CHALLENGING TIME AND SPACE IN
WORDLESS PICTUREBOOKS

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Amid the diversity and variety of picturebooks, those with no words represent a relatively new and exciting category. In recent times, wordless books have developed into highly sophisticated books, appealing to both children and adults (see Beckett 81) by virtue of aesthetic and narrative experiments by skillful artists. Like every visual narration, a wordless book expresses itself through images. Any use of words is avoided, even though, according to Baetens and Lefèvre, to some extent, the connection with language is solicited, since words can be present in the margin of the work, e.g., in the title of the story or when the reader names what he or she sees (see 15). By their nature, wordless narrations impose specific requirements both on the reader and the artist. The artist must ensure the flow of the narrative and the reader must carefully distinguish all the information contained in the images and the pages in order to follow the story (see Berona 20). Despite the fact that wordless books have become “a contemporary publishing trend” with some specially created wordless series and some author-illustrators working exclusively in this genre (see Beckett 83–84), extensive research on it has been limited. The most comprehensive study to date is Beckett’s chapter on the topic (see 81–146) and no in-depth research has been published since.

One of the principal elements of any narrative is its setting, i.e., the time and place in which the events of the story take place. Although the academic community has explored the concepts and interrelationships of time and space in picturebooks to some extent, there are aspects of these concepts that present opportunities for further research, particularly when it comes to wordless books.

We will examine depictions of time and will focus on how the time and space interrelationship is represented in wordless books. We will borrow
theory from comic books, as well as from research of picturebooks, since a variety of formats, styles, and graphic techniques are found in both media. Indeed, there is a “permeability” between the two categories of books (Groensteen 2011, 54). Nathalie op de Beecks’ paper, On Comics-Style Picture Books and Picture-Bookish Comics, characteristically shows not only the close relationship between both of them, but also the actual tendency of artists to blur their limits.¹

For this study, we will rely on wordless books included in William Martin’s Wonderful Wordless: The 500 Most Recommended Graphic Novels and Picture Books (2015). We will comment on books considered “incredibly popular, seeming to appear on everyone’s booklist” and regarded among the “ten most recommended reads” (xvi), such as Hungarian-born American illustrator Istvan Banyai’s picturebook Zoom (1995), Barbara Lehman’s picturebook The Red Book (2004) (Caldecott Honor in 2005), and David Wiesner’s picturebook Flotsam (2006) (Caldecott Medal in 2007). We will also comment on the wordless trilogy of French illustrator Béatrice Rodriguez, which appears 33rd on Martin’s list (266). Her debut work, Le Voleur de Poule (2005) (The Chicken Thief), was followed by La Revanche du Coq (2011) (Rooster’s Revenge²) and Partie de Pêche (2011) (Fox and Hen Together³). Originally from France, Rodriguez’ picturebooks have been published worldwide. Lastly, another book that is examined is Cependant (2002), “Meanwhile”, created by French artist and illustrator Paul Cox. Although some of Cox’s books are included into Martin’s guide, Cependant is not mentioned there. However, it has captured scholars’ attention: Kimberley Reynolds values its nonsense characteristics (see 63) and Marie Derrien its postmodern aesthetics (see 178). Moreover, Sandra Beckett characterises the book as illustrating “extremely well the ambivalent nature of the border between artists’ books and picturebooks” (80).

Temporal Changes and Space Interdependence

It has been widely demonstrated in picturebook and comic studies that time cannot be indicated by a visual sign system but only by inference (see e.g. Nikolajeva and Scott 139, Nodelman 159, McCloud 94). In visual narratives, the ability to represent temporality plays an important role in its success. However, it can be difficult to demonstrate time and temporal changes; time can only be implied by creating the illusion of a duration
perceived through experience (see Van der Linden 102; Nikolajeva and Scott 139). It is argued, that time is converted into space (see McCloud 100; Groensteen 2011, 147) because temporal passage happens on a spatial surface. Furthermore, different techniques have been developed to convey temporality and temporal changes (see Nikolajeva 97–101, Nikolajeva and Scott 139–172, Van der Linden 102–118, Nodelman 158–171). Indicatively, the flow of time is expressed through
- depicted actions and movements as well as through changes in place.
- the use of physical phenomena (e.g., sunset, sunrise), clocks, and calendars.
- the use of the tension between verso and recto, which implies binary movement, temporal and causal relations.

Sophie Van der Linden proposes three categories of the image: the isolated, the sequential, and the associated image (see 44–45). Sequential images are preponderant in wordless picturebooks. They are “juxtaposed and articulated in an iconic and a signifying level and are related to each other” (ibid. 45). As such, and contrary to most illustrated books in which the images can stand on their own and be unrelated to each other, wordless picturebooks involve sequentiality and develop textuality with strong structures of cohesion and coherence. However, in visual narrations, cohesion and coherence are related to ellipsis which plays a major role in and, therefore, contributes to a better understanding and management of temporal and spatial transitions. The mechanism of ellipsis is well known in comic books, where it is most often manifested as the spatio-temporal jump in the narration occurring between two panels (see Groensteen 1999, 132). Consequently, the inherent gaps between images are understood in terms of spatial and temporal hiatus, which the reader needs to interpret by taking initiatives and making assumptions so that he or she would remedy the apparent discontinuity. Meaning is then created by putting together elements stemming from the dialectic interaction of the images.

In picturebooks, the gaps are predominantly found between the images. Such a gap can be understood either by the natural frame created by the borders of the page, or by lines that frame the image. There are three main formats for such gaps:
- One image is shown on a single page; the gap is between the recto and verso pages (the gutter of the book),
- An image extends to a double-spread page; the gap is created between the
double-spread page viewed and the page that follows,
- Several images are juxtaposed on a single page; the gaps are in the inter-iconic white space (the gutters), perceived either mentally or by lines framing the images.

As far as duration is concerned, the temporal and spatial hiatus implied by the inter-frame gap is indeterminate, and thus the rhythm of narration varies considerably (see Miller 89). Time gaps can last from a fragment of seconds to centuries, and it is left to the discretion of the reader to rely on visual elements, in order that he or she could compose them, look for indications of time and, finally, weave the story. However, the transition from one image to the next does not have to imply a temporal interval. The gap may instead be taken to signify ‘meanwhile’ and articulate spatially distant but parallel actions (see Miller 89).

Finally, a technique for presenting temporal change, found in comic books (see Eisner 28), as well as in children’s picturebooks (see Nodelman 51), is panelling. According to Eisner, in addition to containing thoughts, ideas, actions, and locations, “paneling (sic) or boxing the action not only defines its perimeter, but establishes the position of the reader in relation to the scene, and indicates the duration of the event” (28). Panelling is usually used to quicken or slow down time by varying the space between panels. Applied to picturebooks, when sequences of small framed or unframed pictures appear on the same double spread, they give the illusion of a temporal and often causal relationship between them.

Ill. 1: Fox has seized Chicken. (Le voleur de poule (The Chicken Thief), Béatrice Rodriguez © Casterman)
Our first case of study focuses on *The Chicken Thief* by Béatrice Rodriguez. Time and space depend closely on each other, as will be discussed below. To start with, we will deal with the transitions between the images, based on McCloud’s taxonomy of transitions between panels (see 70–73). Similar to comics, where the panels form a sequence, in a wordless book a panel can be conceived as an image framed by a gap, as described above. For example, in *The Chicken Thief*, passing time is shown by using:

- an action-to-action transition (see McCloud 70). This kind of transition shows a subject doing something by a sequence of frames. In our example, Fox has seized Chicken. Her friends, Bear, Rabbit and Rooster try to save her. In two subsequent double-spread pages we see them running vigorously and then walking exhaustingly. The pages function as frames into which figures are depicted moving over a progression of actions: first running, then walking. The change in the movements occurring in each subsequent image renders the flow of time between the succeeding and the preceding one.

- a scene-to-scene transition (see McCloud 70). In this kind of transition, there is a significant jump in either time or space (or even both), while alteration in space becomes essential. In the *Chicken Thief*, the changing of the places on which the characters are situated indicates their different position. For example, during the pursuit, the background is gradually transformed: the woods, a glade, a hill, and the seaside appear and disappear in succession. The shifts in place result in shifts in time. It becomes obvious to the reader that the characters move in space and, consequently, in time. This knowledge comes from the experience of the reader. However, as there are no clues as to what has taken place between the gaps, scene-to-scene transitions require much more of the reader’s participation.

We will now discuss colour as a time indicator. Rodriguez uses colours to show the cycle of day and night in a way different than the usual depiction of physical phenomena (i.e., the moon and the sun). Considering the landscape, where the colour palette progresses from brighter shades to darker ones, the reader understands from experience the passage of time and establishes a more precise sense of daytime or night-time during which each event occurs. For example, the pursuit of Bear, Rabbit, and Rooster starts in the daytime: colours are bright and get darker to insinuate that
the night falls. The next day dawns and yellow colours become more intense. The duration of the three friends’ pursuit of Fox and Chicken is thus further determined.

Moreover, colours can be crucial in identifying a location. When the background remains more or less the same, colour variations indicate not only the passage of time, but also imply a shift in location. In this case, time and space are inextricably related. For example, in two double-spread pages, the depiction of the three friends chasing Fox and Chicken has the same background – that of the woods. The darker colours in the second double-spread page insinuate that night has fallen. The reader knows that the three friends are in the middle of a pursuit. He then makes the assumption that since the characters have moved in time, they should logically have moved in space. The horizontal format of the book reinforces the effect of the pursuit. It forms a physical horizontal frame that offers a larger space for the pursuit to take place and thus induces the idea of a longer duration. In contrast, a vertical frame would describe a high point or a narrative pause in the story.

Elements of the plot diagram are used to determine the setting. Each of the books of Rodriguez’s trilogy can function autonomously, but also as part of a series. If we consider a book as a sequel, then time and place take another dimension. More specifically, in *The Chicken Thief*, the story starts in the woods and ends at the coast, where Fox and Hen bid farewell to their friends Bear, Rabbit, and the Rooster, who make their way home from the sea. However, in the second book, *Rooster’s Revenge*, the same route followed by the characters in the first book is now taken in reverse order. The three friends start their journey back home from the place where their previous journey ended. Furthermore, the story of the first book starts at the same place where the story of the second book ends. The initial situation of the first book is quite similar to that depicted at the end of the second book: a resting moment in the woods one peaceful morning. Circularity is thus implied, which produces a sense of a repetition in time. The initial situation is disrupted by an event, followed by the departure of the heroes to solve the problem before they return to normality; a normality that will be once more disrupted in the next book, in order for yet a new adventure to start and so on, as it often happens in comic book series.

The shifts in the depicted time and space serve and strengthen the main message of the story, which is:
Appearances can be misleading. The reader’s interpretation is ironically undermined in the end of the book; participating in the persistent search of Chicken, he or she eventually discovers that the persecutor and the persecuted are reconciled, as Chicken decides to live with Fox.

**Challenging Simultaenity**

We will now examine how simultaneity is depicted in Paul Cox’s *Cependant*. The book, originally published in France in 2002, comprises 116 pages of thick cardboard, on which 116 simultaneous scenes are displayed in screen-format pictures. These images in succession show everything that can happen at the same time around the world, such as having breakfast, driving a car or even an astronaut floating around in space.

The story is constructed in keeping with what the title of the book means: *Cependant* (meanwhile or however). Taken as an adverb of time, it translates as ‘meanwhile’ and suggests a temporal simultaneity. The subtitle: “Le livre le plus court du monde” (The shortest book in the world) invites the reader to decode a pun:

a. The first appearance of the pun is in the peritextual elements, by contrasting the thickness of the book with the literal meaning of the subtitle (thick vs. short).

b. A second appearance is in the content of the book, whereby 24 hours of human activities around the world take place during the same second. This single moment defines...
the book as the “shortest” one in the world (see Derrien 174).

The layout is identically and strictly repeated on each page. There is one picture centred on a blank page, surrounded by large blank borders. In the upper corner of each page the word “cependant” is inscribed and, similarly, so is the subtitle and the publisher on the left side. A spiral connects these identically structured and successive pages, with no title page and no epilogue, no beginning, no end. As Marie Derrien argues, the reader gradually realises that the word “cependant” is not only the title of the book, but the “text” of the narrative (see 174). For instance, one could “read”: Here, a couple is getting married. Meanwhile, elephants are carrying wood. Meanwhile, people are sleeping. Meanwhile, a soccer match is taking place, and so on.

We argue that in Cependant, the transitions from page to page is what McCloud refers to as “aspect-to-aspect” (70) that defines the depiction of various aspects of a scene or idea. While transitions in Rodriguez’ books deal with the passage of time, in Cependant, transitions deal with no time at all. Successive images show various aspects of human activities. By itself, the content of a silent image cannot determine any duration, producing a sense of suspension in time and adopting a “timeless quality.”

Ill. 3: In Paul Cox’s Cependant, successive images show various aspects of human activities (Editions du Seuil, 2002).
However, there is a specific element that determines a specific time: the word “Cependant” forces the reader to comprehend time as a single moment. Thus, no time elapses between the images and the depicted activities are necessarily simultaneous.

Simultaneity is further emphasised by the depiction of clocks in some images. Like a big world clock, various clocks display the time at various locations around the world. As a result, the simultaneity of actions happening in the very same instant is underlined. However, the clocks also imply that night becomes day and that this cycle is used to measure the passage of time. Their depiction reminds us that the universe is filled with cycles. The scientific and philosophical concepts of time are therefore implicitly addressed.

The cycle of time is also projected by the construction of a never-ending narration. The accumulation and juxtaposition of images create the feeling of infinite repetition, enabled by the spiral bound of the book. For Marie Derrien, the spiral helps the readers to “physically” comprehend the cycle of time and its immutable continuity” (see 178). Additionally, as there is no front and back cover, there is no clear beginning or end. Simultaneity and perpetuity are thus concepts that co-exist in Cependant as two facets of the notion of time.

A book that shares many similarities with Cependant is Istvan Banyai’s first wordless book Zoom (1995). It consists of 31 sequential pictures, each depicting other pictures within. The narrative in Zoom moves successively from a barnyard to a ship, to a city street, a desert, an island and, finally, to outer space. Every image comprises a detail of the next one; the two images are again encapsulated in the following one, and so on. The centre of each encapsulated space becomes unperceivable and provokes imagination. Potentially, space extends far beyond
the limits of the book to the immensity of the universe.

The constant zooming in and out forces the reader to change his subject position every two pages and to see farther every time he or she turns the page. The shift in perspective, size, and point of view constantly transforms the relativity of what we see, as what we see is constantly transformed into something else. These pictures undermine reality, as we are not sure about what we see, where we are, and when something happens. Space and time thus become nebulous concepts.

Furthermore, if we consider each page individually, the images seem to be taken in different moments of the day and at different places as well. However, taken as a whole, time and space are challenged and undermined. The mise en abyme technique (sequence of pictures within pictures) creates the feeling of an unlimited expansion both in time and space. We are in front of a virtually infinite chain of images, one depicting an embedded detail of the next one, and all occurring at the same time. This chain of countless aspects of the same scene escapes from earth’s limits to space, as we can see on the last page. Indeed, the earth is depicted as a tiny white dot on a black page, symbolising the immensity of the universe, where time becomes relative.

The technique with magnified pictures is also used in Barbara Lehman’s wordless book *The Red Book* (2005). It is about a girl coming across a red book left on the side of a snowbank. While sitting in class, the girl decides to go through the book. She discovers pictures of what appears to be an archipelago taken from the sky, which is progressively magnified to reveal a tropical island, a beach, and then a boy. As the magnification continues, the girl sees the boy picking up a book identical to hers, and right in the next image she sees him looking through the pages of his red book. The images in the boy’s red book depict the girl sitting in her classroom, presented in a consecutive zooming pattern as in the beginning of the story. They both look at each other and exchange surprised smiles. The girl decides to meet the boy after school and buys red balloons to fly to the tropical island. As she goes up into the sky, she drops her book. A man cycling by discovers the book and decides to take it with him, leaving the reader to wonder what story the red book will reveal to its new owner. Just like in *Cependant* and *Zoom*, there is an open ending that allows a perpetual reconstruction of the story: Potentially, the red book could be found and dropped endlessly.
In *The Red Book*, there is a combination of image transitions, framing and perspectives that allow time to be implied sometimes as successivity and sometimes as simultaneity. In the first case, action-to-action image transitions together with zooming-in technique, imply the passage of time by gradually showing details of the girl’s movements and position. For example, the attentive reader will notice that the girl has gone ahead, as she has left behind a sign on the street and some paving stones.

The mise en abyme technique is also used in the *Red Book*. In *Zoom*, this technique is rather implied, as each detail occupies its own page and the idea of the embedded images must be constructed by the reader. In the *Red Book*, the images within images are clearly depicted on the same page. As the illustrations are framed in black and have thick white borders, the effect of a page within a page is created (see Beckett 123). For example, the boy catches sight of the girl reading the red book inside her classroom. In the foreground, the girl looks at the boy (and the reader), while she holds her red book showing the boy on his island, himself looking at her. By turning the page, this image is repeated, however, the scenery and protagonists are reversed. In the foreground, we can see now the boy on his island, while his
red book shows the girl in her classroom. The boy looks at the girl and she looks at him on the very same red book. At the moment when their glances cross, the time of the two stories coincides. Thus, simultaneity is enhanced by the encapsulated books that mime the effect of the mise en abyme.

Furthermore, there is a reduplication of images showing a child reading a book and so on that creates an infinitive sequence that appears to recur indefinitely, a constant mirroring of the same theme at the same moment. There are pictures within pictures, where children, in succession, appear to be reading several red books. All these children’s eyesights coincide and, as a result, they tend to look straight forward at each other, thus, the reader. Both eyesights, children’s and readers’, cross, while the various books regard distinctively the same red book, which the reader himself holds in his hands. Timelines collide, implying the very instant of simultaneous and crossed eyesights.

**Temporality**

Having discussed how passage of time within a visual narrative is depicted, the focus will now be on time as a phenomenon itself. We will use David Wiesner’s *Flotsam* (2006) as a vehicle to explore the depiction of temporality. The story is about a young boy who spends his day exploring the beach. He finds an old underwater camera and discovers a film inside. Going through the photos he has developed from it, he notices that the last print depicts a girl having taken a picture of herself while holding a photo of a boy, who in turn is holding a photo of another child, and so on. The protagonist takes out his magnifying glass and then his microscope to delve further into the picture. He sees even more pictures of kids holding pictures of other kids, all the way back through time. The chain of children ends with the image of the first boy who took his picture in the early 1900s. The protagonist realises that he is one of the kids who have found this camera. He takes a picture of himself holding the photo with the child’s pictures within pictures and hurls the camera back into the sea. The book ends with a little girl on a palm beach finding the camera.

The mise en abyme technique is once more used in *Flotsam*. The simultaneous presence of characters, made possible by the depiction of photos within photos showing various characters, implies here a return to the
past, rather a synchronisation of moments, as it was the case in *Zoom* and *The Red Book*. The depiction of one unique print that includes images within images of children from various geographic locations creates a web of connections across time and distance, while the reader is taken back in time. The journey of the camera acts as a metonymy for a journey through time. The children who have found and used the camera are linked by a long chain which extends back in time and across the world.

To produce the illusory sense or the present and the past, sepia and coloured illustrations are juxtaposed. For example, in *Flotsam*, by watching the photos of the children, vivid colours are used to imply recent years, while grey and sepia colours signalise the past and indicate the old age of the pictures. Furthermore, clues hinting at temporality and the variety of places are the kids’ different types of clothes, accessories, and haircuts. For example, we can see a child wearing a tie dye t-shirt, another one wearing a square shoulder jacket, both of them having a short buzz haircut, all indications of former trends, i.e. those of the ‘80s and ‘90s. Perhaps the most easily chronologically identifiable clothing trend is the one that depicts a boy and a couple of women wearing outfits typical of the early 20th-century style (sailor suit, knee high socks, knickerbockers, the

Ill. 6: David Wiesner’s *Flotsam* produces the illusory sense of the past, the present and the future.
flat cap for the boy, long skirts, tall stiff collars and broad hats for the women). The implication that the photos have been taken in different parts of the world is enforced by the different races of the children pictured; we can see a Caucasian, an Asian, an African and a Sami child.

The open ending opens a window to the future. On the last page, a girl finds the camera and in doing so, she could eventually make a picture of herself. She will then become part of the past, as all the other children. The open ending moves the story from the present forward into the future and leaves the past behind. And the cycle begins once more, as it is the case of the other wordless books discussed above.

**Conclusion**

Visual techniques found in wordless picturebooks, such as kinesics, zoom effects, magnifications, panelling, framing, colours and clothing become important elements to depict temporality and the movement of time and space. Additionally, a key tool to convey spatial and temporal relations in wordless picturebooks is the use of sequences. Transitions are tools that authors of wordless books use to render time and space prominent and, consequently, help unfold the story and attract the reader’s attention. It is within the reader’s discretion to interpret the silent images as well as the magic and mystery space between them and draw conclusions about what happens between them. This makes wordless books a medium heavily dependent on the reader’s participation. It becomes obvious that the reader’s ability to observe the tiniest detail of the silent narration, as well as his or her expertise in constructing the meaning, plays a major role in understanding the story.

Referring to comics, Harry Morgan argues that “we can narrate everything in images” (118). He continues by saying that indications of time and space can be drawn and that thoughts and intentions can be imitated. The use of verbal text follows the principle of economy and not the insufficiency of the image (see ibid.). Temporality and spatiality are significant influences on narrative in wordless narrations. Simultaneity, successivity, the perpetual circularity of time, and coexistence of past, present and future are successfully depicted in wordless books. These prove that a visual narration can indeed express anything, and does not need words as a means to convey meaning. The most interesting is that
the techniques through which time and space are insinuated are used in such sophisticated ways that they narratively challenge the reader, both child and adult.

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NOTES
1 Also see Children’s Literature Association Quarterly, 37.4 (2012), referring to the similarities between picturebooks and comic books.
2 For the Australian edition, the book was entitled The Treasure Thief.
3 For the Australian edition, the book was entitled The Fishing Trip.
4 This statement has been criticized by Neil Cohn, who argues that conveyance of meaning across sequential images’ depictions of space and time must be placed in the cognitive sciences (see 2010). However, Sarah McConnell’s article published in this issue applies the linear panel-to-panel analysis to discuss the sequential nature of picturebooks. She refers to McCloud’s panels’ transitions taxonomy in order to show how movement, time and “drama” form a continuous narration. (see 2016)
5 Isolated images are presented as detached one from the other with no interaction between them, neither in the expression nor in the narration. The associated images are “neither completely independent nor completely solitary” (see Van der Linden, 45).
6 According to Groensteen, “the ellipsis is the basis of the discontinuous language of comics”. It implicates “a jump in time and a displacement in space” (see 1999, 132).

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