

Re-reading *The Red Tree*: The art of Shaun Tan

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Abstract

This article re-reads *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan in the light of literary and art criticism. Discussing Tan's work as both thoroughly contemporary and richly dialogic with earlier epochs, it attempts to disentangle the clues of past and present interwoven into the powerfully resonant narrative. Not radically challenging the main interpretative lines, it offers alternatives to the widely accepted readings of this picturebook.

Key words: Shaun Tan, picturebook, art criticism, interpictoriality, embodied experience

Introduction

Undoubtedly, Shaun Tan is one of the most recognised and successful contemporary picturebook artists. The prestigious Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award which he received in 2012 and an Oscar for *The Lost Thing* in 2011 open a long list of Tan's achievements. Nevertheless, for what he has accomplished in his field, he remains a thoroughly modest, continuously self-reflective artist. In an exceptionally concise and unassuming biographical note posted on his website (Tan, 'About me'), Shaun Tan informs his readers that he graduated from the University of Western Australia with joint honours in Fine Arts and English Literature. The co-presence of literature and art, reciprocally informing each other, is continuously tangible in the artist's work.

What makes art and literature so interesting is that it presents us with unusual things that encourage us to ask questions about what we already know. It's about returning us, especially we older readers, to a state of unfamiliarity, offering an opportunity to rediscover some new insight through things we don't quite recognize.

(Tan, 'Picture Books: Who Are They For?')

What can be grasped from reading his interviews is that he works slowly and, rather than striving for an immediate effect of brilliance, he explores the artistic potential of social and personal themes, letting his ideas grow and develop in ways he finds fruitful and resonant.

Salisbury and Styles write about the artist: 'Shaun Tan's contribution to the evolution of the picturebook is immeasurable. This is not only

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because of the innovation, technical accomplishment and sheer creative ambition of his books, but also as a result of his writing and speaking on the subject' (2012: 44). Tan possesses a real talent for putting his sophisticated ideas across to his audience in a complex yet communicative way, and, what is more, he is invariably willing to share his views. However, although he cares much about his readers, he does not compromise his artistic credo in any way. In all endeavours he remains faithful to his idea of the artist's responsibility, which he defines as lying 'first and foremost with the work itself, trusting that it will invite the attention of others by the force of its conviction' (Tan, 'Picture Books: Who Are They For?').

As Tan is always persuasive and eloquent in his comments and interviews, he thus poses a challenge to the audience who might shun making their inquiries and feel discouraged from pursuing more interpretations. It all proves to the contrary, as Tan's unimposing attitude and personality invite further explorations of his books and their themes. The artist says, 'What really matters is whether we as readers continue to think about the things we have read and seen long after the final page is turned' (Tan, 'Originality and Creativity'). The esteem and long-term interest he enjoys among his audience as much as among educators and researchers, prove that the readers *do* continue to think.

'The Red Tree' and the critical perspectives

In numerous studies Shaun Tan's *The Red Tree* has been described as a 'writerly text' (see Wyile 2010 and Pantaleo 2015), pointing to the text's openness towards multiple interpretations. Critical perspectives vary, to name only a few, from education-rooted and education-oriented (Pantaleo 2012, Roche 2015) to literary (Reynolds 2007, Natov 2017), narratologist (Wyile 2010), and philosophical (Johansen 2015¹). A question arises then, whether there exist any important reasons to interpret the picturebook again or whether there exist any gaps in the criticism which would demand further explorations and initiate the process of rereading *The Red Tree*. The artist talks in such a way about

¹ Johansen's article is insightful not only due to the author's original reading of *The Red Tree* through the lens of Kierkegaard's philosophy, but also in as much as it sketches a very clear and comprehensive map of the criticism pertaining to *The Red Tree* almost to date (Johansen's article was published in 2015).

the book's interpretative potential: 'The ideas of the original book are very broad, and, I think, point more to a method of expression—of "emotional worlds"—rather than any very specific content, so it not only endures variable interpretations, it almost demands them' (Tan, 'Picture Books').

Undeniably, while Tan's book has most often been named as 'art', there is still a missing link in the existing criticism between the work and the possibilities of its extended interpretation as offered by the perspective of art criticism.² This article, while not necessarily redirecting the main flow of the already existing interpretations, aims to reconstruct the missing links, reading *The Red Tree* within the broad context of art, this time not 'picturebook art'. This is not to say that Tan's work would be best analysed outside the context of picturebooks, rather that, following Kieran's observation:

[C]oming to a fuller understanding and deeper appreciation of a kind of experience, to the extent that kind admits of attending to different aspects, taking up different perspectives and exercising different and finer discriminative capacities, requires comparative experience both within the relevant kind and of relevantly contrasting kinds. (2005: 142)

As *The Red Tree* has consistently been interpreted in the context of picturebook art and children's literature, I am taking this opportunity to move it slightly yet significantly and allow for the insights from the 'relevantly contrasting kinds' of art and literature.

Art appreciation and art discrimination

Tan's work, although thoroughly contemporary in expression, is richly dialogic with earlier trends and concepts.³ In this essay, I will emulate to a certain extent Tan's approach and refer to insights and inspirations reaching beyond strictly contemporary sources. One such source is

² 'Art criticism' is understood here very broadly and involves elements of historical perspective, the tensions between a direct reference and its influence, mainly in the form of interpictoriality; insights from the philosophy and ethics of art will also be taken into consideration whenever appropriate.

³ See for instance a thought-provoking discussion of Tan's art in the context of modernism and postmodernism by Lien Devos (2011) or Tan's comments on his painterly fascinations published on the artist's website.

Kakuzo Okakura's seminal essay of 1906, *The Book of Tea*. Okakura, focusing predominantly on Japanese art and its aesthetics and introducing it to the Western audience of his times, drew some illuminating comparisons between Western and Eastern art. What may be of significance at this point is that in a very straightforward way he laid bare the essentials and universals of art appreciation: 'The sympathetic communion of minds necessary for art appreciation must be based on mutual concession. The spectator must cultivate the proper attitude for receiving the message, as the artist must know to impart it' (Okakura 2006: 78). Creating or interpreting art is both a privilege and responsibility. In this text I will follow both paths, associating privilege with participating in 'the sympathetic communion of minds' and responsibility with cultivating 'the proper attitude'. Tan's understanding of the artist's responsibility towards his work corresponds with the spectator's responsibility of careful analytical exploration of the work. Okakura's 'communion of minds' is first created for the sake of the appreciation of the work and then, in return, it illuminates the artist and the spectator:

To the sympathetic a masterpiece becomes a living reality towards which we feel drawn in bonds of comradeship. The masters are immortal, for their loves and fears live in us over and over again. It is rather the soul than the hand, the man than the technique, which appeals to us,—the more human the call the deeper is our response. (Okakura 2006: 79).

Nevertheless, as Matthew Kieran warns in *Revealing Art*, some works of art, although provoking and evocative, may prove relatively superficial: 'Such works are poor because we expect art not merely to prompt but to guide and deepen our responses' (2005: 121-22). Kieran concludes with a succinct summary of views, questions and concerns an art critic faces when disentangling the dilemmas of meaningful and valuable art:⁴

The ultimate test of art lies in what reasons we have to value a work. Is a work original, expressive of distinctive qualities of mind, engaging, beautiful, insightful? Does it repay close study? Is it compelling time after time? These kinds of questions constitute the most basic test of how good a work is. Our understanding and

⁴ It is worth to note how Kieran's views, embracing and unifying artists and art lovers, echo Okakura's concept of communion.

experience of a work seeks to track such reasons. But not just any old experience will do. Amongst other things, one has to be open to and understand what the artist is trying to do; one has to be in a position to know what references and allusions are being made, to have developed through experience the capacity to make the right kind of discriminations. Striving for delicacy of taste is a never-ending process, akin to moral discrimination and understanding, which is impelled by a deep sense of curiosity and appreciation of the riches that art can bring to one's life conjoined with the humility to recognise that there is always more one could appreciate, be challenged and surprised by. This is as true for those striving to be artists as it is for those who appreciate art. (Kieran 2005: 255)

The critic's detailed discussion of how to tell the difference between poor and good art is particularly helpful in the context of Tan's work for it allows the reader/viewer to see Tan's picturebook as one which reveals qualities and dimensions of the human condition which they suspected to exist but could not quickly grasp or articulate. The responses are most certainly deepened, much more nuanced, for Tan's work, as any meaningful art in Pallasmaa's terms, 'makes us experience ourselves as complete embodied and spiritual beings' (2012: 13). Seeing the body and the world as inherently interrelated (and in this, following the implications of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology), Pallasmaa declares: 'Each form of art elaborates metaphysical and existential thought through its characteristic medium and sensory engagement' (2012: 49).

Shaun Tan's own words are very much in tune with the above observations, especially when it comes to the question of experience: 'Writing and painting is very much about trying different things based on hunches and intuition, often in a silly and playful way, and then looking at them critically to see if they make any kind of sense when cast against the backdrop of lived experience' (Tan, 'Picture Books: Who Are They For?') Although Tan defines his philosophy of artistic creation and artistic ideals in an exceptionally modest and straightforward way, the attentive and investigative readers/viewers will not be misled by the apparent simplicity and obviousness of the comments, testing the philosophy against the power of the actual work. The following part of the article will deal with the details of the embodied and spiritual thought and experience, made available to the reader/viewer through Tan's art in *The Red Tree*.

The embodied experience (or how much image there is in an image)

In Pérez-Gómez' view, 'human self-understanding, *recognition* of wholeness [...] occurs in experience and, like in a poem, its "meaning" is inseparable from the experience of the poem itself' (2013: 575). *The Red Tree* requires both visual and extensive sensual reading.⁵ It is a picturebook in which a child's challenging emotional and mental states have been translated into images. The scarce text is there to either support or frame the protagonist's experience and also to trigger and structure the reader's response. Majority of the researchers analysing the picturebook (see, for instance, Reynolds 2007, Pantaleo 2012, 2015, Church 2018, Natov 2017) insist on reading *The Red Tree* as directly portraying a child's depression, yet I am more inclined to believe that instead of an actual illness or pervasive mental state it explores the pains of the human condition in more universal terms. This observation will be examined later in this essay, especially in the light of the picturebook's closure, which some researchers find problematic (see Lewis 2015). It cannot be denied that the dominant theme is that of melancholy or even depression, but there are other important issues, such as interpersonal and social communication, the elusive power of expression and articulation, the temporary drama of not being heard or listened to. The obstacles of various kinds come both from the inside and the outside of the character's world. The protagonist, a young child, is portrayed as a shy and reserved person, and the surrounding world offers neither understanding nor compassion. The text and the images explore the gaps between the child and the world and do it evocatively yet subtly.

Pallasmaa contextualises the status and role of the image within the sensory domain, explaining:

The image is usually thought of in terms of the purely visual and fixed picture, but a characteristic quality of the senses is their tendency to mingle and integrate; a visual image is always accompanied with repercussions connotating experiences in other sense modalities [...] The visual image itself is a constructed fusion of fragmented and discontinuous percepts. (2011: 50).

This explanation can be further developed, adding two observations from another humanistic and phenomenological artist, Alberto Pérez-Gómez,

⁵ For a more textual literature-oriented discussion of the very idea and the possible application of 'sensual reading', see Syrotinski and Maclachlan 2001.

who claims that '[o]ur sentient bodies are our means for thinking and understanding' (2013: 573), and that '[b]odily perception is synaesthetic' (2013: 572). These insights illuminate the inherently complex nature of the image as such and lead to the conclusion that it is inevitable to explore its sensual potential in Tan's picturebook as apparently there are meanings there which are virtually inaccessible otherwise.

In numerous readings of *The Red Tree* the analysis of the visual as if naturally comes to the fore. A picturebook, in which '[m]uch of its strength comes from the counterpoint between the eloquent, detailed, and complex visual images and the economical use of the text' (Reynolds 2007: 101), mostly attracts the eye. While not denying the expressive and narrative power of the visual, I would like first to concentrate on the sound, both in its phonostylistic aspect and as a constitutive element of the acoustic imagery, not losing sight of the synaesthetic⁶ properties of perception as revealed in Tan's work. Wyile touches on the problem of perception when writing about the metaphorical potential of *The Red Tree*: 'I've come to the conclusion that this is very much a book about learning to see and varying levels of perception and vision' (2010: 135). Supporting such a reading in principle, I will nevertheless insist on the extensive, sensual reading as it reveals other than 'just the visual' spheres of human experience. Moreover, the fact that the book's protagonist in most illustrations is not making eye-contact, as she is portrayed with downcast eyes, reinforces the idea that the book's theme goes beyond the visual.

Sound

Shaun Tan in *The Red Tree* underpins the visual characterisation of his main heroine with the use of phonostylistics. As the picturebook's protagonist is shy and seemingly lonely, the auditory quality of her 'voice' supports the personality features and the circumstances of the narrative. The shy, murmuring voice can be heard due to a conscious sound pattern, for instance a frequent use of voiceless consonants,

⁶ I refer here to Reuven Tsur's discussion of neuropsychological and literary synaesthesia and his preoccupation with the literary one for the sake of studying literature. Tsur sees the neuropsychological synaesthesia as 'involuntary and rigidly predictable' (2007: 27) and in stark contrast to the flexible and creative literary phenomenon.

especially /s/ ('sometimes', 'worse', 'darkness', 'sense') and the semivowel /w/ ('worse', 'world', 'wait'). The auditory quality of the sentences, which are very short, minimalistic and often interrupted by longer pauses (imposed by and masterfully synchronised with page breaks), is also very suggestive, addressing the lack of determination and self-consciousness of the heroine.

While the above examples address the experiential effects of sound symbolism in the picturebook, the following analysis will look at the auditory imagery and the way it develops the book's meaning potential. Depicting indistinct water circles on the water surface,⁷ the cover of the book suggests the delicate sound of raindrops or the heroine's tears falling, and the pastel colours used for the cover reinforce the delicacy and monotony of the sound. Another illustration, placed before the title page, shows the main character standing on a stool and speaking through a primitive horn. What the reader can assume is that her words are incomprehensible, yet, surely, some sounds must be articulated. The inaudible sound of this illustrations is translated into a chain of meaningless, separate letters (sounds) which dispersed by the wind are assembled two pages later, to finally produce a subtle version of the book's title in soft red. A number of consecutive images also contain more or less subtle auditory clues. In the illustration where the girl leaves her room walking with apparent difficulty through a massive pile of dead, necessarily rustling leaves, or when the heroine is floating in a small boat against towering ships and presumably loud crashing waves are against her as well. An illustration portraying the protagonist trapped in a gigantic glass bottle and wearing an ancient diver's helmet would allude to, among others, the muted or muffled reiterating echo of her voice if she ventured to speak. The image also addresses the acoustic potential of the stormy sky, and the distant murmur of the sea painted far below the horizon.

In all of the above circumstances the heroine makes or is confronted with some sounds or noises, yet she seems to struggle with them on her own. Her solitude is conspicuous, and she looks in many ways separated from the world around her ('darkness overcomes you', 'nobody understands'). Surprisingly enough, although the auditory imagery

⁷ The character and nature of the water are ambiguous, alluding on the one hand to a wide sea, on the other, an almost limitless pool of tears.

features richly in *The Red Tree*, the real auditory barrier is mentioned only once in the text, in a powerful phrase: 'the world is a deaf machine'. The accompanying illustration shows the girl in the central part of the image yet of a relatively small size, with her head down. While the nature of the building the girl finds herself in is unspecified (it most readily reads as a clash between an enormous factory hall and a giant temple or Aztecs' pyramid), its acoustic qualities and the auditory environment can easily be deciphered. The place must be unbearably loud; the undefined machines placed along the building's walls all produce a lot of steam with a hissing sound while a gigantic aeroplane, like a large totem, is towering high above people's heads. The plane is equipped with an enormous golden engine which, when started, may produce an oppressive noise. Not only is the 'world' a deaf machine which cannot hear or listen to the girl, but it also generates so much noise that it virtually contaminates itself and the people who live there. The auditory imagery used in this illustration shapes and evaluates the space portrayed; it also helps recreate the mental states, in which the girl and other characters find themselves.

In *The Red Tree* the sound in the image can be directly referenced (with the use of musical instruments and megaphones), alluded to (in the form of singing birds or other animals making noise, steaming pipes, whirling waves, etc.), or vaguely suggested (the potentially muffled voice heard or not heard from under the diver's helmet). It appears that the overall structure of the picturebook can be read through the acoustic lens as well, as an extended scheme of first a crescendo and then a sudden diminuendo. The first four images never occupy more than a single half-page, and of them three seem composed, visually as well as 'acoustically'. The fourth image signals a shift both in the visual and the acoustic sphere. The image gets darker and 'louder' (the suggestion created by the vast amount of dead rustling leaves) and thus prepares the reader for the growing noise and oppression which await the protagonist. The images to follow are impressively big, usually taking two-thirds of each doublespread, with diminishing margins. The images seem to oppress, overpower, and visibly shout. Only the last two images in the book restore relative peace; they get visibly smaller again, the noise as if quietens down as the girl returns to her bedroom.

Touch and materiality

The ‘sound’ has been used by Tan both literally and figuratively (in the form of acoustic imagery), significantly expanding the interpretative potential of the story. The synaesthetic tactility of the image has played no smaller a role in the book’s striving for meaning. To start the discussion of the importance of touch, it is worth noting that Tan’s choice of an artistic technique strongly connotes the tactile in many insightful ways, for, in Pallasmaa’s words, ‘materials and surfaces surely have a language of their own’ (2011: 48). Images in *The Red Tree* are either multilayered collages of different materials and surfaces or mixed-media works to a certain extent resembling a multilayered encaustic painting. The achieved ‘density’ and blurred effect of the image structure metaphorically correspond to the book’s themes, and the expressive and narrative power of such tactility should not be underestimated.⁸

In the picturebook, Tan shows a number of materials which communicate symbolically or metaphorically. In the majority of illustrations, the images of steel, glass, stone surfaces, brick or concrete walls are used to support the psychological atmosphere of isolation and alienation of the main character. One of the first doublespreads in the book develops the theme of touch in detail. It shows the protagonist walking down a dark street with a few other characters present (among them a huge tar-crying fish floating low above the girl). The fish, due to its enormous size and disturbing looks, attracts much of the reader’s attention. The soon deadly unnatural environment the fish finds itself in,⁹ namely, the surrounding dryness (the animal is deprived of water) and the exceptionally dense tar of its ‘tears’, tactilely reinforce the message of the text accompanying this illustration: ‘darkness overcomes you’. The ‘dryness’ of the image translates into the dryness of the human condition, deprived of life-sustaining moisture. This doublespread

⁸ Berys Gaut in *Art, Emotion and Ethics* shares an observation on the potentially reciprocal nature of the sensory and the ethical: ‘it should be noted that even abstract works can teach us, particularly about sensory matters, for they can get us to see things and to notice visual and acoustic subtleties that we might otherwise have missed’ (2007: 186). Pallasmaa sees the intersections in even more radical terms: ‘each form of art elaborates metaphysical and existential thought through its characteristic medium and sensory engagement’ (2012: 49).

⁹ An analogy between the fish and the girl, feeling like ‘a fish out of water’, also comes to mind.

addresses the problematic tactility in other ways as well. One of the characters holds a (dry and rustling) newspaper; another one carries two plastic shopping bags. There are two more characters walking down the street, and although they hold each other's hands, there seems to be no lively contact between them (they walk together, but do not talk or look at each other). All the above cases of 'touch' show it as superficial and failing to integrate the characters with each other and with their surroundings.

The synaesthetically communicated 'temperature' of some of the images seems to be another constructive element of the sensual reading of *The Red Tree*. It is encoded mainly through the use of colour and suggested texture of the surfaces portrayed (naturally, Tan addresses the surfaces through the use of sensory imagery). Comparing two consecutive, seemingly contrasting doublespreads, one showing the protagonist within a factory/Aztec pyramid environment and the other, capturing the girl climbing a ladder, allows the reader to draw unambiguous conclusions. While the first doublespread in the sequence in a complex visualisation of coldness (note the dominant colour palette ranging from violets, blues, greys to black, and the stone and steel effect of the walls), the latter image evokes suggestive connotations with fire (for apart from the symbolic oranges and reds, the image also communicates through the flame-like shapes of the paper-clippings used for collage). It seems that no matter what the social and psychological temperature is, the effects of fire and ice can be equally destructive.¹⁰

Resonance, not reference (or more image)

In many comments and interviews, Shaun Tan explores the multiple inspirations behind his artistic ideas. He does not see the inspirations in historical, hierarchical or educational terms. He openly admits: 'Whether the source is recognisable is irrelevant: what does matter is the resonance' (Tan, 'Originality and Creativity'). Tan's use of interpictureoriality is meaning and effect oriented. In some cases, he uses single motifs as an egg attached to a string. Featuring in one of the images in *The Red Tree*, it possibly alludes to Piero della Francesca's

¹⁰ A comparison with Robert Frost's short poem, 'Fire and Ice' would be a welcome elaboration here, yet it naturally reaches beyond the scope of this article.

Brera Madonna painting where an egg hangs down from a shell placed right above the head of Madonna. In Tan's book, the egg is visible in some other illustrations although it is no longer 'attached'. The significance of an egg as a symbol of life, creativity and potentiality is carefully developed throughout the picturebook, although not conspicuously. An illustration showing a scene of a school performance has the egg placed in a central position in a bird-cage held by a ghostly lady. Another egg in a nest can be found in the illustration featuring a drawing on a wall. Interestingly, the egg is at all times displayed in the vicinity or company of a bird, a fact addressing the cyclicity of the process of creation and a sense of attachment. The egg motif mirrors the motif of the red leaf present in all the illustrations in the picturebook, which at the end of the story will grow into the titular red tree. This example of interpictureoriality enhances the metaphorical and symbolical dimension of the illustrations.

The repetitive inclusion of the snail in several of the illustrations and the variations on the theme of the snail (a snail shape drawn on a stage or a sequence of images featuring different portraits of the snail) recreate the intriguing snail motif of Francesco del Cossa's painting. In both Cossa's and Tan's works, the snail seems to have no clear symbolic or narrative significance. For some reasons, the motif has been included and carefully displayed, so there is no coincidence in its presence in the picture. In Tan's book, the snail can possibly be read as a silent and patient companion for the protagonist, a paradoxically (because so small and insignificant) stable counterbalance against the turbulent moods and emotions the girl feels.

Another approach towards interpictureoriality is revealed by Tan's reworking of Rene Magritte's *The Teacher* in the already mentioned school performance scene. Tan's large group of characters in bowler hats crowding around the stage acquire their meaning as either literal teachers or more figuratively, officials. The characteristic crescent of the moon, visible above the teacher's head in Magritte, in Tan's illustration is placed further to the top right corner, almost to the background. The little space that existed between the figure and the moon in Magritte's work has been as if extended and divided into planes, with Tan placing a group of strange-looking performers between the teachers and the moon. Significantly, there is no eye contact either between the teachers or the teachers and the performers. Neither do the performers look at each

other. The characters are awkwardly ‘not looking’, which adds to the weirdness of the scene. The only exception is a square-shape character whose one eye is directly and disturbingly establishing a direct eye contact with the reader (and it should be added that this is the only example of a direct eye contact in the whole book), with the other eye being a circular part of a machine or toy. The meaning of the potentially ambiguous image clarifies to a certain extent when the source is evoked for comparative analysis; characters can be ascribed to their functions within society, and the prevailing indifference communicated in Tan’s work seems to be doubled due to the deciphering of the visual quotation from Magritte.

One of the central illustrations seems to be, perhaps remotely, inspired by one of Hieronymus Bosch’s visions of hell, namely, ‘The Hell’ part of the *Haiwain Triptych*. Some fragments of Tan’s composition (lighter towers with ladders leading to them against the fiery red background and a group gathered in the left bottom corner), the colour scheme of the scene and the overall atmosphere of the image allude to Bosch’s painting. The protagonist on a ladder seems to be escaping from the metaphorical flames and the fire of the hatred or aggression embodied by the group on the left. One of the collage-made attackers is wearing glasses in which the reader can decipher words like: ‘aggressor’, ‘attack’, another spits a broken sentence which reads: ‘Your friends/are all/the dullest/dogs I know’, still another carries a hammer. The unpleasantness of the scene is heightened by the presence of a scared cat, hiding in the farthest left, behind the group of aggressors. The illustrations recall Bosch’s art in one more respect: it shows a great number of seemingly discordant elements which gradually analysed and deciphered start to make a more organised sense than it was suspected before. The contrast between reference and resonance discussed by Tan is fully exemplified by his work and, most importantly, by his use of inter pictoriality. The allusions, quotations or reworking co-create and reinforce many of the ideas Tan depicts, as they most definitely go beyond the concept of an echo or simple resemblance. Through their rootedness in older works of art they participate in the recreation of a world which is a continuation, not a new creation, and, what is more, we

can see Tan's art as being part of the very long tradition of art dealing with the human condition.¹¹

The history of painting is by no means the only source for Tan's exploration of art. The doublespread portraying the protagonist in a factory/temple-like building employs several important architectural and cinematic clues. The very shape, colour and materiality of the building echo gigantic pyramids of the Aztecs (which were multifunctional as they served religious, political and communal purposes). However, the characteristic type of scene arrangement and the factory-like feel, connoted by the steaming machines and the exaggerated proportions between the architectural structures and the human figures present there, are conspicuous and this leads to comparisons with the German expressionist film *Metropolis*, directed by Fritz Lang. The latter clue may be a key to a reading of the girl's intriguing individuality as compared with other figures portrayed there and the lit lamp she 'hides' inside her chest. The light might symbolise the heart, which other characters portrayed in the picture do not have. The motto framing *Metropolis* which reads: 'The mediator between head and hands must be the heart'¹² helps translate this doublespread in the view of the language and theme of this story.

Tan's fictional world and his view of organicity

Although Tan seems more readily¹³ to portray his characters within an indifferent or even hostile world, he subversively and as if secretly also

¹¹ Sandra Beckett succinctly comments on the different positions of the reader in the inter pictorial experience: 'Readers do not have to be familiar with the artistic references to appreciate the narrative. It is important to remember that illustrators and authors who reference or recreate preexisting pieces of art in their own works do so to enhance a new and original work of art. However, familiarity with the artistic style or artwork quoted adds further intertextual meaning. The more cultural background the reader brings to the picturebook, the more resonance it will have, as with any reading experience' (2012: 207).

¹² In the original German version, the quote reads: 'Mittler zwischen Hirn und Händen muss das Herz sein.'

¹³ Tan says about working on *The Red Tree*: 'Originally I was planning to paint pictures about a range of emotions; fear, joy, sadness, amazement and so on. But the more I worked on this, the more I found the negative emotions—particularly

offers some hope and consolation. Describing his approach and technique, he shows his interest in how different elements ‘combine and react’ (Tan, ‘Originality’). He seems to have a kind of organic and cohesive vision of art in which details are not randomly juxtaposed or assembled on a page, but where all the constructive items are interanimated to collaborate on the meaning. The books show a generative bias in that they are evoking, provoking, inspiring, and most of all, offering new insights. The implications they signal or suggest are most often open-ended, leading to new queries and solutions (and in that they respond to the category of the ‘revealing art’ defined by Kieran).

In Tan’s art, there are no accidents. Instead, there are coincidences and interrelations. In *The Red Tree*, organicity is encoded on several levels. The most obvious level is the visual presence of the natural world which, although not ostensible, is valid. The weather (rain, storm, sun, wind) and landscape are carefully and intricately portrayed. There are many animals, mostly hidden (except for the giant fish): the already studied snail and birds with or without eggs, a cat in ‘the hell’ scene, another black cat with a halo in the school performance image, a cloud of butterflies passing by. There are also miniature animal illustrations quoted from old books, which feature owls, a crocodile, a snake, beetles, spiders and magical creatures such as dragons (in the scene alluding to a board game). The animals do not perform any critical roles in the main narrative, yet their presence seems meaningful if not for the sole reason that they counterbalance the industrialised, unnatural world.

The egg-bird cycle is mirrored in the overarching leaf-tree motif,¹⁴ both addressing the cyclicity of human life, its relation to nature and the potential of rebirth. Tree and leaf are two aspects of the same organism; set side by side they represent wholeness created by individuals. As for most of the book, the red leaf remains unattached, so the girl feels unattached as well, her sense of belonging is tested against many environments and circumstances. However, when she returns home, she starts experiencing the sense of belonging, the leaf can take root. A similar pattern can be observed in Tan’s treatment of separate letters/sounds and their painful regroupings into words (as represented by the first illustration with the girl uttering seemingly meaningless,

feelings of loneliness and depression—were just much more interesting from both a personal and artistic point of view’ (Tan, ‘Picture books’).

¹⁴ Some aspects of the cycle motif are discussed in Wylie 2010.

unrelated sounds). Letter/sounds in this picturebook gradually gather to generate meaning; while the first images show separate letters, the latter reveal words and sentences. Meaning is something not inherently absent from the represented world, but something which *can* be achieved yet not without effort or, occasionally, help from others. The inclusion of different languages and alphabets (there are words and sentences in English, Finnish and Chinese) imply possible communication, provided there are others around who can read, decipher and interpret the message.

Metafictively, the book as such speaks as a single, internally and intricately united organism. It has a somewhat untypical structure: its front and back covers are structurally inseparable as they form one large image, there is no proper title page, and, in the central position, there is a brief, much telling personal dedication ‘for inari’.¹⁵ The organicity metaphor is further developed with the use of the endpapers. The back endpapers show a radical change of colour when compared with the other endpapers. The opening pages were dull and grey, with few marks and lines and a small dark leaf close to the right margin. The back endpapers are vivid red, the overall impression alluding at the same time to the structure of a magnified red leaf and blood vessels in a close-up.¹⁶ As the opening of the book communicated separateness and stagnation, the end suggests more connectedness and pulsing life.

The book’s closure and ethical attitudes

Most critics see the child’s depression as the core issue the book deals with. What should follow is that the protagonist seems to be ‘the problem’. I would offer a different reading of *The Red Tree* in this respect. Instead of being the problem, the little girl turns out to be ‘the

¹⁵ ‘for inari’ can be most readily read as a dedication to Shaun Tan’s wife, Inari Kiuru, an artist of Finnish origin and red hair. This explains the use of two sentences in Finnish in the school performance scene, the Finnish word ‘inkku’ meaning ‘ink’ written on the wall where the protagonist sketches her profile. This also leads to a possible explanation of the use of Chinese (the language of Tan’s father) in several images as alluding to the artist’s roots. The biographical traces help strengthen the organicity of the book, linking the work with its artist.

¹⁶ Imogen Church (2018) sees there an allusion to a throbbing heart.

solution'.¹⁷ She is shy, an introvert perhaps; she finds it hard to communicate, which is signalled in the very first image inside the picturebook. But at the same time, there are hints which overtly lead to a conclusion that although meaning and understanding are difficult to achieve, they are by no means impossible. Slowly but surely, the sense emerges from the separate letters/sounds the girl utters. The girl, 'with whom the reader is invited to identify' (Tan, 'Picture books') becomes the embodiment of the metaphorical 'heart', able to reach 'home' and feel the sense of belonging, at least for some time. However, it is difficult to agree that what Tan offers in *The Red Tree* is 'a way of normalising depression for children who suffer from it' (Natov 2017: 164) or that the red leaf growing into a red tree means hope and 'suggests the way the adult writer/illustrator knows that depression will lift and things will be all right' (Natov 2017: 163). David Lewis (2015) would be right observing that 'Shaun Tan's metaphorical depiction of how depression might be cured or ameliorated is simply trite' if Tan indeed offered this narrow meaning. Most certainly, Tan deals with depressive and melancholy states and emotions, but he does not deal with mental illness.¹⁸

Apart from the insistence on the illness motif, there is another view which needs further modification or clarification. Lien Devos says that 'in *The Red Tree*, the threatening and bizarre images are products of the girl's mind and are not caused by others' (2011: 19), and this reading seems to be in line with other interpretations, positioning the problem *inside* the protagonist. While not denying the melancholic complexity of the main heroine and the depressive states she finds herself in, I would like to focus attention on the *outside* as well, as I believe this will allow us to see other layers of the book. As the finale of the picturebook reveals, the girl is capable of experiencing pleasure, feeling satisfied and smiling, with seemingly not much around her (the red tree) to inspire such reactions. If we accept that the red tree is a metaphor for community, a group of interrelated parts which are no longer separate,

¹⁷ The doublespread showing the girl inside of a big empty bottle does not need to be read as her silent cry for help, but as the girl herself being the message. This ties in with the 'heart' reading suggested by the *Metropolis* clues.

¹⁸ For the reasons presented above, it is difficult for me to fully accept Imogen Church's reading of this picturebook in the light of the clinical illness hypothesis.

then we can read back to realise what prevented this type of identification and sense of belonging in the girl.

I would rephrase Devos' observation and say instead, that 'the threatening and bizarre images' are the reactions of the girl to the external world and, in a way, many are caused by others, even if, at times, not directly. I have already discussed how we can see in many doublespreads that the meaning is not permanently lost but absent for external reasons (no understanding, no empathy, no interpreter around). Several doublespreads suggest the possibility of easing the difficulties by others, as, for instance, in the image where the girl watches beautiful butterflies and clouds passing by, but she cannot free herself as her window is locked from the outside, with 'REGRET' written on the padlock. This image subversively offers a kind of empathetic agency to the reader who would venture to find the key and open the lock. Another scene ('the hell' allusion) shows the girl attacked verbally and physically threatened (see the group of aggressors with a hammer); her distress is a direct result of the external circumstances, not her supposedly mental problems. The hope she gains when back in her own room may be a result of finding herself again in a friendly environment, a place she can peacefully belong to, with no difficult or unpleasant tasks ahead.

Pallasmaa observes that 'all significant artistic images evoke ethical attitudes' (2011: 70). The picturebook enables exploration and reflection upon the human condition in the contemporary world which is portrayed as simultaneously ancient and modern, organic and industrialised. One of the possible reasons why *The Red Tree* attracts so much critical and audiences' attention is its unique combination of art and theme. Shaun Tan's work is a perfect embodiment of Berys Gaut's reflection that 'moral and cognitive claims tend to be aesthetically relevant when expressed by artistic means; it is the way, or mode, in which ethical and other insights are conveyed that makes them of relevance' (2007: 170). Tan's art undoubtedly inspires ethical insights and considerations. His thoroughly humanistic approach in *The Red Tree* shows the protagonist deserving understanding, empathy and support, and it also reveals the nonobvious power of the girl.

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