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Visualizing Childhood: Multimodal Artistic Strategies in Suzy Lee's *Shadow* and Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines contemporary picturebooks as part of visual culture and as agents in the cultural construction of childhood. Drawing on multimodality, intermediality and visual culture studies, it proposes a visually oriented framework for analysing how images, page design and narrative structures shape meaning in children's literature. The study combines qualitative multimodal close reading with an interdisciplinary case-study approach focusing on Suzy Lee's wordless picturebook, *Shadow* and Shaun Tan's graphic narrative, *The Arrival*. Using operationalised categories of layout, framing, colour, panel transitions and intermedial references, the analysis traces how both works stage thresholds, silence and embodied movement, and how they invite readers to negotiate experiences of play, trauma, migration and otherness. The findings show that these texts construct childhood as both vulnerable and agentic, while also foregrounding ethical questions about who is seen, by whom and under which visual regimes. The article argues that a visually oriented approach can support educators, librarians and curators in designing age-appropriate mediations of demanding picturebooks and in addressing issues of inequality, displacement and memory without resorting to didactic simplification. In doing so, it positions children's literature as a significant site of cultural imagination and critical discourse in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Picturebooks; Visual Culture; Multimodality; Intermediality; Childhood and Migration; Ethics of Representation

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1. Introduction

The visual elements in children's literature are not merely decorative but serve as critical components of storytelling and cultural transmission. Albers'[1] analysis of Caldecott award-winning literature highlights how images in children's books embody cultural representations and invite diverse interpretations, often rendering visual binaries that encourage oppositional readings. This aligns with Zbaracki's[2] exploration of global trends in children's literature, where visuals are increasingly used innovatively to enhance storytelling and engage children, exemplified by the emergence of "blended narratives" that combine elements of picturebooks, comics, and graphic novels.

Historically, the concept of visual instruction in children's literature, as discussed by Schmideler[3], has been instrumental in imparting spatial and temporal knowledge, making subjects come alive through a dynamic interplay of visualization and verbalization. Farrar et al.[4] further emphasize the importance of visual literacy, noting the challenges and opportunities it presents in terms of power, authenticity, and representation, particularly in research with marginalized Katinaitė's[5] research on Lithuanian children's books reveal a consensus among readers and publishers on the importance of visual harmony in books, which is crucial for educational purposes and cognitive development. Guerrero Ruiz & López Valero[6] argue that children's literature is not only a social or psychological phenomenon but also an artistic-aesthetic product that includes various forms and functions, further emphasizing its cultural significance. Anafiah[7] highlights the role of children's literature in character development, as it contains positive values that contribute to the intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and social growth of children.

The aim of this study is to contribute to a theoretical understanding of children's literature as part of the broader visual culture of the 21st century and to show its potential as a tool of cultural imagination and critical discourse.

To anchor these claims in concrete objects from the outset, this article analyses two widely discussed picturebooks: Suzy Lee's *Shadow* (2010) (see **Appendix A, Table A1**) and Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006) (see **Appendix B**, **Table A2**). These works were selected as paradigmatic cases for their sustained critical reception, formal innovation (wordless or near-wordless narration), and recurrent use in educational and curatorial contexts.

Research focus and questions. This study asks: (RQ1) How do specific visual-material strategies (e.g., framing, gutter, salience, color) structure reader navigation and meaning-making in *Shadow* and *The Arrival*? (RQ2) In what ways do these strategies intersect with representations of otherness (migration, difference) and with ethical considerations in classroom and curatorial mediation?

Contribution. The article contributes an applied multimodal framework (see section 3.1) and model close readings that connect general claims about visual culture to page-level evidence.

1.1. Children's Books as a Medium Between Art, Education and the Market

The cultural industry often reduces art to consumer products, simplifying the imaginary to sustain itself within the capitalist market, which poses a challenge to the educational potential of children's literature. However, education can act as a form of resistance, presenting art as a means of aesthetic fulfilment and critical thinking, offering children alternative perspectives on the world[8]. Children's literature functions as an educational tool that imparts moral knowledge and broadens aesthetic perception, influencing children's personality development through exposure to diverse cultures and values.

Picturebooks are recognized for their educational significance, as they cultivate children's interest in reading and art, stimulate imagination, and support cognitive and interpersonal growth. The design of children's books, encompassing materiality, layout, and illustrations, is crucial for narrative articulation and reader engagement, yet remains under-researched from a design perspective[9]. Despite their educational potential, mass-market children's picturebooks often face invisibility and illegitimacy in academia, though they are prevalent in schools and households, suggesting a need for their inclusion in curricula to introduce written culture and literature[10]. The commercial aspect of children's books is significant, as children have long been a target market, with companies increasingly engaging them directly through various marketing techniques[11]. I explicitly distinguish between (a) interpretive claims about the works' affordances and (b) empirical claims about child readers. The present article limits itself to (a), while indicating peda-

gogical implications that require mediated, age-appropriate practice.

1.2. The Transformation of Visual Forms in the 21st Century

The transformation of visual forms in the 21st century is characterized by a profound shift driven by digital technologies, which have redefined aesthetics, communication, and cultural expression. The digital transformation of cinema, for instance, has led to a new visual aesthetic that transcends traditional cinematic boundaries, integrating digital tools and software to create hybrid visual forms that resemble video games and graphic novels more than traditional photography[12]. This shift is part of a broader societal trend where visual media have become more dominant than text, facilitated by the accessibility of digital tools that allow individuals to create and manipulate visual content, thereby enhancing visual literacy and cultural participation[13]. The audiovisual sphere and creative industries have undergone morphological transformations, marked by a transition to network-based functioning and a convergence of artistic and creative practices, which have been accelerated by digitization[3].

In political communication, visual information has become a primary tool, overshadowing verbal forms and playing a crucial role in shaping political realities[14]. The omnipresence of digital images across platforms like social media and virtual worlds has necessitated new analytical approaches to manage the information explosion, highlighting the interactive and autonomous capabilities of digital imagery[15]. This visual dominance is further evidenced by the transformation of traditional visual art, where digital technology offers new forms of cultural expression and participation, reshaping the interaction between art and society[16]. Emerging digital aesthetics, such as vaporwave and pixel art, reflect the cultural nuances and artistic autonomy fostered by technological advancements, illustrating the transnational nature of contemporary visual culture[17]. The poster, as a form of visual communication, has also evolved significantly, expanding its influence through digital platforms and maintaining its role as an effective medium for conveying messages and prompting action[18]. Ultra-realism in visual transformation design leverages psychological insights to enhance the effectiveness of visual communication, demonstrating the intricate relationship between visual form and human perception[19]. Within picturebooks, these broader visual shifts often appear as remediation: print layouts emulate cinematic montage or interface-like sequencing, while exhibitions curate picturebooks as visual art objects (see §3.2).

2. Childhood as Construction and Representation

Historically, childhood has been perceived as an unstable concept, with its representation shifting significantly over time. Philippe Aries' seminal work highlighted how childhood was once depicted as a miniature adulthood, evolving into a distinct phase characterized by innocence, a notion that has been both embraced and contested in various media representations[20]. The media plays a crucial role in constructing childhood, often portraying children as innocent or, conversely, as knowing and adultified, reflecting broader societal changes and ideologies[20]. This duality is evident in the transition from traditional media to digital environments, where children are increasingly seen as active participants in their own narratives, challenging older, more passive representations[21]. Literature and art have also contributed to the construction of childhood, often romanticizing it as a period of innocence and purity, yet simultaneously acknowledging its complexity and the adult nostalgia that shapes its portrayal[6].

The Romantic era, for instance, idealized childhood as a time of purity and potential, a view that has been both perpetuated and critiqued in subsequent cultural texts. The representation of childhood in media and literature is not static; it is influenced by globalizing forces that introduce new ways of seeing children as more socially participative and less biddable, reflecting a shift from viewing children as mere social investments to recognizing them as complex individuals. This evolving representation is further complicated by the commercialization and sexualization of childhood in contemporary media, which some argue erodes traditional notions of innocence[22]. Ultimately, the construction and representation of childhood are deeply intertwined with societal values and ideologies, continuously reshaped by cultural, economic, and technological changes, and reflecting both the aspirations and anxieties of the adult world[23]. Following

children's literature theory, the analyses refer to an "implied child reader" rather than presupposing what actual children think or feel[5, 24]. This avoids over-generalizing reception while clarifying how the works position readers through visual address.

3. Methodological Framework: Interdisciplinarity, Multimodality, Intermediality

This study draws on an interdisciplinary methodology combining literary analysis, social semiotics, visual literacy studies, and intermedia aesthetics. The primary method involves close multimodal reading of selected children's books—both print and digital—focusing on how meaning is produced through the interaction of textual, visual, and interactive components.

Multimodality, as framed by social semioticians[25], refers to the orchestration of multiple semiotic modes—language, image, gesture, sound, spatial layout—to create layered meanings. In children's literature, this is manifest in "blended narratives"[26] that cross the boundaries between picturebooks, comics, and animation.

The concept of intermediality[27] further extends the analysis by examining how literature interfaces with other media—such as cinema, music, and digital design—and how these transitions generate novel aesthetic and narrative experiences. As Magagnin[28] suggest, children's literature increasingly reflects intermedial sensibilities, which not only expands the expressive palette of the book but also restructure reader engagement.

Drawing from visual culture studies[23, 29], the article approaches childhood as a socially constructed and visually mediated category. Literature and media both construct and deconstruct childhood identities through iconic images and symbolic codes. This study critically engages with those codes—especially in representations of marginalized identities[9, 30]—to examine how visual elements shape children's perceptions of difference.

This study adopts an interdisciplinary methodological framework that combines close multimodal reading with principles of visual culture analysis, media theory, and social semiotics. The core research method is a case study analysis of selected contemporary children's books, chosen for their innovative integration of visual and textual elements and their relevance to the construction of childhood identity in visual culture.

One main category of texts was selected for in-depth examination:

Contemporary picturebooks, exemplified by works of Shaun Tan and Suzy Lee, were analyzed with a focus on artistic strategies, including visual metaphors, the expressive use of silence and empty space, and non-verbal storytelling. These works demonstrate how visual design—through framing, composition, and abstraction—can convey complex emotional and narrative layers without relying on verbal narration.

The case study method enables a contextualized and layered reading of these texts, highlighting the aesthetic, ideological, and technological mechanisms through which children's literature participates in the shaping of contemporary visual culture and in the social construction of childhood.

3.1. Operationalizing the Analysis

Qualitative multimodal close reading with iterative coding of page/spread elements. Two paradigmatic cases (*Shadow*, *The Arrival*) selected for (i) wordless narration; (ii) critical prominence; (iii) availability of stable print editions for page-accurate analysis.

Analytical lenses and codes (after Kress & van Leeuwen[31]; Nikolajeva & Scott[32]): composition (left/right, top/bottom), framing & gutter, salience (size, contrast), vectors (gaze, movement), contact (offer/demand), colour & texture, materiality (format/fold-outs), sequencing (panel transitions), and silence (absence of verbal text as meaning resource).

For each spread, I (1) describe salient features; (2) interpret their narrative/affective function; (3) relate them to ethical/representational issues where applicable; (4) cross-check with scholarship[5, 33–38]. **Table 1** presents analytical categories and their operationalization.

3.2. Picturebooks at the Intersection of Visual Art, Digital Media, and Curatorial Practice

In addition to their literary and pedagogical functions, contemporary picturebooks increasingly inhabit a space between literature and visual art, inviting reconsideration of their material form and aesthetic function. Many authors and

illustrators deliberately engage with artistic strategies drawn from installation, printmaking, conceptual art, or artist's books. In this context, the picturebook emerges not only as a narrative vehicle, but as a performative object—its layout, structure, and physical manipulation become integral to the reading experience. Books by artists such as Suzy Lee, designed as fold-out or accordion formats, activate the materiality of the book and choreograph the reader's engagement through rhythm, spatial progression, and visual tension. Similarly, works like Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* evoke the logic of memory archives or museum displays, where imagery functions as a silent testimony that prompts affective and contemplative responses. These visual-textual practices resonate with the wider landscape of digital childhoods, in which reading is increasingly shaped by post-print environments and multimodal experiences. Picturebooks are often adapted into interactive applications, augmented reality formats, or animated versions, and readers—especially children—encounter stories not only through text and image, but also through touch, sound, and motion. Such hybrid reading practices challenge conventional literary categories and reposition the picturebook as a fluid cultural interface that operates across media. The visual strategies explored in this article—such as silence, spatial duality, metaphor, and gesture—remain meaningful in both print and screen-based storytelling. Moreover, the convergence between picturebooks and contemporary exhibition practice offers new possibilities for public engagement and education. Institutions around the world—such as museums dedicated to picturebook illustration, national galleries, or international art exhibitions—have begun to present children's books not only as educational tools, but as artworks. These exhibitions often foreground the aesthetic quality of visual storytelling and its capacity to address social and political themes, including migration, gender identity, and belonging. Presenting picturebooks within gallery contexts also draws attention to curatorial decisions, spectatorship, and the performative aspects of reading and viewing. As such, the contemporary picturebook can be seen as both a cultural artifact and a visual medium that circulates across literary, artistic, and institutional spheres. Curatorial implications. Museums and galleries increasingly present picturebooks as artworks, foregrounding spectatorship, installation display, and performative reading. This curatorial framing amplifies the ethical stakes of representation and invites dialogic programming with educators (§5).

Table 1. Analytical categories and operationalization.

Analytical Category	Observable Features/Coding Cues	Operationalization (What We Infer/Code for)
Salience	Relative size, contrast, placement, sharpness, detail	Hypothesized focal points that guide attention and meaning emphasis
Vectors	Lines of action/gaze, directional cues, movement implied by gesture	Narrative directionality and relationships between depicted participants
Framing/gutter	Panel borders, spacing, separation vs. overlap across the gutter	Boundary work: degrees of connection/disjunction between story spaces or moments
Color/palette	Hue, saturation, value; limited vs. varied palette; texture	Affective tone and symbolic contrasts that scaffold interpretation
Materiality	Format, foldouts/accordions, page turns, paper stock, trim size	Embodied manipulation and performative reading effects on meaning-making
Sequencing	Panel transitions (moment-to-moment, aspect-to-aspect), pacing, repetition	Temporal modulation and rhythm of inference across images
Silence	Absence of verbal text, ellipsis, wordless spreads	Meaning generated by omission; readerly inference and ethical restraint

4. Results

Shaun Tan and Suzy Lee are renowned for their innovative contributions to the realm of picturebooks, each bringing a unique perspective and style that challenges traditional narratives and visual storytelling. Suzy Lee's work (see **Appendix A**, **Table A1**), such as *Mirror* and *Shadow*, employs meta fictive elements to explore the complex relationship between fiction and reality. Her use of "mirrors" in these books serves to reveal, reframe, penetrate, and engulf,

thereby suggesting that fiction and reality are not only interactive but also inseparable, challenging the conventional dichotomy between the two[15].

In contrast, Shaun Tan's (see **Appendix B**, **Table A2**) picturebooks, like *The Red Tree* and *Cicada*, delve into existential themes and human condition. Meanwhile, *Cicada* uses whimsical illustrations and a narrative of bureaucratic monotony to explore themes of liberation and transformation, culminating in a metaphorical flight that resonates with readers of all ages[14]. Tan's *The Arrival* and his retrospective *Creature* further showcase his ability to blend narrative and visual art to address themes of migration, identity, and belonging, often using fantastical creatures and surreal landscapes to evoke emotional and narrative depth[12]. Both authors utilize the picturebook format to engage readers in a multi-layered experience, where visual and textual elements work in tandem to construct meaning and provoke thought. This approach not only captivates young audiences but also invites older readers to reflect on broader societal and existential themes, demonstrating the versatility and depth of picturebooks as a literary form[21].

A canonical spread (**Figure 1**) divides the page horizontally: the "real" upper field (objects) vs. the shadow world below. The central gutter functions as a hinge; silhouettes extend across it, softening the boundary. The restricted black grey–yellow palette heightens contrast, guiding salience to the child's gesture (vector) that initiates transformation. The bottom "shadow" fauna reconfigures mundane objects (vacuum hose → serpent), exemplifying semiotic recategorization via silhouette abstraction.

The book scripts an embodied choreography: turning the page and scanning across the gutter enact the very crossing it thematizes. Silence (no words) externalizes interior play without psychologizing; affect arises from graphic rhythm rather than verbalization.

Materially, *Shadow*'s landscape format and high-contrast printing produce gallery-like legibility; thematically, it stages agency through manipulation of absence (shadow), resonating with feminist readings of gesture and space[16, 32, 34].

4.1. Case Study: Suzy Lee—*Shadow*

Suzy Lee's *Shadow*[26] is a metafictive and minimalist picturebook that offers a conceptually rich exploration of the interplay between reality and imagination, as well as fiction and materiality. Entirely wordless, the book unfolds across double-page spreads that visually separate two realms: the real world of a child in a basement occupying the upper half, and a fantastical shadow world occupying the lower half. The book's central gutter acts not only as a physical binding seam, but also as a narrative mirror and conceptual threshold, marking the fluid boundary between the mundane and the magical. Everyday objects—such as a vacuum cleaner or a bicycle wheel—cast exaggerated shadows that are reimagined as dragons, wild animals, or dreamlike forms, enabling a shift from realism to fantasy that mirrors the child's internal world. For an analytical schematic of salience, vectors and the gutter as threshold. **Figures 1–4** indicate representative spreads referenced in the analyses.

This dynamic spatial composition exemplifies spatial multimodality and intermedial awareness, positioning the book itself as a performative medium. The restricted palette of black, gray, and yellow enhances visual contrast and rhythm while maintaining semantic clarity. Lee's deliberate use of silence invites an embodied and interpretive mode of reading, where gesture, posture, and transformation become primary semiotic tools. In this sense, the child is portrayed not only as the protagonist but also as the author and performer of the imaginary world—affirming the idea of childhood as a space of creative agency and cognitive autonomy (see **Figures 2** and **3**).

Critics have highlighted Lee's sustained engagement with the materiality of the book as a narrative device across her works[39] as well as her strategic use of mirrors and doubling to challenge conventional boundaries between fiction and reality[40]. Her works often employ non-everydayness as a structuring principle, generating narrative environments where fantasy and realism coexist in equilibrium. Furthermore, *Shadow* engages readers emotionally and ethically, activating the sentimental potential of children's literature through visual poetics and experiential interpretation[41]. Semiotic readings of related books such as *Wave* underscore Lee's ability to navigate complex emotional and philosophical themes through minimalist visual languages[42]. Ultimately, *Shadow* exemplifies Suzy Lee's innovative approach to visual storytelling—where the book becomes both a story world and a metatextual object, and where the reader's engagement is at once intellectual, sensory, and affective.
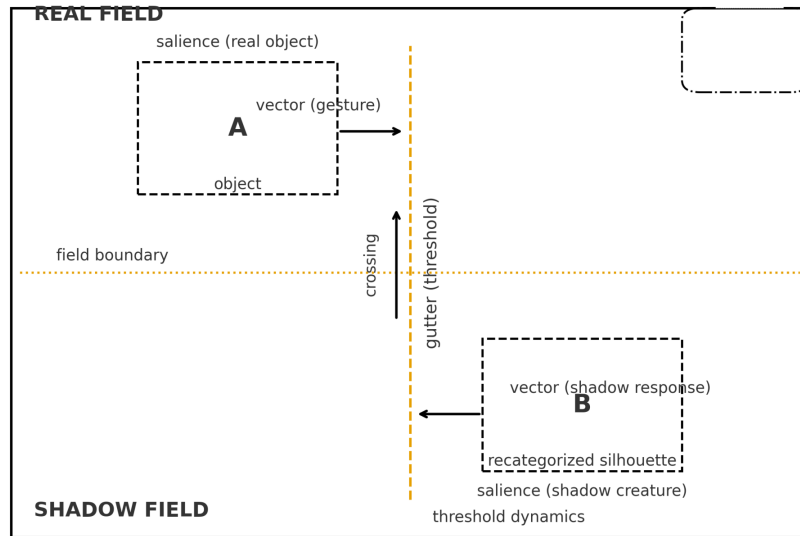
Figure 1. Analytical schematic for Suzy Lee's *Shadow*: mapping of salience, vectors, and the gutter as a conceptual threshold between the real and shadow fields.
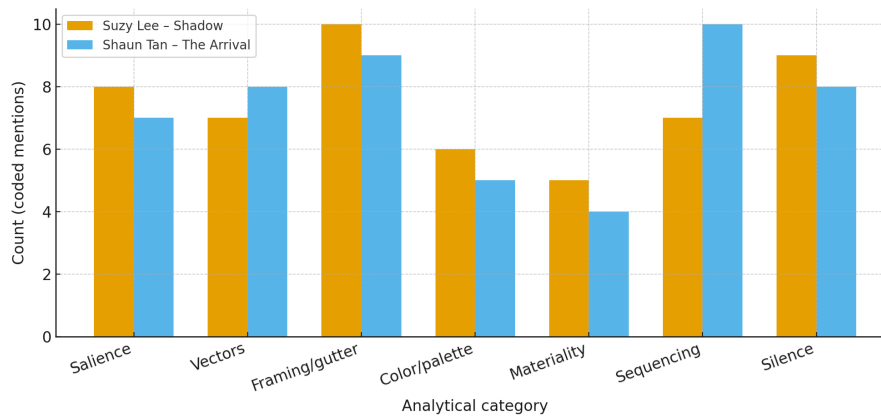

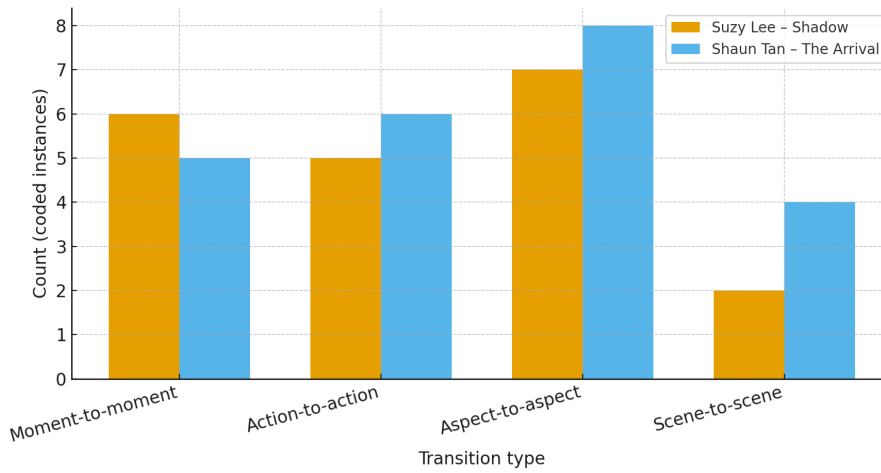**Figure 2.** Analytical category emphasis (illustrative counts).

Figure 3. Panel transition types (illustrative counts).

4.2. Case Study: Shaun Tan—*The Arrival*

Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* [38] is widely regarded as a landmark work in contemporary picturebook and graphic novel discourse, offering a deeply affective, wordless visual narrative that meditates on themes of migration, trauma, and cultural estrangement. The story follows an unnamed protagonist who leaves his family and embarks on a journey to an unfamiliar, fantastic city populated by surreal architecture, indecipherable symbols, and hybrid creatures. Told entirely through sepia-toned illustrations evocative of archival photography, the narrative constructs a silent universal language that transcends verbal limitations and renders the migrant's experience legible to readers across cultures [43, 44]. This silence functions not merely as an absence, but as a metaphor for the voicelessness and vulnerability of the displaced subject, compelling the reader to engage through visual inference, empathy, and embodied interpretation. Tan's medium-specific narrative strategies are rooted in the grammar of comics: panel transitions, framing, and the manipulation of the gutter enact complex operations of temporal modulation and focalization, allowing the reader to inhabit the protagonist's spectral and fragmented experience [37]. Through this, *The Arrival* conveys the cyclical nature of migration, as well as the intergenerational trauma and longing it entails [45]. The presence of the child, while not always foregrounded, operates as a symbolic anchor, representing memory, emotional continuity, and the hope of adaptation. The father's journey is framed as much by his physical dislocation as by his psychic attachment to family and the imagined possibility of reunion. Visually, the book combines realist detail and fantastical invention in a dreamlike visual register that blends melancholy with wonder. The nostalgic tension of the imagery—achieved through muted tones, architectural strangeness, and gestural mimicry—imbues the narrative with a temporality that is both historical and timeless [35]. Tan incorporates origami motifs and metaphors of folding to represent the relationship between homeland and new world, reinforcing the idea of memory as something both compressed and expandable [38]. In doing so, *The Arrival* becomes more than a migration narrative; it is a visual meditation on displacement, belonging, and the ethics of reception. Ultimately, Tan's work exemplifies the potential of multimodal and intermedial literacy to convey complex emotional and sociopolitical realities to both child and adult audiences. Through silence, ambiguity, and visual eloquence, *The Arrival* invites readers to imagine the world through the eyes of the newcomer—and to recognize the shared human longing for safety, connection, and home.

A sequence of small panels (**Figure 4**) simulates archival contact sheets; panel-to-panel changes (moment-to-moment; aspect-to-aspect) slow temporality [28]. Unreadable scripts and hybrid creatures universalize estrangement without indexing specific ethnic caricatures. Sepia tonality and filmic vignetting embed the narrative in a pseudo-historical aura, mobilizing what Nabizadeh terms "visual melancholy" [38]. Abstraction does not erase specificity so much as it withholds it to invite empathetic projection; this enacts an ethics of reception aligned with decolonial cautions against essentializing the Other [2, 44]. Where present, the child anchors affective continuity (memory, hope) rather than discoursing on "migration" per se (see **Figure 5**); the book positions an intergenerational audience via domestic reunion motifs (§5).
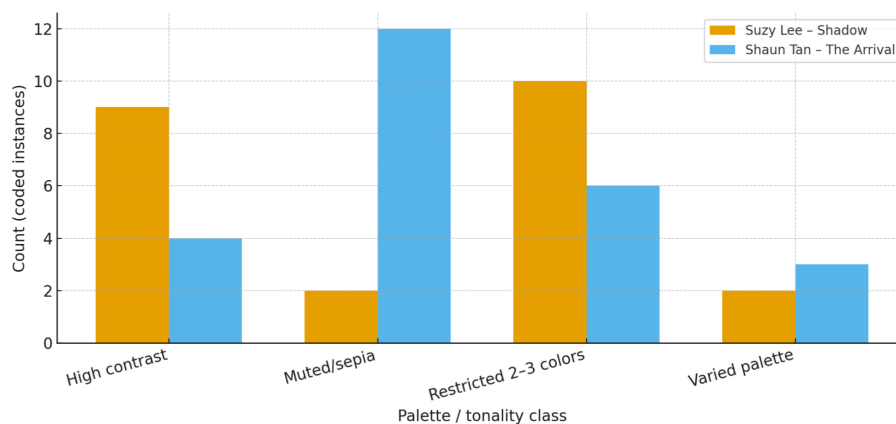

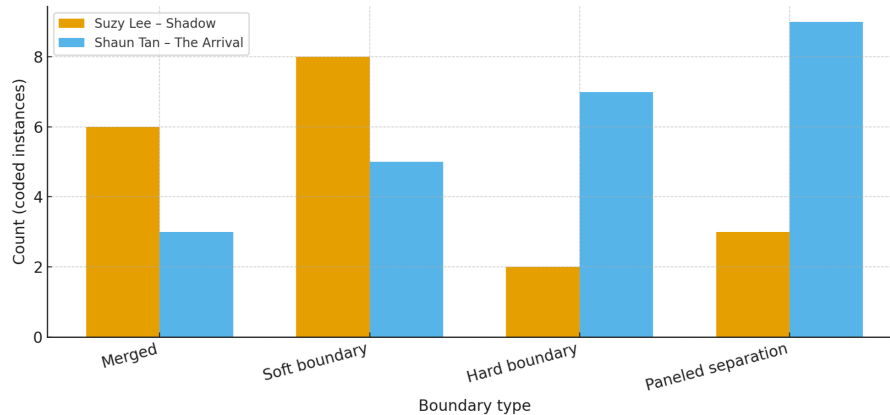**Figure 4.** Palette and tonality classification (illustrative counts).

Figure 5. Gutter/framing boundary types (illustrative counts).

4.3. Cross-Case Synthesis

Both books construct thresholds (gutter; illegible scripts) that require readers to negotiate ambiguity. *Shadow* uses spatial duality and metaleptic crossings; *The Arrival* uses seriality and archival grammar. In each, silence is not absence but a resource that redistributes interpretive labour across image, sequence, and the reader's embodied handling of the book.

5. Discussion: Ethics, Aesthetics, and the Politics of Representation

The results of this study have demonstrated that contemporary picturebooks—particularly those by Shaun Tan and Suzy Lee—are not only artistic artifacts, but also deeply ideological texts situated at the intersection of visual culture, childhood construction, and sociopolitical discourse. The preceding analysis has shown that visual narratives can encode complex experiential, emotional, and ethical structures without the use of verbal language. However, as recent research in visual and children's literature studies suggests, the aesthetic strategies employed in such narratives cannot be separated from the ethics and politics of representation, especially when they concern marginalized identities. In the context of *Shadow* and *The Arrival*, visual storytelling becomes a mediating force between the reader and culturally encoded notions of identity, displacement, gender, and power. The representation of childhood in these works is inseparable from the broader visual regimes of the 21st century, in which children's roles are increasingly defined by active participation in meaning-making, rather than by passive reception Yet,

this agency is not distributed evenly: children of different racial, cultural, gendered, or socio-economic backgrounds continue to be framed through dominant visual grammars that may reinforce stereotypes or aesthetic violence.

As Zecca Castel[46] notes, the colonial gaze persists in the framing of marginalized others, and a decolonial aesthetic must intentionally disrupt such framings by offering alternative, dialogical forms of seeing. *The Arrival* responds to this imperative through its strategy of universalized abstraction—the protagonist is unnamed, the language is unreadable, and the setting is fantastical, making the migrant experience accessible without resorting to ethnic caricature or cultural essentialism. This silent ambiguity enacts an ethic of empathy, enabling readers to inhabit alterity without appropriating its specificity. At the same time, this very ambiguity requires critical scrutiny: does abstraction risk erasing lived realities, or does it foreground shared human vulnerability?

Ritter's[44] emphasis on the responsible depiction of violence is particularly relevant here. Both Tan and Lee resist direct visualization of traumatic experiences; instead, they rely on suggestion, metaphor, and spatial composition. In *Shadow*, trauma is not thematized explicitly, yet the doubling of real and imagined worlds suggests psychological negotiation, perhaps even a protective dissociation. The gutter functions as a semiotic and affective threshold, and the child's manipulation of shadow forms suggests not just play, but a process of symbolic integration. In this way, Lee's book participates in the visual ethics advocated by Viljoen[47]. who calls for indirect representation of violence to avoid retraumatization and objectification.

Furthermore, Krishnan's[25] argument that aesthetic form must be read as embedded in political discourse affirms

the analytical approach adopted in this article. Lee's use of folding composition, limited color palette, and the interplay between physical materiality and narrative rhythm aligns with feminist and decolonial methodologies that foreground embodiment, gesture, and spatiality as meaning-making resources[39]. *Shadow* destabilizes normative constructions of girlhood by presenting the child as both agent and author of meaning—a strategy consonant with Marshall's[34] reading of feminist pedagogies in graphic narratives.

In this regard, *The Arrival* repositions the refugee not as an object of pity, but as a figure of imaginative centrality. As Tan's retrospective *Creature* further confirms, his work consistently merges surrealist aesthetic with socially engaged narrative, inviting contemplation of alterity without moralizing simplification[48].

The ethics of curation, addressed by Maron et al.[33] are also relevant in the pedagogical circulation of these works. As materials that often enter school curricula and reading programs, picturebooks like *Shadow* and *The Arrival* must be handled with didactic sensitivity, particularly when engaging readers from historically marginalized backgrounds. As Araujo Pestana[8] suggests, positive visual representation in ethnic-racial children's literature can foster empowerment and identification, especially when illustrations challenge prevailing aesthetic hierarchies and affirm diversity without tokenism.

Moreover, as Alone[30] reminds us, visual narratives have the power to destabilize dominant aesthetic canons—a task that both Lee and Tan undertake through non-linear storytelling, open-ended interpretations, and refusal of genre constraints. In line with the article's broader argument, this aesthetic disruption is not merely formal, but ideological and epistemological, inviting children and adult readers alike to reimagine childhood not as innocence lost, but as a critical, imaginative site of negotiation and resistance.

Finally, following Mannay's[29] insight, the double potential of visual representation—as both empowering and disempowering—must remain central to any discussion of children's literature. What determines this potential is not simply content, but framing, design, reader positioning, and cultural literacy. As such, the analysis of Tan's and Lee's picturebooks calls for continued scholarly attention to the aesthetic and ethical entanglements that define contemporary visual narratives for young audiences.

This article does not quantify children's experiences; it interprets how the books position an implied child reader and an intergenerational audience[5, 24]. Any educational impact depends on mediation by caregivers/teachers and on contexts that respect age and background.

Following Viljoen[47], the cases favor indirectness (metaphor, suggestion) over graphic depiction; this can reduce retraumatization while preserving space for dialogue.

Children need not command the term to engage with fairness, belonging, and difference. Aesthetic cues (estrangement, hospitality scenes, unequal power) scaffold guided discussion appropriate to developmental stages; curatorial and classroom design should avoid exoticizing frames[47, 49].

6. Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that a visually oriented approach to children's literature offers a rich and necessary lens for understanding how texts for young readers function not only as aesthetic objects but also as culturally and ideologically charged artifacts. By drawing on interdisciplinary methods that combine literary theory, visual culture studies, media theory, and semiotics, the analysis foregrounds the significance of multimodal and intermedial strategies in shaping the representation of childhood, identity, and otherness in contemporary picturebooks.

The close readings of Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* and Suzy Lee's *Shadow* illustrate the transformative potential of wordless or near-wordless narratives. These works mobilize visual storytelling to articulate complex affective and political realities—migration, imagination, trauma, and agency—through silence, metaphor, spatial design, and performative materiality. In doing so, they challenge both traditional narrative structures and normative visual grammar. They also confirm the central hypothesis of this study: that children's literature in the 21st century must be recognized as a dynamic site of cultural production, deeply embedded in visual regimes, digital aesthetics, and ethical representation.

The contribution of a visually oriented approach to the study of children's literature lies in its ability to bridge textual analysis with material, affective, and sociopolitical dimensions. Such an approach brings into focus the nonverbal, sensory, and performative aspects of reading, which are especially salient in early literacy and visual literacy de-

velopment. It also makes visible the ideological functions of images and design choices—how they include or exclude, empower or silence, embody or abstract.

At the same time, this approach raises important challenges and avenues for future research. One major challenge lies in developing critical vocabularies and methodologies that account for the full spectrum of multimodal meaning-making, particularly in texts that resist conventional interpretation. Another lies in the ethical curation and pedagogical mediation of such materials, especially when they deal with sensitive themes like displacement, violence, or social marginalization. Scholars and educators must consider how visual narratives affect different readers—and how they might be mobilized in classrooms and cultural institutions to foster empathy, critical thinking, and cultural awareness.

Future research should continue to explore the intersections between visual aesthetics and social representation, particularly regarding gender, race, disability, and class. Comparative studies across cultures, technologies, and readerships can further enrich our understanding of how children's literature functions within the global media ecology. Moreover, greater attention should be paid to reader response, embodied cognition, and transmedia adaptation, all of which are key to grasping how children experience, interpret, and interact with visual narratives.

In conclusion, by repositioning children's literature within the broader field of visual culture, this study advocates for its recognition not merely as a didactic tool or artistic form, but as an active participant in the cultural, ethical, and aesthetic shaping of childhood in the 21st century. This reconceptualization opens new critical pathways for scholarships and practice—ones that are as imaginative, complex, and visually attuned to the works themselves. Applied multimodal analysis—grounded in operational categories and page-level evidence—can make claims that are rigorous yet properly modest about reader effects. Comparative corpora, classroom studies, and permissions-based figure sets could triangulate interpretation with reception and pedagogy.

Funding

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

All data are available on request from the author of the paper.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Selected picturebooks by Suzy Lee.

Title	Year of Publication	Characteristics
The Wave	2008	Wordless; interaction between a girl and the sea, rhythm and silence; interplay of order and chaos.
Mirror	2003	Exploration of identity through reflection; mirrored compositions and minimalist color palette.
Shadow	2010	Play between reality and imagination; shadows as a fictional space; double-page layout as a visual border.
Lines	2017	Inspired by figure skating; minimalist visual style, traces of motion as graphic signs.
Open This Little Book *(illustrator)*	2013	Metafictional play with book format; layered narratives and spatial imagination.

Appendix B

Table A2. Selected picturebooks by Shaun Tan.

Title	Year of Publication	Characteristics
The Arrival	2006	Wordless graphic novel about migration and displacement; strong visual metaphor and spatial narration.
The Red Tree	2001	Poetic picturebook on depression, alienation, and hope; emphasis on silence and introspection.
Tales from Outer Suburbia	2008	Collection of short, illustrated stories; plays with format, visual metaphors, and cultural paradoxes.
Rules of Summer	2013	Ambiguous meanings, cyclical visual sequences, surreal symbolism of childhood and brotherhood.
Cicada	2018	Wordless narrative of oppression and liberation; minimalist style, strong metaphor of invisibility.

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