

---

# Stop All the Clocks: Time in Postmodern Picture Books

Cherie Allan

Time, according to Ursula Heise (Heise 1997, p.48), is one of the most fundamental parameters through which narrative is organised and understood and the mode by which we mediate and negotiate human temporality. This human experience of time depends on cultural contexts that themselves are subject to change (p.48). The novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet (Robbe-Grillet 1962, p.133), claims that time no longer passes and that the question of chronology, of 'clocks and calendars', has become irrelevant. Time, as an aspect of the referential illusion created by conventional narratives, is being undermined, not only in postmodern novels, but also in postmodern picture books. In an effort, then, to understand these new temporal realities of the contemporary world and the ways in which they are represented in postmodern narrative, principally the postmodern picture book, I turned to Heise's text *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative, and Postmodernism* (1997).

It is Heise's contention that a fundamental change has taken place in the Western culture of time and it is my intention in this paper to examine these changes to our conceptualisation of time and briefly look at the causes of such changes. Following this I examine the ways in which these changes are reflected in narrative, with particular emphasis on the postmodern picture book.

Changes to the cultural sense of time in the postmodern era have been driven, according to Heise, by the technological, economic and social innovations of late capitalism (p.20). These changes of the past thirty or forty years have not occurred in isolation, thereby making it constructive to also look back to some of the changes that occurred in the latter part of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth centuries.

This modernist period experienced a changing cultural attitude towards time through the extended time scales made apparent by the theories of evolution and geology as well as through the discoveries of quantum physics relating to the behaviour of subatomic atoms. Further, the utilisation of the telephone, telegraph and radio made possible, for the first time, a disjunction of spatial and temporal distance prompting a need for the standardisation of time zones; for instance, Greenwich was declared zero meridian in 1884 (Heise, p.34). The narrative response to

such standardisation and mechanisation of public time, contrasted with private temporality, is reflected in the novels of Beckett, Joyce and Woolf, for example, in which the subject explores the spontaneous, non-linear meanderings of private temporality (Heise, p.37) through such devices as stream-of-consciousness. This disjunction between public and private time is perhaps best symbolised by the 'soft clocks' of Salvador Dali's artworks. These changes of the modernist period made it impossible any longer to think of time as 'a unified, homogeneous and neutral medium' and foreshadowed the more radical 'chronoschisms' of the postmodern era (Heise, pp.39-40).

More recent scientific discoveries have extended the boundaries of time scales both from the very large to the very small while economic pressures have seen an intense time-space compression leading to a shortening of the product life cycle resulting in a culture of instantaneity and disposability (Harvey 1990, pp.285-6). However, the most significant innovations, with regard to the effect on conceptualisation of time in the postmodern era, according to Heise, have been the advent of computer technology and satellite television (p.23). The information technology of the World Wide Web has contributed to the creation of a space in which information circulates without virtually any temporal delay. Twenty-four hour news visually juxtaposes quite different times and spaces, blurring any sense of distinction (p.24) and creating a culture of instantaneity and simultaneity. These technologies have given rise to 'technological time' which, according to Virilio (Virilio 1991, p.15), constructs a permanent present. This is particularly evident in the playing of computer games where the player becomes immersed in an extended present detached from any sense of past or future (Heise, p.46).

While mechanical clocks may have imposed a time frame upon people which alienate them from natural cycles, these clocks, along with radios and telephones, operate at human speed. Computer technology, on the other hand, operates on an electronic pulsation unrelated to any naturally occurring process and at speeds beyond human perception, giving rise to the 'nanosecond culture' (Heise, p.44).

These information technologies have not only created a desire for and expectation of instant availability (Heise,

p.25) but also led to the apparent acceleration of normal temporality whereby time horizons are shortened to the point where the present is all there is. The present is increasingly perceived as taking over from both the past and the future. How, then, are these temporalities represented in postmodern narrative?

Postmodern writers of adult texts such as Italo Calvino (*If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*), Robbe-Grillet (*La maison derendez-vous*) and Christine Brook-Rose (*Thru*) construct narratives which deliberately impede temporal progression and work to undermine the temporal organisation on which conventional narrative is based (Heise, p. 17). As a result Heise suggests that 'there arises a feeling that time itself has ceased to be a useful concept around which to organize experience' (p.29). David Lewis (Lewis 2001, p.87) suggests that writers and illustrators of picture books over the last thirty years have also, either consciously or unconsciously, been importing the approaches, techniques and sensibilities of postmodernism into their work. And one such concern, particularly (according to Heise) since 1980, relates to temporality. While conventional children's stories are generally narrated chronologically, postmodern picture books play with the temporal aspects of their narratives, utilizing complex temporal patterns which may involve parallel temporalities or the simultaneous placing of the narrative in past, present and/or imaginary moments in time.

Temporality is no longer a medium of continuity and coherence. Rather, Heise suggests, postmodern novelists rely on three major strategies of repetition, metalepsis and typographical experimentation to represent this notion of an extended or permanent present. The style of repetition (pp.56-58) referred to here differs from the modernist technique of relating the same event from different perspectives. Rather, the same scene is frequently repeated with minor variations, preventing the reader from constructing a coherent story or reality (Heise, p.53). This postmodernist repetition creates a temporality which is not ruled by cause and effect but rather by contingency and dispersion (Heise, p.59).

Metalepsis is defined by Gérard Genette (Genette 1980, pp.234-235) as the transgression of logical and hierarchical relations between different levels of narration. Heise sees

such transgressions occurring as systematic violations of the boundaries between a frame narrative and its embedded stories, thereby destabilising the narrator's control of that story (Heise, p.59) particularly when the boundaries between nesting and nested narratives are crossed by characters or other textual elements (p.60). Further, Heise suggests that conventional print typography and the book format have placed a number of constraints on how temporality has been presented. Increasingly, however, postmodern novelists use typographical experimentation to provide multiple reading itineraries and temporalities. For example, Brooke-Rose's novel *Thru* (1975) has a number of pages formatted in a manner similar to that of a crossword puzzle (Heise, p.62).

While each of these three strategies is variously employed in postmodern picture books the unique characteristics of the picture book, with its dual codes of signification and its brevity, not to mention the youthfulness of its implied reader, dictate that such strategies will be utilised differently.

Through the two systems of signification mentioned above, picture books lend themselves to the construction of narratives which are multi-stranded. This experimental juxtapositioning of two or more apparently concurrent narratives in the one text reflects the simultaneity and



Fig. 1

If I catch a fish we can cook it for supper.

What if you catch a whale, Granpa?

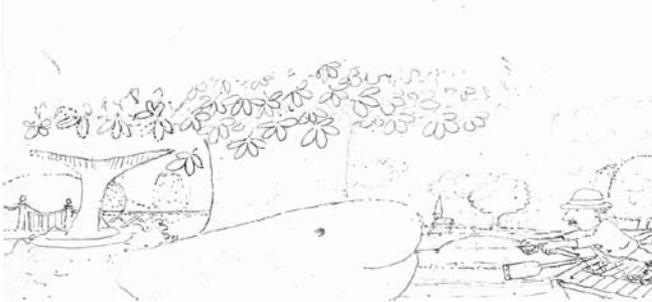


Fig. 2

instantaneity characteristic of Heise's premise of an extended present. John Burningham's picture book *Granpa* (1984) plays with narrative and temporal linearity through the presentation of parallel narratives on either side of the double page spread. While the right-hand page appears to be current story time (fig. 1), although this is by no means certain, the left-hand page at times seems to represent Granpa's memories (fig. 2), creating a situation where he is simultaneously living in the past and in the present. At other times the illustrations appear to be the granddaughter's imagination at play whereby she projects a number of possible futures into the present. The reader's attempts to construct a single, logical and chronological narrative are frustrated and interpretative certainty is denied.

*Voices in the Park* (1998), Anthony Browne's polyphonic picture book, contains four separate focalisers through whom the events are recorded. The repeated narrations confirm aspects of the events and highlight inconsistencies. The four voices are differentiated, not only by class, gender, age and mood, but also by changing seasons (fig. 3). These temporal shifts, suggested by the passing seasons, challenge the seemingly simple chronology of the written text which suggests that the events occur over one afternoon. The use of intertextual references in the guise of cameo appearances by Mona Lisa, Munsch's *Scream(er)*, *The Laughing Cavalier* and *Father Christmas*, locate a number of different temporalities into the present as represented by the temporal framework of the narrative.

Transgression between different levels of narration (metalepsis) is evident in David Wiesner's parody, *The Three Pigs* (2001). The tale begins conventionally enough with the wolf stalking the pigs. Ironically, the first break comes when the wolf huffs and puffs so strongly that he blows the first pig out of the frame (fig. 4). The moment of absolute transgression occurs as the wolf approaches the house of bricks. The traditional tale is placed on pause, or freeze

#### FIRST VOICE



It was time to take Victoria, our pedigree Labrador, and Charles, our son, for a walk.

#### FOURTH VOICE



Dad had been really fed up, so I was pleased when he said we could take Albert to the park.

Fig. 3

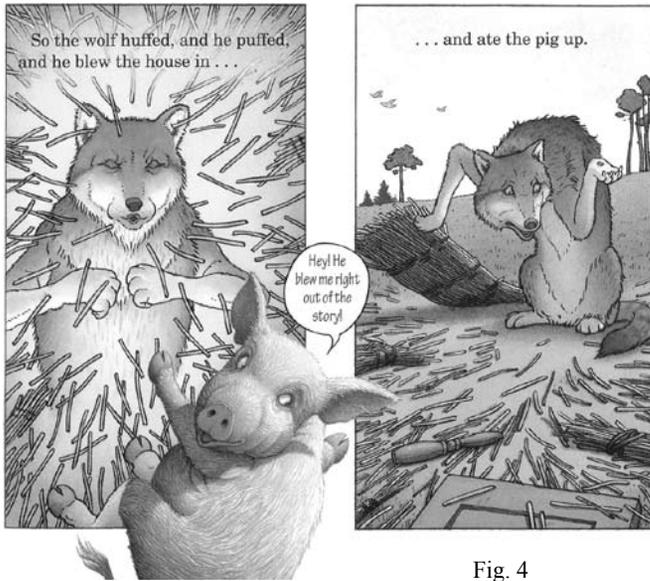


Fig. 4

frame, as the pigs take off on a paper plane constructed from the pages of the book. While the third person narration continues to run parallel to the direct speech bubbles of the characters as they wander in and out of a number of stories, it recedes into the background as pages become folded, discarded and ignored. Time appears to be suspended at one level while it proceeds at another (p.59), yet all moments in time seem to be equally accessible (p.124).

Undoubtedly, the picture books discussed above certainly challenge a conventional view of time. However, it is perhaps Paul Cox's picture book *Il Libro piu corto del mondo* (2002) which most noticeably embodies Heise's theory of an extended present, particularly through typographical experimentation. This is immediately evident from the physical construction of the book (fig. 5). Each page is framed in such a way as to evoke images of a television

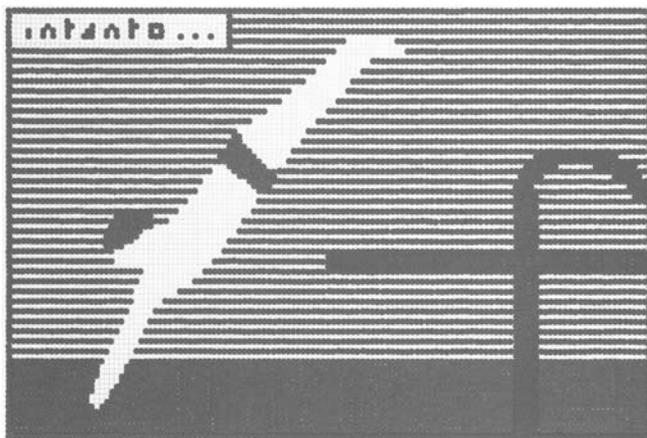


Fig. 5

or computer screen. The text relies almost exclusively on the illustrations to represent time and these images are constructed through the use of pixel style dots reinforcing the suggestion of a communications screen. The spiral design disrupts the conventional notion (and function) of front and back covers, denying any sense of closure. Order is not crucial, perhaps irrelevant, as no image is privileged above any other as the spiral allows the reader to begin at any point (See also Derrien 2005). The spiral also allows the reader/viewer to flip through the images in a manner similar to that of a television viewer using a remote control to channel surf, or a computer user surfing the net, juxtaposing disparate times and spaces.

The repetition of the only written text, consisting of the one word *intanto*, meaning 'however' or 'meanwhile', is the only evidence of a narratorial presence, and provides a tenuous narrative link between the images. Repetition, with



Fig. 6

minor variations, is utilized when a soccer game is played 'live' in one scene, meanwhile watched on the big screen by two children in another. However, in a third illustration the game is on television being viewed by two different children (fig. 6). This repetition, somewhat reminiscent of a *mise en abyme* trope, raises questions of whether the game is being played and watched simultaneously or at different times thanks to delayed telecast.

---

The motif of a clock is regularly, if randomly, repeated throughout the text, perhaps alluding to the notion that conventional perceptions of time are problematic and indicating a desire to challenge current conceptualisations and representations of time. The clocks do not necessarily record the passage of time in the conventional sense but rather lives being lived, simultaneously, in different time zones throughout the world, reflecting the postmodern contention that events are moments in time not necessarily linked to the past or future. Luis Borges (Borges 1981, p.176) suggests that each moment we experience exists, but not their imaginary combination.

And so, to the title of the text: *Il libro piu corto del mondo* ('The Shortest Book in the World'). With some 116 images over 58 pages (remembering that the average picture book is approximately 32 pages in length) this title cannot refer to the actual length of the text. Instead, I suggest, it refers to what Genette (1980) calls *durée*, or duration, (i.e. the time covered by the story of the text or narrative time) which, in this case, is but a single second or instant, again reinforcing the notion that we live in an extended present detached from any sense of past or future.

As this paper has demonstrated, there have been fundamental changes in the Western conceptualisation of time, which are clearly evident from the development of and demand for a culture of instantaneity and simultaneity. These changes have been driven by the technological, social and economic innovations of the past thirty or forty years, particularly the arrival of the World Wide Web and satellite television. Aspects of these changes are reflected in postmodern narrative and have led to alterations to both the way in which time is represented in postmodern narrative, as well as the uses to which time is put in the organisation and structure of such narratives. Will temporality continue to be a central concern of narrative, both conceptually and structurally? Only time will tell.



## REFERENCES

- Borges, J. L. (1981) 'Nueva refutacion del tiempo', *Otras Inquisiciones*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. Madrid: Alianza, pp.170-188.
- Browne, A. (1998) *Voices in the Park*. London: Corgi Books
- Burningham, J. (1984) *Granpa*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Cox, P. (2002) *Il Libro piu corto del mondo*. Rome: Corrani Editore.
- Derrien, M. (2005). Radical Trends in French Picturebooks. *The Lion and the Unicorn*. 29(2), 171-189.
- Genette, G. (1980) *Narrative Discourse*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Harvey, D. (1990) *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Heise, U.K. (1997) *Chronoschisms: time, narrative, and postmodernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, D. (2001) *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks: Picturing Text*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Macaulay, D. (1990) *Black and White*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Robbe-Grillet, A. (1963) *Pour un nouveau roman*. Paris: Minuit. Semio-text(e).
- Wiesner, D. (2001) *The Three Pigs*. New York: Clarion Books.



## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Cherie Allan has been a secondary teacher and teacher-librarian, and recently completed a Master of Education (Children's Literature). She is currently working on a PhD thesis at Queensland University of Technology under the supervision of Professor Kerry Mallan. Her thesis is entitled *Playing the game: Ways of reading postmodern picture books*.