault, ENS de Lyon, 2014.

[3] Certeau 1990, 170 ; "geographies of action"

[4] e. g. Certeau 1990, 170-171; "Narratives [...] cross and [...] organize places; they select them and link them together; they make sentences and routes with them. These are space courses. […] Every narrative is a narrative of a travel, a practice of space."

[5] e. g. Lussault 2001, 145 ; " every spatial *praxis* can be studied as a narrative structure".

[6] *Mamoko, 50 stories in the city*

[7] *Nicole at the 16th floor*

[8] *Nicole and the lift*

[9] *The tower goes for a trip*

[10] e. g. Garonnaire 1974, 6 : « All around this tower, there was a wire fence so that children don't go in the street, and, through this wire fence a big door for cars and a small one for people : thus, they couldn't be crushed. »

[11] e. g. Garonnaire 1974, 16 : « She saw the sun rising above the trees, and animals of the forest going out of their hiding places to see this « big thing » which had grown in the clearing. People who slept in the tower woke up hearing noises that they didn't know. Opening their windows, they were so amazed when they saw they were in a pretty forest, full of animals. »

[12] *Gregoire and the Big City*

[13] *Caroline and her friends move*

[14] *Martine is going to move*

[15] e. g. Benjamin 2011, 136 ; "Children, in particular do read like that: by integrating, and not by identifying with. Their reading is in a very personal relationship; less between their culture and their knowledge of the world, than between their growth and their power."

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