

Anthropomorphism and Morphism: Embodiment and the Picture Book

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I can't remember when I made my first visual story, but the saga of *The Roller-skating Mouse* (figure 1), which I wrote and illustrated when I was about five, reminds me of my long-standing love of reading and creating pictorial tales. This naive depiction of a humanised mouse highlights the wide acceptance of the use of anthropomorphism within visual story-telling: even as a young child I knew that this was an established form of character representation. In this paper I will investigate the use of anthropomorphism and morphism in picture books. In particular I will focus on the ways in which my research project, *IN-Transit*, draws connections between morphed beings and: the concept of 'other', and notions of hybridity. This is with the view to assessing the ways in which these ideas within visual literature have the potential to influence notions of what it is to be a contemporary human. This analysis will be supported by the work of author-illustrator Shaun Tan, children's literature theorist David Rudd and anthropologist Bruno Latour.

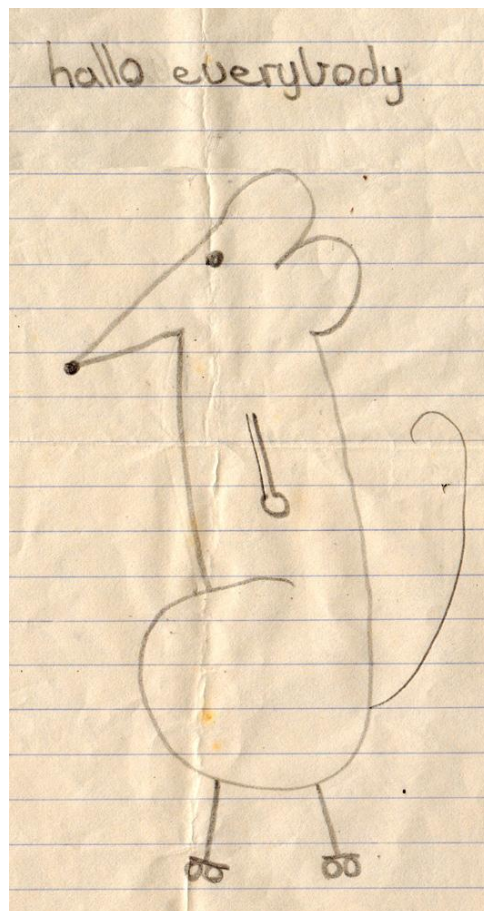


Figure 1: *The Roller-skating Mouse*, Betty Sargeant

The IN-Transit project centres around creating a picture book: text and images that present an empathetic first person account of a refugee arriving in a new country. This study is based on the premise, largely set by Tan (n.d. a), that picture books have a cross-generational audience. This genre began as a literary form of instruction and amusement for the very young (Grenby 2009, p. 4), and has expanded to embrace a broad readership¹. Consequently, through this practice-based research, I intend to address a relevant and complex social issue, distil the idea, and present a work that embodies layers of information with the view to appealing to a range of visual and textual comprehensions.



Figure 2: The Stone Tree, Betty Sargeant 2011

In February 2011, as I was planning this project, I noticed a seedling growing from a crack in the cement and blue-stone gutter in front of our house (figure 2). I became fascinated by the out-of-place nature of this plant and by its ability to exist within such an unconventional setting. I began to observe, photograph, and write about this plant's response to its surrounding hostile conditions: it wilted in harsh sunshine, was buried amongst autumn leaves (figure 3), and was submerged in flood waters (figure 4). I did not intervene, I simply documented these occurrences.



Figure 3: Buried by Elders, Betty Sargeant 2011



Figure 4: The Torrent, Betty Sargeant 2011

Using these photographic chronicles as a visual reference, I sketched exploratory illustrations and developed these into rudimentary character studies (eg. figure 5). These preliminary works unearthed a plant-human: but is this image representing anthropomorphism or morphism? Foundational, and perhaps outdated studies of anthropomorphism within picture books describe it as an animal-centric practice: the 'convention of clothed animals' (Lowe 1996, p. 37), or the presentation of 'humanized animals' (Nobleman 2002, p. 7). Even though the word, anthropomorphism, has a broader definition: an object, natural entity or animal that embodies human form (Brown 1993, p. 87). Morphism on the other hand is defined as being a transformation (ibid, p. 1833). Within this paper I am using the term morphism to describe the transformation of an entity into plant, animal, human or inanimate form.



Figure 5: The Stone Tree (Character Study), Betty Sargeant 2011

Whilst creating character studies for IN-Transit I had begun to draw parallels between the growth of the seedling and refugee experiences. This led me to investigate the ways in which previous literary works had presented anthropomorphic and morphed characters, particularly in relation to immigration, refugees and cultural diversity. I had also begun to query the reflexive quality within morphism: the crossovers between animal-humans, human-animals and nature-humans.

Anthropomorphism, Morphism, Animals and the Other

As previously stated the convention of anthropomorphism is commonly viewed as an animal-centric practice. These historic (animal-centric) views often align with hegemonic social forces. As Rudd states:

Those at the top of the human ladder wish to see themselves as most distant from animals, as civilized, with 'lesser' beings automatically coded as closer to nature. Hence it is not only children to whom animals are linked: they are also linked to women, slaves, peasants, the working class, the mad, ethnic minorities, migrants - in fact, to anyone seen as 'other' (Rudd 2009, p. 242).

Within the field of visual literature, *The Water Babies* (Kingsley 1863), provides an example of one way in which morphed humans reflect concepts of 'other'. The longstanding political, geographic, religious and social battle between the British and the Irish is referenced within this work. Kingsley states, that the 'wild Irish' (the other), who failed to conform to British social mores, were 'changed into gorillas, and gorillas they are until this day' (ibid, pp. 193-4). This work reinforces the ways in which animal representations are used to portray or 'underwrite the accepted order of things' (Rudd 2009, p. 256).

In further defining the concept of 'other', Salman Rushdie, in his formidable novel *The Satanic Verses* (2006), describes the plight of refugees in immigration detention. Rushdie morphs the detainees, depicting humans embodied in animal form. The refugees are viewed by the immigration officers as sub-human, as beasts, they are told that they have no worth and consequently their psyches are stripped of all defences. The refugees begin to feel as if they are sub-human, as if they are beasts: they succumb to being othered. Within this work Rushdie states:

'How could they do it?' ...

'They describe us', the other whispered solemnly. 'That's all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct' (2006, p. 168).

Tan's 2008 picture book *Eric* (figure 6) portrays an empathetic view of a morphed other. This piece presents a humorous portrayal of a captivating foreign exchange student and his well intentioned, yet endearingly ignorant, host family. This work displays only visual glimpses of the host family, yet they appear to embody 'normal' human form, whilst Eric is portrayed as a miniature insect-human: as a shadow-like other (Grzyb 2010, para. 3). Regardless of the family's efforts, they continually misunderstand their guest and view him as odd. Yet the reader is able to see life through Eric's inquisitive and fresh eyes (ibid), and can form an appreciation of his intriguing and engaging qualities.



Figure 6: Eric, Shaun Tan 2008, p. 1

In my recently released picture book *Wayne Boris Carlo* (2011), I created an anthropomorphised world (figure 7). Similar to Oliver Jeffers' *The Great Paper Caper* (2008), this work is comprised of a range of cohabiting animal-human species. My aim was to present a vision of a 'multi-race' community. Within my current work, *IN-Transit* I am not striving to depict mixed-culturalism per se (as in *The Great Paper Caper* and *Wayne Boris Carlo*) nor is it a work about immigration (as seen in Tan's 2006, *The Arrival*). *IN-Transit* is a piece that aims to employ morphism to portray an empathetic view of social outcasts: that is to depict the plight of 'illegal immigrants'.



Figure 7: 'City Tower,' Wayne Boris Carlo, Betty Sargeant 2011, pp. 22-3

Animal-centric anthropomorphic and morphic depictions within the picture book genre are common. Yet there are exceptions. Tan's character Eric (figure 6), is viewed by some as being reminiscent of a leaf (Murphy n.d., para. 2). And the plant-human character (figure 5) and the machine-human character study (figure 8) reflect my aim to represent a wide morphic scope within IN-Transit, one that draws connections between humans, nature and inanimate objects.

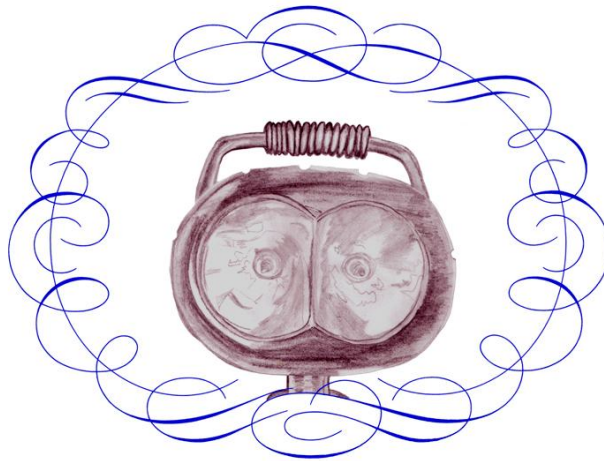


Figure 8: Torch Song (Character Study), Betty Sargeant 2011

Anthropomorphism, Morphism and Hybridity

In developing further characters for IN-Transit I have come to look at notions of hybridity. Figure 9 is a human-machine-animal, an idea that acknowledges connections between and across humans, nature and the inanimate world. In understanding the ideas supporting this illustration I will firstly look at foundational notions of hybridity.

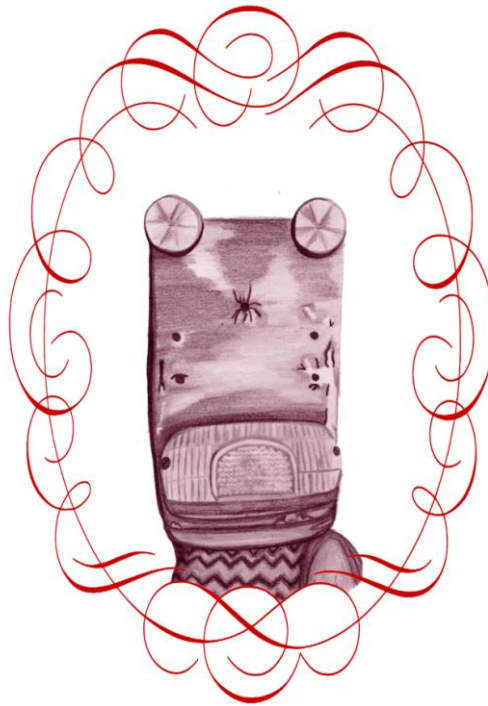


Figure 9: 250 Screecher (Character Study), Betty Sargeant 2011

Hybridity is a concept that embodies a synergy and multiplicity at its core. Gloria Anzaldúa's personal experience of migration led her to describe this notion, she states:

We (Mexican-Americans) don't identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don't totally identify with the Mexican cultural values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicaness or Angloness (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 63).

In our contemporary, globally mobile world there is an unprecedented flow of information, objects and humans across and around the planet (Miler 2009, p. 9). As a result should we be encouraged to ask: are we all, to varying degrees made up of hybrid forms? And is hybridity limited to the inter-mingling of humans? Depictions of machine-humans have become common within animated films, for example Wall-E (Disney 2008) and within wider literature, for example Neuromancer (Gibson 1984). But previous to Tan's work it has been a relatively unexplored area within the genre of (non-merchandise related) picture books. Tan's portrayal of machine-animals in *The Lost Thing* (2000), presents unconscious mutations (Tan n.d. b, para. 9) as seen in figure 10. The unnamed protagonist within this work finds a creature on the beach. Tan describes this as 'a huge tentacled creature (that) evolved from drawings of pebble crabs and oldfashioned cast iron stoves' (Tan n.d. c, para. 15).



Figure 10: The Lost Thing, Shaun Tan 2000, p. 6

Authors and illustrators can extend the ambiguous origins of characters through creating connections between nature and inanimate objects. This kind of depiction relies on an open concept of anthropomorphism, one that reflects the 'ability to go beyond the Real into the realms of possibility, to worlds where, potentially, anything can have a voice' (Rudd 2009, p. 257). Through this egalitarian notion, one that allows anything to have a voice, artists can present the crossovers that exist between and across objects, humans and the natural world, breaking down the idea that these things exist in separate compartments.

Latour, assists in illuminating the links between the previously divided territories of the human realm and the nonhuman realm. He notes that humanism is made of machines as much as machines are made of humanism. Latour continues, stating that '(h)umanism has defined itself by multiplying things' (1993, p. 138). This idea, suggesting that humans not only make machines but define themselves by the existence of machines, creates an interplay between humans and inanimate objects. In developing human-machine-animals (eg. figure 9) for the IN-Transit project I am drawing on the work of Latour to search for future directions in this area. These directions seek to acknowledge: the human connection to nature, the power of the natural world, and the central position of inanimate objects within our contemporary existence.

Anthropomorphism, Morphism and Futures

Anthropomorphism and morphism in visual literature has historically involved 'rebodying': representations that reinforce hegemonic power structures. In acknowledging the crossovers that exist between and across humans, and between and across humans and the non-human world, artists can offer alternatives to the narcissistic power-play common in most current human-centric behaviour. This approach to embodying could

be viewed as morphism. As Latour says 'the expression 'anthropomorphic' considerably underestimates our humanity. We should be talking about morphism' (1993, p. 137). By deploying the word morphism it opens up transformational representations to include: animals depicted as humans, humans depicted as animals and embodiments of creatures that incorporate multiple (including inanimate) forms. And through this practice 'one does not defend humanism, one loses it' (ibid, p. 137).

In loosening our hold on what it is to be human we open up possibilities. In discussing the direct connection between humans and inanimate objects, Latour states, '(a)s long as humanism is constructed through contrast with the object that has been abandoned to epistemology, neither the human nor the nonhuman can be understood' (ibid, p. 136). Within the (work-in-progress) IN-Transit project I am developing human-machine-creatures, this is with the view to challenging the great divide that has been established between dominant social forces and the other. Further to this I am seeking to acknowledge the connection between humans and non-humans and between humans and the natural world. This is with the view to presenting alternative future ways of viewing humanity. By drawing connections between humans, and connecting humans and nonhumans, we may be able to create a more empathetic approach to life on this planet, an approach that looks beyond human self-interest.

As climate change, and recent natural disasters, remind us of both the destructive forces within people, and the powerful capacity of nature, is it not time to reposition the notion of what it is to be human?

Notes

¹ Unlike most creative forms, picture books have an innate cross-generational viewership: the parent, grandparent or teacher who is reading the work aloud and the child to whom the work is being read. In addition to this, the mixed readership of this genre has recently expanded to include independent adult audiences (Tan, 2010). Consequently contemporary picture books have become a platform from which to address key social and psychological issues, a platform that presents a distilled concept in a multi-layered format that can be appreciated by a broad audience. This being said, I acknowledge that the central viewers of this genre are children aged from birth to eight years. IN-Transit is a work being created for an audience aged six and above.

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