Intermedialidades
Following a Wordless Migration in Shaun Tan’s The Arrival

Sofía Montenegro

Abstract
This essay explores the way in which storytelling functions in wordless narratives based on an analysis of Shaun Tan’s The Arrival (2007), a crossover book that portrays the migration experience from a visual perspective. Through a close reading of the story and drawing on theoretical notions coming from Children’s Literature Studies, this essay attempts to unveil the ways in which the author graphically represents issues of belonging, estrangement and alienation and the way in which the reader manages to construct the meaning of the story through visual cues.

Key words: wordless picturebooks, Shaun Tan, crossover books, multimodal narratives, children’s literature.

Resumen
Basado en un análisis de The Arrival (2007) de Shaun Tan, este ensayo explora el modo en que operan aquellos libros álbumes que narran una historia exclusivamente a través de imágenes. Mediante una atenta lectura del libro y tomando conceptos teóricos provenientes de los Children’s Literature Studies, este estudio intenta develar las formas en que el autor representa de forma gráfica, temas relacionados con la pertenencia, la alienación y la familiaridad, y también el modo en que el lector logra construir el significado de la historia a través de la interpretación del código visual y su particular gramática.

Palabras claves: libro álbum sin palabras, Shaun Tan, literatura crossover, narrativas multimodales, literatura infantil.
1. Introduction

In literate societies we are used to thinking of stories in terms of words. Stories told in books, newspapers, blogs or in conversations between friends, are usually verbally transmitted. Images may complement or counteract what is being told through words, but they very rarely appear as the main medium for storytelling. Modern societies have found effective conventional signs to communicate with each other, therefore using pictures or drawings to represent what we want to express may seem like an unnecessary return to a pre-verbal era. Perry Nodelman points out this issue in the very beginning of his study of the narrative art of children’s picturebooks:

Our heritage of many centuries of great unillustrated literature makes it clear that stories can be told adequately by words on their own. Why, then, add pictures to them? Or why even create series of pictures that tell stories on their own, without accompanying words? Why are there such picturebooks at all? (1)

We certainly may not “need” such picturebooks in functional terms, but we can probably benefit from them in aesthetical and creative terms. Wordless picturebooks and graphic novels are sophisticated objects that appeal to readers of all ages and develop a different way of reading and relating with worlds of fiction. Visual storytelling can be traced back to rock painting and medieval stained glass windows; it is an old medium of conveying stories that has been used by multiple artists throughout history but that has hardly been recognised as an art form with an essential literary value.

Picturebooks in general have held a secondary status following a reasoning where “real” literature is supposed to have nothing to do with pictures, but this closed and fixed idea of what constitutes literature started to expand in the late twentieth century and at the same time “traditional ideas of language, as written and spoken communication based around letters and alphabets, changed to include the multimodal ‘languages’ of images and signs” (Ross Johnston 423). Films, advertising, television, video games and the internet era have probably modified our relationship with the visual, and reactivated our interest and understanding of images as a powerful and creative way to convey meaning.

In this cultural scenario where pictures, illustrations, animations and all sort of visual forms are intrinsically related with our daily lives it is not surprising that graphic narratives in form of picturebooks, comics or graphic novels are calling
the attention of a great mass of readers of all ages worldwide. As Sandra Beckett points out in her study of picturebooks as a crossover genre:

In a graphically-oriented society where culture in general is shifting away from age as a defining category, picturebooks are an increasingly important mode of artistic communication … they promote a graphic literature that renews our reading habits and invites us to see the world differently. (316)

And it is precisely this different way of seeing the world, which is at the basis of all graphic narratives, what I would like to explore in this essay. Particularly, I would like to focus my attention on the way in which storytelling functions without words. In order to comprehend the special dynamics of wordless narratives I will look at Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* (2007), a book which portrays the migration experience from a visual perspective and that has been considered by readers and critics both as picturebook¹ and as graphic novel.²

Through a close reading of the story, I will attempt to unveil the ways in which the author graphically represents issues of belonging, estrangement and alienation and the way in which the reader manages to construct the meaning of the story through visual cues. In order to do this, I will reflect on the nature of picturebooks and on how the storytelling process takes place both with and without words. Analysing the dynamic in which the reader gets involved when confronted with “conventional” picturebooks (i.e. when words and pictures give shape to the narrative), will allow me to understand to a greater extent the challenging process of reading wordless stories, and to apply this particular operation of reading and visualization to the unique world depicted by Shaun Tan in *The Arrival*.

2. Graphic narratives

According to Perry Nodelman, “picture books are unlike any other form of verbal or visual art. Both the pictures and the texts in these books are different from and

---

¹ Picturebooks combine words and pictures to narrate a story. They can be predominantly visual (as it happens with wordless picturebooks) or combine in similar proportions the verbal and the visual. Picturebooks were originally aimed for young children but since the seventies they have also been published for older children and adults. (See Beckett, Nikolajeva and Scott, and Nodelman)

² A graphic novel can be defined as a lengthy story written in comic strip form (use of panels in sequences). It differentiates from comics mainly in terms of format (it is published as a book and not in periodical publications) and in terms of content and audience; whereas graphic novels are almost exclusively directed to mature readers, comic books cover all age groups. (See Beckett, Nikolajeva and Scott, and Nodelman)
communicate differently from pictures and texts in other circumstances” (vii). In a similar vein Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott point out that “the unique character of picturebooks as an art form is based on the combination of two levels of communication, the visual and the verbal” (Nikolajeva and Scott 1). Also following this line of thought, Lawrence Sipe explains that “in a picture book, both the text and the illustration sequence would be incomplete without the other, they have a synergistic relationship in which the total effect depends not only on the union of the text and illustrations but also on the perceived interactions or transactions between these two parts” (Sipe, How Picture Books 99). As we can note, there seems to be a generalised agreement that the uniqueness of picturebooks lies in the interplay between words and pictures and in the sort of secret language that emerges from this collaboration. Whether text and images go hand in hand narrating the story or supply alternative or contradictory information, we are inclined to think that a special dynamic is forged in picturebooks between images that show, and words that tell.

And this dynamic is what has been a central concern for academics working in the field of children’s literature and reader response. Questions such as “How do we read these books?” or “What happens inside the reader’s mind when trying to couple the verbal and the visual in a single reading?” have arisen. Nikolajeva and Scott make reference to the process of reading a picturebook as a “hermeneutic circle” in which “the reader turns from verbal to visual and back again, in an ever-expanding concatenation of understanding” (2). Using semiotic terminology, the authors explain that picturebooks convey meaning through iconic and conventional signs that require two different types of reading: “The function of pictures, iconic signs, is to describe or represent. The function of words, conventional signs, is primarily to narrate. Conventional signs are often linear, while iconic signs are nonlinear and do not give us direct instruction about how to read them” (Nikolajeva 2).

Two sets of signs require two sets of skills, therefore independent readers of picturebooks have to be verbally and visually literate and learn to perform a simultaneous close reading both of text and illustrations, actively filling the gaps that may be left between them. Picturebooks, as Peter Hunt claims, “can develop the difference between reading words and reading pictures: they are not bound by linear sequence, but can orchestrate the movement of the eye” (176). By breaking the linearity of traditional reading, the book opens to infinite possibilities of interpretation; the reader’s eyes and mind flow from one medium of communication to the other, actively engaging in the construction of meaning.

This idea of picturebooks as multi-layered and multimodal texts contradicts old discourses that categorised them as simple and children-exclusive texts. Thanks
to the innovative and creative work of many authors/illustrators, picturebooks are now seen as complex and challenging artefacts that require new terminology or critical language to describe more precisely the world that is displayed between covers. In an attempt to repair this lack of tools to talk about the specificities of picturebooks, many concepts have been borrowed from related disciplines such as fine art, film and comic books. Notions that help to describe the use of colours, lines, shapes and perspectives, or the depiction of action and the passing of time have been brought to analyse picturebooks. The question of finding an appropriate metalanguage for picturebooks increases in complexity if we move to the extreme-end of the genre and attempt to describe how the storytelling process works in wordless narratives, both in terms of creation and reception of the work.

We could say that on the one hand, the artist/storyteller must draw on multiple strategies to transform pictures into something which can be distinguished as a story where there is a plot, sequenced events, and characters to follow. As we have noted, many of these strategies are narrative techniques used in visual or multimedia arts. According to Anne Rowe many parallels can be found between film language and the language used in sequenced picture texts: “One, for example, is the way in which pictures are framed. The use of shots of differing spatial distance, i.e. close-up or long shot, is also common, as is the high and low angle position given to the reader” (225). The use of different shots and layouts (single-page framing or fractured layout) allows the author to provide a sort of guidance to the reader, to play with the narrative perspective and with the rhythm of the story. Drawing on these techniques the sequence of pictures created by the author can produce the effect of a moving camera zooming in and out, offering both intimacy and perspective to the reader.

Elements coming from comic strips and graphic novels such as panels, gutters, speech bubbles, and narrative boxes, among others, are also incorporated by some authors in their wordless narratives. Raymond Briggs and Shaun Tan are two of the contemporary authors who have crossed the genre border and found in the language of comic books a way to depict their stories. Briggs originally approached the “much-despised medium of strip cartoons” while searching for more space to develop Father Christmas (1973). He explains that at one point the thirty-two page picturebook was not enough to tell the story that he had in mind so he turned to small comic-strip frames. Since then he has used this format in books like The Snowman (1978), When the Wind Blows (1982) and Ethel and Ernest: a true story (1998), proving that “strip cartoons do not have to be comic cuts or muscle-bound men in tights socking bad guys on the jaw” (Briggs par. 6).

Shaun Tan in turn, an Australian author who acknowledges the influence of Briggs in his work, explains how he undertook extensive research on comics
and graphic novels in order to give shape to his wordless narrative *The Arrival*. Trying to find answers to questions such as: “What shapes are the panels? How many should be on a page? What is the best way to cut from one moment to the next? How is the pace of the narrative controlled, especially when there are no words?” (Tan, “Comments on the Arrival” par. 11), Tan looked at Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* as well as Japanese comics (*manga*).

The reception experience of wordless picturebooks is radically different from the one that the reader has with verbal narratives. In wordless picturebooks there is no narrative voice in a conventional or literal way; instead, the author presents a point of view and a narrative perspective through visual elements and through their disposition in the page. Therefore, although the reader has to participate more actively in the storytelling process, there is still some kind of guidance coming from an authorial voice which is implicit in the pictures. In “Meaning-Making from Wordless (or Nearly Wordless) Picturebooks”, Evelyn Arizpe mentions some of the demands involved in the process of reading and signifying wordless narratives:

> … filling in iconotextual gaps that are larger than those usually found in picturebooks with words; recognizing there is a sequence and connections must be made between images; elaborate a hypothesis about these connections without knowing what is significant or what could happen in the future and recognize that there are often multiple interpretative possibilities and ambiguous endings. (3)

The reader has to be aware of certain conventions, that help to structure the story, and at the same time must be willing to push his/her imagination further due to the ambiguities and uncertainties within the text. More than in any other type of book, meaning is not something fixed; on the contrary, infinite possibilities of interpretation open up between pictures, lines, frames, colours and textures, being the reader the one who has “to assemble the meaning of the text in a process of re-creative dialectics” (Iser x). From this perspective, and as Louise Rosenblatt explains it, the reading act can be understood in transactional terms: “Instead of two fixed entities acting on one another, the reader and the text are two aspects of a total dynamic situation. The meaning does not reside ready-made “in” the text or “in” the reader but happens or comes into being during the transaction between reader and text” (7). Cultural background, previous knowledge and the emotional disposition of the reader —or the “reader’s stance” as Rosenblatt puts it— affect the reading experience making it unique and unrepeatable.

But despite the diverse kind of interpretations that can emerge from wordless books, it is possible to state that a common response to these narratives is the
verbalisation of the story in the reader’s mind. Nodelman explains how children, for instance, “... tend to express their enjoyment of wordless books by telling, in words, the stories the pictures suggest to them; they themselves turn purely visual experiences into verbal ones” (186). In such a way, a translation process comes into play where the reader attempts to make sense of what is presented in the sequence of pictures by narrating the story in his/her head. The British author and illustrator Quentin Blake explains that precisely: “one of the advantages of a book with no words is that you have to talk about whether you’ve understood it or not. You have to discuss, even only with yourself what is actually happening, what do these gestures mean, what is happening next?” (Tes). This does not mean that the reader creates in his/her mind a perfectly articulated narrative that verbally represents what is shown in pictures, but that in this meaning-making process words are not totally excluded and appear as a silent narration or dialogue that accompanies the visual interpretation. Anne Rowe describes this internal process using the figure of a double narrator:

From this perspective the reader becomes a narrator who, in addition to give voice to the narrative, can also control the pace and the way in which he/she follows the story. Little or no text allows the reader to linger in the page and concentrate on the details, or to expand a chosen moment of the narrative and to go back and forward with more freedom. As Shaun Tan declares in an interview related with the reading of *The Arrival*, “some readers can move quite quickly through each part of the book –as though it were a short story– while other readers seem to take several hours. It’s up to the reader to consider things such as background details and recurring visual elements and patterns. These are not essential to the story, but they add extra dimensions to those who take time to observe them” (Ling and Tan 46).

As we have seen, reading a silent graphic narrative can be a highly demanding activity for readers of all ages, both because there is less guidance than in verbal stories and because the reader needs to have certain familiarity with visual conventions and modes of visual interpretation. This ability to “read” images has
been often understood in terms of “visual literacy”. According to the art and media educator, Karen Raney, visual literacy is a troublesome concept because by coupling “visual” with “literacy” “it introduces the metaphor of language, provoking debates about the value of linguistic metaphors for getting to grips with visual things. These are in essence debates about the nature of words and images and how we understand them” (41).

Raney explains that the expression visual literacy “applies to making objects and images as well as to understanding them” (44), and identifies five kinds of visual comprehension: perceptual sensitivity, cultural habit, critical knowledge, aesthetic openness and visual eloquence (45). Following these categories, it is possible to note that being visually literate is not just about being able to “see” what surround us, it is also about being able to respond to what we see both in critical and creative ways. In the particular case of wordless picture books and graphic novels, we need to acknowledge that “reading pictures” is very different from reading words and allow ourselves to experience the pictorial text activating visual categories of perception, which are adequate to the material we are relating with.

3. From alienation to belonging in Shaun Tan’s The Arrival

Shaun Tan is an artist and illustrator largely acclaimed for picture books such as *The Rabbits* (1998), *The Red Tree* (2001), *Tales from Outer Suburbia* (2008) and *The Arrival* (2007). Colonisation, melancholy, loneliness, identity and displacement are some of the subjects explored by Tan in his books, topics that are not usually found in children’s picture books and that difficult their classification in terms of audience. Tan is an author who consciously challenges the idea of a closed audience for the books he makes, in his essay “Picture books: Who are They for?” (2002), he questions the almost natural association of picture books with children’s literature and invites us to see it as a cultural convention that has nothing to do with the essence of this art form. Picture books, he says, are for anyone who remains “interested in the imaginative play of drawings and paintings, telling stories, and learning how to look at things in new ways” (Tan par. 4).

In *The Arrival*, a wordless lengthy graphic narrative, Tan also challenges the genre boundaries by creating a story that does not fit properly in the category of picture book, comic book or graphic novel. The author has declared that he sees his book more as a graphic novel than as a picture book, particularly because of the “emphasis on continuity between multiple frames, … actually closer in many
ways to film-making than book illustration” (Tan par. 11). However, if style and length could incline us to think of it as a graphic novel, its character and plot development could make us consider it more as a short story delivered in picture book format. Therefore, perhaps it is better to think of The Arrival as a hybrid wordless narrative that resists classification, precisely because it successfully combines elements from many art forms in only one book. Elements of picture books, graphic novels, comic-strips and the “‘language’ of old pictorial archives and family photo albums” (Tan par. 11) are present in the story expanding the levels of intertextuality and transmitting a postmodern idea of the work of art.

The Arrival (2007) can be “read” as the story of a man who must leave his country and family in quest of a better life. This man arrives, after a long boat trip, in a big city where he finds himself absolutely lost in translation: everything is strange, new and undecipherable. Unable to communicate, only through drawings and gestures, the newcomer manages to find a house and a job with the help of three friendly strangers who also arrived to the city, escaping from unfavourable circumstances (i.e. slavery and war). After some time, the man manages to settle down and earn enough money to bring his wife and daughter to live with him, and together form a new home away from the problems they had in their country of origin.

This gradual process from alienation to familiarity, described above, is graphically represented in five chapters and one hundred and thirty pages using different sepia tones. There are no words apart from the title and some written text in an undecipherable language that usually appears in the background. As a consequence, from the very beginning of the book, the reader –as the migrant– is subjected to a bewildering experience. We take into our hands this big format book that looks like an old photo album, showing a picture in the cover of a man with a suitcase in his hand curiously looking at a strange animal, and as we pass the pages we realise that we are about to undertake the same journey that the migrant is about to start.

Accordingly, in every page a puzzled initial reaction gives place to a gradual understanding of the narrative language of the pictures. For instance, the endpapers with sixty small panels representing different people of varied ages and ethnic backgrounds highlight the metonymic nature of the story, that is, the idea of an immigration narrative which can have a universal value. Because of its ambiguity it has the potential to be the story of Tan’s parents (Malaysian-Chinese father

---

3 From this reference onwards all the quotes belong to Shaun Tan’s essay “Comments on The Arrival”, published on his website www.shauntan.net.
and an Anglo-Irish mother), of European migrants arriving in America around 1900, or war refugees today or of any individual that experiences “an arrival” to an unknown land or context. The absence of specific references with regards to time and place, and the combination of realistic and imaginary elements grant a symbolic character to the story.

Attempting to convey a sense of familiar unfamiliarity, where things are different but recognisable, the author combines surrealist urban landscapes, exotic fruits and bizarre animals with objects and situations that the reader can relate with (what the author calls “a concrete ring of truth”). As the first pages of the book suggest, Tan’s intention is to make the reader share the strangeness and confusion that the migrant feels since he leaves home: “In order to best understand what it is like to travel to a new country, I wanted to create a fictional place equally unfamiliar to readers of any age or background (including myself)” (Tan par. 13).

In such a way, we can note how alienation works in two different levels in the book, both inside and outside the story. Inside because as active readers we follow closely the journey of the migrant and empathise with his sense of displacement, and outside because if we are readers used to deal with verbal narratives we might experience some degree of disorientation trying to “read” a visual story, in terms of direction, linearity, and interpretation. As the author explains, “In The Arrival, the absence of any written description also plants the reader more firmly in the shoes of an immigrant character. There is no guidance as to how the images might be interpreted, and we must ourselves search for meaning and seek familiarity in a world where such things are either scarce or concealed” (Tan par. 8).

Therefore, communication and comprehension are the first challenges that the reader faces when he/she opens the books and also that the migrant finds when he arrives to the nameless land. However, before making manifest his inability to communicate, the author shows through nine medium-sized panels (at the beginning of the second chapter) the estrangement process that the migrant experiences. A close-up of the family portrait that he is carrying shows what is he leaving behind and the eight successive panels situate him in his loneliness, first with a medium shot of him eating alone in the ship’s cabin and looking sadly through the window, and then with a long shot of the ship which evidence that he is just one of the thousand anonymous persons who are starting this journey.

When the ship arrives, three consecutive pages with twelve panels each show the migrant being inspected in the immigration office. The vulnerability and helplessness of those who are not able to communicate and speak the language is strongly depicted in the fractured layout of these pages. First a medical check where two men evaluate his sight, his hearing, and his heartbeat. After each
check a paper with an icon is pinned on his jacket, the last panel of this page shows the migrant with an anxious look in the eyes following an arrow and the directions given by one of the men.

Like in a Kafkaian scene, the second of these pages shows the migrant trying to deal with the police control bureaucracy. Twelve medium shots show his expression growing with worry; we are inclined to think that many questions are being asked and that even if he wants to answer he does not have the words to do it. The eyes, the frown and the hands moving in different directions try to replace words, but apparently it is not enough as the last panel show him looking even more helpless. Nevertheless, he is granted permission to stay in the country, which is proved by a document that he cannot read but that allows him to continue the journey.

The gaze of the immigrant captures the strangeness and novelty of this new city; people from different ethnic backgrounds accompanied by strange looking animals inhabit the streets. He observes people working, selling newspapers and groceries, chatting, or simply passing the day, while he wanders absolutely lost. The migrant carries a notebook with some pages showing words written in the unknown alphabet (a sort of dictionary perhaps?) and other blank pages where he draws the things that he is looking for or parts of his story when he meets a friendly stranger.

Gestures help him for using the public transport service (flying ships) and looking for a job but, as every immigrant who does not share the cultural codes, he is far from being the ideal employee. For instance, in the first job he finds he has to paste some posters on a wall, but as he cannot read them he puts them upside down and is immediately dismissed. Even the simplest task appears as an extreme challenge, so after a second failed job he ends up working in an enormous factory with thousands of men and women doing an alienating job. This is represented in two confronted pages, one with twenty small panels showing a sequence of the migrant’s torso and the mechanic movement of his hands and another one depicting in a full-page spread a mass of indistinct workers under monstrous machinery.

The feeling of displacement can also be experienced at a domestic level in the book. When the migrant finds a place to stay in some sort of hotel or guesthouse, he enters a room full of strange shaped objects which he cannot assimilate to anything that he knows. He—and we—might recognise a wooden chair and a bed, but the rest are surrealistic machines, pipes, steaming jars and something similar to light bulbs. In addition to all these disconcerting unanimated objects, an animal appears when he opens a conic shaped barrel, this is the “companion animal” that
Shaun Tan refers to as a key character in the story: “a creature that looks something like a walking tadpole, as big as a cat and intent on forming an uninvited friendship with the main protagonist” (Tan par. 17). At the beginning, the migrant is frightened by the animal but when he realises that it is friendly he seems to take into account his solitude and accepts the funny looking creature as company.

Homesickness is another constitutive feeling in the immigrant experience and it is beautifully portrayed in *The Arrival* in two consecutive pages. Combining panels of different dimensions, the author manages to transmit the longing and the sadness of being apart from loved ones. The migrant opens the suitcase and sees the image of his wife and daughter sitting around the dining table, with the menacing dragon’s tail in the background symbolising that they are not safe yet. We can see him unpacking and immediately hanging the family portrait on the wall; then a close-up to the wife and daughter’s face is followed by a memory of the last time they held hands. He stays there staring at the portrait trying to bring some of their presence to the unfamiliar room and while he does this, the close-ups progressively give way to a medium and long shot that show the external facade of the building where he is living. We can watch him through one of the many windows of the concrete block, and visualise him as an anonymous and lonely small figure, this time, in the middle of the city.

As we follow the story we see the migrant feeling “other”, powerless and misunderstood, even if he encounters friendly strangers in the process, and the feeling of not belonging seems difficult to overcome. In Tan’s story the idea of belonging may be related with a sense of familiarity and domesticity. This is represented in the first page of the opening chapter where nine panels show in a close-up different domestic objects: a paper bird, a clock, a hat, a pot with a wooden spoon, the daughter’s drawing, a cracked teapot with a steaming tea cup, an open suitcase, and the family portrait. This fractured view of unrelated objects is replaced then by a long shot of the family room that allows putting each object in context and understanding the role they play in the domestic life of the migrant’s family.

This warmth of home, symbolised in the objects and the people that are present in that room, is only re-established at the end of the book when in two consecutive pages the author repeats the zoom-in and zoom-out of nine domestic objects or scenes. The difference is that this time the objects talk about their new place and lifestyle: a paper figure similar to the companion animal, a funny looking clock, a bowl with exotic food, the daughter’s drawing representing the flying buses of the city, a surrealistic teapot, a newspaper (indicating that now they can read it), the same family portrait and the migrant’s hand giving a coin to his
daughter. The pictures in the nine panels become part of a full-page spread that shows the family (including the pet) happily reunited around the table. In such a way, the transition from outsiders to insiders is symbolised through the familiarity that they have acquired with the objects and codes of their new culture, and we are inclined to think that because now they understand the culture in which they are living, a feeling of belonging is finally attained.

4. Conclusion

The previous analysis of the book’s narrative should only be taken as a personal reading that by no means pretends to be authoritative or definitive. I have tentatively proposed a sense for Tan’s wordless graphic story, but as we have previously discussed in this essay, this is only one of the multiple interpretations that a reader can make of a narrative which is mainly constructed with pictures. Just as the child who feels the need to tell the story aloud as he/she turns the pages of the book, I have rendered my impressions about the arrival of the migrant into a new land as part of a hermeneutic exercise that sought to shed light on the meanings of this wordless story. My reading of The Arrival will probably differ significantly from the reading that another person from a different age or cultural background could make; other words could be used to describe the same situations and other emotions might be perceived in the eyes of the characters. This openness of the text is created by the author himself, he has produced the conditions for this plurality of meanings and encouraged the reader to escape from absolute answers and hermeneutical homogeneity.

To conclude this interpretation of Tan’s graphic novel, it is important to emphasize that the wordless nature of The Arrival is not arbitrary; words become unnecessary to depict the story of the nameless migrant both because its absence highlights the impossibility of the main character to communicate with other people, in his new country, and because it contributes to enhance the feeling of alienation in the reading experience.

In this narrative, words are successfully replaced by images as a result of the unique eloquence of Tan’s illustrations. Every detail, every element in the pages of The Arrival, help to construct meaning in the reader’s mind and to translate the visual language into the verbal. As active readers, we are not only able to identify the general plot of the story and the different stages of the migrant’s adventure, but to go deeper and

For me, a successful picturebook is one in which everything is presented to the reader as a speculative proposition, wrapped in invisible quotation marks, as if to say “what do you make of this?” (Tan, “Picturebooks”)
recognize issues of belonging and estrangement. These are beautifully transmitted by each one of the illustrations, by the gaps that exist between them, and also by the sequences that are constructed by means of their association.

*The Arrival,* just like other wordless picturebooks,\(^4\) incites the reader to embark himself/herself in an interpretative journey that requires different—but also very instinctive—tools to follow the narrative. Therefore, no matter our nationality or the language we speak, it is possible to find our way in the universe of signs presented by the author. In such a way, *The Arrival* unfolds as a vivid rendering of the experience of displacement, a life event that needs no words precisely because migration is usually wordless, silent and extremely lonely.

## Works Cited


