



A Threefold Hybridity. Picturebook¹ Art Fantasies as Life Writing

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ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

Picturebook art fantasies about the life and work of famous artists are usually studied from an art education perspective, but they are also interesting from the point of view of life writing, because of their hybridity on three levels: the combination of fact and fiction, the synergy between text and images and their attractiveness for both child and adult readers. In this article two picturebooks are examined on this threefold hybridity, one about Wassily Kandinsky and one about Piet Mondrian. Both books are part of a series of picturebooks, initiated by the Municipal Museum in The Hague and Dutch children's book publisher Leopold. It is argued that the postmodern experimentation with the form which is characteristic of life narratives for adults, can also be observed in children's literature. The biographies of Kandinsky and Mondrian make use of novelistic techniques and the interplay between words and images to tell about the life and work of these two visual artists. The many allusions in text and images to the art and the poetics of the two painters show that these picturebooks are a challenging form of life writing for both adults and children.

ABSTRACT IN DUTCH

Prentenboeken over het leven en werk van beroemde kunstenaars worden meestal bestudeerd vanuit het perspectief van kunsteducatie, maar ze zijn ook interessant als vorm van life writing, omdat ze op drie niveaus hybride zijn: de combinatie van feit en fictie, het samenspel tussen tekst en beeld en hun aantrekkelijkheid voor zowel jonge als volwassen lezers. In dit artikel worden twee prentenboeken geanalyseerd op deze drie niveaus, een over Wassily Kandinsky en een over Piet Mondriaan. Beide boeken maken deel uit van een serie prentenboeken die geïnitieerd is door Het Gemeentemuseum in Den

Haag en de Nederlandse kinderboekenuitgever Leopold. De analyse laat zien dat het postmoderne experiment met de vorm dat als typisch wordt gezien voor levensverhalen voor volwassenen, ook van toepassing is op kinderboeken. De biografieën van Kandinsky en Mondriaan maken gebruik van romantische technieken en zetten het samenspel tussen tekst en beeld in om over het leven en werk van de schilders te vertellen. De vele allusies in woord en beeld op de kunst en kunstopvatting van de twee kunstenaars tonen dat deze prentenboeken een uitdagende vorm van *life writing* zijn voor volwassenen en kinderen.

Keywords: Picturebooks, art fantasies, multimodality, dual audience

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, the Municipal Museum (Gemeentemuseum) in The Hague and Dutch children's book publisher Leopold started a series of picturebooks about famous artists and art objects. The series aims to attract children to the museum by offering them picturebooks about artists and objects on display at the museum. The books were intended to serve as a guide for four- to nine-year-old children on their visit to the children's exhibition that ran parallel to the adult's exposition, and also as a kind of souvenir of their visit afterwards. The museum and the publisher thus wanted the books to serve as a bridge between the world of art and the world of the child. Although the picturebooks were published in an art educational context, the authors and illustrators were asked to avoid a didactic tone, because the books were also meant to be art objects in their own right. Since 2010 nine of these so-called art fantasies (Nikola-Lisa 1995 and Beckett 2012) have been published, telling the reader about the life and works of painters such as Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky, James Ensor, Gustave Caillebotte and Egon Schiele.

So far this picturebook series has only been studied from the point of view of art education (De Bodt 2012). However, these fantasies about famous artists are also interesting from a *life writing* perspective, because of their hybridity on three levels. First, the books are a combination of fact and fiction. Unlike classic art biographies for children, which are usually classified as non-fiction, art fantasies can be categorized as biographical fiction, because they mingle facts and fiction and they make 'overt use of novelistic techniques' (Kersten 2011, 19). Nikola-Lisa (1995, 53) defines the genre as 'fantasies that bring to life past masters (and their works) in new, exciting – even surprising – contexts.' Art fantasies thus tie in with recent developments in the field of biographical writing 'where the number of novels about historical individuals and their real

lives went up dramatically around the turn of the millennium' (Kersten 2011, 15). Second, picturebook art fantasies are multimodal: 'The unique character of picturebooks as an art form is based on the combination of two levels of communication, the visual and the verbal' (Nikolajeva and Scott 2001, 1). The life narratives are thus told interactively through both text and images. Many words and concepts have been used to describe the relationship between the verbal and the visual mode. Sipe (1998, 98), who gives an overview of the words used to conceptualize the text-picture relationship in picturebooks, uses the term 'synergy' to indicate that 'both the text and the illustration sequence would be incomplete without the other.' Because of the interplay between the words and the images they transform each other, conveying a different meaning together than they would separately. This interaction may take different forms: words can enhance or reinforce the pictures and vice versa, or text and picture may contradict each other; sometimes the images completely take over the storytelling from the text and the other way around (Nikolajeva and Scott 2001, 12). Thus in order to interpret the life story that is told, the reader has to go back and forth between the text and the pictures. Like the mingling of facts and fiction, this synergy between the verbal and the visual code also separates the art fantasy from the classical art biography for children, in which photographs of the artist and his or her work serve only or mainly as illustrations. Third, art fantasies are a hybrid genre because they turn out to appeal to both child and adult readers. Within the field of children's literature there is a growing number of books that transcend age boundaries and that are being read by children and adults alike for their own pleasure. This phenomenon of crossover fiction is recognized nowadays as a 'distinct literary form and marketing category by critics, publishers, booksellers, writers and readers' (Beckett 2012, 1). Until recently, picturebooks were considered not to feature in this development, the reason being that the genre was traditionally associated with (very) young readers, with adults mainly being co-readers, reading the story to children who cannot read yet. However, today's picturebooks are increasingly acknowledged as books that appeal to both children and adults. There are several reasons for this change in appreciation: there is the complex interaction between the visual and verbal code just discussed, the 'cross-generational themes' found in modern picturebooks (Beckett 2012, 209) and, last but not least their 'often highly sophisticated referencing of fine art' (Beckett 2012, 147). As life narratives, picturebook art fantasies thus cross the boundary usually felt to exist between life writing for adults and life writing for children.

In what follows we will analyze how *Meneer Kandinsky was een schilder* (2010; Mr. Kandinsky was a painter)² by Daan Remmerts de Vries, and

Coppernickel goes Mondrian (2012)³ by Wouter van Reek. These picture-books tell the life stories of the two famous painters Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) and Piet Mondrian (1872–1944). Both books won several children’s literature prizes. Wouter van Reek received the Golden Apple at the 2011 Biennial of Illustrations in Bratislava and both Van Reek and Remmerts de Vries were awarded a Zilveren Griffel (Silver Slate, an important children’s literature prize in the Netherlands). In our analysis, we will examine the threefold hybridity that we regard as being typical of art fantasies as a life writing genre: the merging of facts and fiction, the interplay between words and images and the appeal to both child and adult readers. It will be argued that allusions in the sense of ‘any revisiting or recontextualizing of previous works of art’ (Beckett 2012, 147) are a central element on all three levels.

FACTUAL AND FICTIONAL

In *Travels with Fiction in the Field of Biography*, Kersten (2011, 19) marks the ‘perhaps typically postmodern experimentation with the form of biography’ as one of the most important developments in the field of this genre, which has resulted, among other things, in the emerging of biographical fiction. Because many biographers feel limited by the conventions of what is called the scholarly or ‘traditional’ biography, they explore and tend to stretch the boundaries usually drawn between biography and fiction. They use novelistic techniques for instance to overcome the limitations imposed by chronology. Instead of representing a historical figure’s entire life, biographical fiction ‘generally focuses on particular events in a life story’ (Kersten 2011, 38). This is also what happens in both *Mr. Kandinsky was a painter* and in *Coppernickel goes Mondrian*. They are about the turning points in the lives and artistic careers of the two painters: Mondrian’s desire to find a new way of painting without strict rules and Kandinsky’s wish to relate sounds and painting to each other. In their ambition to think outside the conventional frames both painters were very much alike.

The first thing to be discussed with respect to the relationship between fact and fiction is the paratext. The importance ascribed by Genette to paratextual elements in the reception of a text (Genette 1997, 2) is even stronger in the case of life narratives for children, because for most young readers art fantasies are their first encounter with the artist the story is about. The paratexts of the two picturebooks can offer readers a first clue that they are dealing with a life narrative about a historical figure. In picturebooks it will probably only be the adult (co-) reader paying attention to the paratext, because most of the young children ‘reading’

picturebooks cannot read the text independently. In both art fantasies the name of the painter is explicitly mentioned in the title or, in the Dutch version of the Mondrian book, in the subtitle. In *Mr. Kandinsky was a painter* the Dutch word ‘meneer’ (the equivalent of Mr.) in the title catches the reader’s eye. It creates a hierarchical relation between the protagonist of the story and the reader and suggests that Kandinsky was a painter who deserves the reader’s respect.

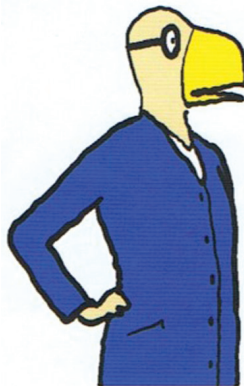
The back cover provides additional information on the life and work of the artist. On the cover of *Mr. Kandinsky was a painter* the picturebook story is first summarized and then contextualized in a rather conventional biographical note in terms of style and factual information:

Daan Remmerts de Vries made a picturebook that tells about the colorful life of the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) in a poetic and moving way. Kandinsky was one of the first abstract painters who, during his life, deviated further and further from representations as experienced by the eye. He was co-founder of ‘The Blue Rider’ group and experimented with the connection between visual arts and music.

However, not all paratextual elements are as factual as this note. In *Mr. Kandinsky was a painter* a little blue horse is running across the endpaper⁴ which refers to one of the characters in the life narrative itself and which is an allusion to The Blue Rider group. Here facts and fiction are mingled.

In *Coppernickel goes Mondrian*, facts presented in the paratext also frame the story. In the American version the title and paratext differ considerably from the Dutch edition, which is much more modest in giving additional factual information. The translation is explicitly announced as being part of the so-called *Artist Tribute* series, ‘in which each book is an homage to an artist in picture book form.’ Moreover, in an afterword (absent in the Dutch original),

the reader is told about Piet Mondrian’s love for American music and dances such as the Charleston and the Foxtrot, and about his search for a new and free style of painting, which resulted in his most famous and unfinished painting



Victory Boogie Woogie. With this information and the announcement on the inside of the dust cover that Mr. Quickstep, one of the protagonists, is an alias for Mondrian, the story in the book is much more verbally contextualized than it is in the Dutch version. The visual contextualization is the same in the American and the Dutch book: on the back cover, besides the text, there is a photo of Piet Mondrian, one hand to his side and a drawing of Mr. Quickstep in the same posture, leading the reader to conclude that Mr. Quickstep is a fictional alter ego of the painter.

Mr. Kandinsky was a painter

Moving from the paratext to the actual story we see that in *Mr. Kandinsky was a painter*, Kandinsky is turned into a character of fiction, but retains his real name. On the first page, there is a drawing of the painter sitting in front of a painting. On the wall is a photograph of Wassily Kandinsky that shows a certain amount of similarity with the drawing of the fictional character. The photo is the only reference throughout the story to the actual physical appearance of the historical figure. The other verbal and visual allusions to reality all refer to his paintings and his poetics. The fictionalization is further shaped by the introduction on the first page of an additional character: ‘Mr. Kandinsky was a painter. One day a little blue tripping horse escaped from a painting he was working on.’ This escape is also visualized: the fantasy figure of the blue horse is shown running out of the painting towards the photograph on the wall. The little horse becomes Mr. Kandinsky’s source of inspiration, his inner voice. This fictional character is an allusion to ‘The Blue Rider,’ a group of painters to which Kandinsky belonged between 1911 and 1914. They shared ‘an interest in abstracted forms and prismatic colors, which, they felt, had spiritual values that could counteract the corruption and materialism of their age.’⁵ The horse character thus represents Kandinsky’s poetics and the influence of The Blue Rider group on it. Apart from serving this important function, it also makes the story more playful for young readers and makes his abstract search for a new poetics more tangible with his search for the blue horse later on in the story.

The blue horse talks to the painter, puts ideas into his head, causing his mind to be obsessed with painting. This preoccupation is brought out humorously by having the painter make Freudian slips of the tongue involving colors:

‘Sometimes it was inconvenient to have that odd animal around. At the bakery, Mr. Kandinsky said: “A loaf of whole wheat red... I mean er... half a loaf of white, please.” In the shoe store he said: “I’ve come to buy new blues...” And to a baroness who asked what he thought of a concert, Mr. Kandinsky said: “I love that yellow’s music.”’⁶

The last sentence of the quotation is a verbal allusion to a concert by Schönberg which Kandinsky attended in 1911 in Munich. Inspired by this concert he painted 'Impression III' (1911), in which yellow is the dominant color (Frisch 2005, 129). Because the painting is not shown in the picture, this allusion will only be recognized by a select group of readers who are familiar with this link in Kandinsky's work.

Imagined thoughts and conversations such as those in the passage referred to above are important elements in *Mr. Kandinsky was a painter* as they add emotions to the historical facts (see also Lajta-Novak 2012). They give expression to Kandinsky's struggle with the artistic conventions of his time and his desire to paint differently. In words and images the story tells the reader about the growing importance of the blue horse, thus symbolizing the increasing influence of The Blue Rider group on the painter, which helps Kandinsky to become an independent artist, no longer caring about conventions and about what people around him think of his work. That this creative period was obviously a happy time in his life is made clear by a picture showing Kandinsky riding joyfully on the back of the blue horse, and by the text which tells the reader that the painter made 'Landscapes in red and purple, with sharp and slanting curves, with running stripes and funny little spots – landscapes that showed what *he* felt.' These words describe the painting depicted on the same page, which alludes to 'Composition IV' (1911).

That the happy period did not last very long is depicted on a page with a visual allusion to his famous painting 'Improvisation 19' (1911) which serves as the setting for the rejection of his paintings. The text explains: 'But although he was not bothered by other people, there were people who were bothered by him. Mr. Kandinsky ran into them one afternoon, and he was frightened to see how much he



appeared to infuriate them...’ In the accompanying picture the reader sees Kandinsky sitting on the back of his prancing blue horse against a background showing ‘Improvisation 19.’ Two additions in the painting catch the informed reader’s eye: a hammer and sickle and a swastika. The former refers to the hostility of the Russian authorities towards Kandinsky’s work in the early 1920s,⁷ the latter to the Nazis who closed the Berlin Bauhaus School of Design where the painter worked, in 1933, after which Kandinsky moved to France⁸. Although his struggle with the Russian and Nazi governments is extended over a period of more than ten years, in the picturebook text the period is compressed into ‘one afternoon,’ probably to make it more concrete for young readers.

Having been rejected by the people around him, Kandinsky loses his inspiration, which is symbolized by the disappearance of the blue horse. He looks for his blue friend everywhere, but he cannot find him. His sadness is expressed on a spread with two pictures: one on the left with a close-up of the painter’s face next to an empty canvas, a tear escaping from his eye, and one on the right showing the painter sitting in front of an empty canvas. His despair and the impossibility of returning to the conventional way of painting are described in the following words:

‘But Mr. Kandinsky could no longer paint neat and tidy, like he used to. He had tried so hard to show everyone how special the world was...What was he to paint now...? Cheerless, he sat staring at an empty piece of linen.’

Finally, inspired by a steam engine roaring past his house, he regains his spirit as he rediscovers the relationship between sounds and colors, and tries to put to canvas the inner emotions caused by external impressions.

The visual allusions to his paintings do not always follow the chronology of Kandinsky’s life and career. There is a reference to his painting ‘Orange’ from 1923 which occurs after the verbal allusion to his struggle with the Nazis, and a visual reference to ‘Lyrisches’ (1911) is used to tell about his flight from his critics in the 1920s and the 1930s. However, the picturebook ends with visual and verbal references to his last years in Paris at the end of his life and to the successful reception of his paintings after his death. The last spread of the book visually alludes to ‘Sky Blue’ (1940), a painting Kandinsky made in Paris four years before his death. The image shows him jumping into the painting where he is reunited with the little blue horse. The last words of the book are:

Today Mr. Kandinsky is very happy. He is in a place where nobody considers him weird, on the contrary; At last he can talk about greens, reds, violets and blues; and about how you can see the outside world from the inside. Can you spot him?



book is one of the few references to the art educational context of this picturebook.

Coppernickel goes Mondrian⁹

The protagonists of this picturebook are Mr. Quickstep and his friend Coppernickel. The latter is a long-legged bird and, together with his dog Tungsten, the main character of a whole series of books by Wouter van Reek. Mr. Quickstep is depicted as half human, half bird and he has a dog called Foxtrot, both names being an allusion to Mondrian's interest in American dance music. The name of the historical figure Piet Mondrian is never actually mentioned in the text of the story. The only reference to the painter himself is found in his initials on a car, halfway through the narrative. The allusion to Mondrian lies in the way the characters are depicted and colored, in particular in the use of his well-known painting style. The primary colors, the geometrical forms and black lines used throughout the book are typical of the abstracts paintings Mondrian is famous for. The story begins with a sentence that captures the essence of Mondrian's life narrative: 'Mr. Quickstep is looking for the future.'¹⁰ His friend Coppernickel does not understand what urges him to undertake this search: 'If you just wait, the future will arrive anyway.' In his lack of understanding Coppernickel represents most of Mondrian's

The change from the past tense used throughout the book to the present tense in these last few lines calls for an interpretation. The words, in combination with the image of Kandinsky floating in the blue sky of his own painting, tell the reader how he lives on after his death through his work which is highly valued nowadays.

The young reader explicitly addressed in the last sentence of the

contemporaries (Janssen and Joosten 2002, 195). Mr. Quickstep replies with ‘But if we stand around waiting, nothing will change.’ And a little further on he adds: ‘The new future is full of things that don’t even exist.’ This refers to Mondrian’s career and his active search for innovation (Kruger 2007). After Mr. Quickstep has left, Coppernickel ‘can’t stop thinking about all the new things he’ll miss out on if he stays home’ and he decides to follow his friend. Together with his dog Tungsten he enters new and strange places. In the beginning, the spreads are empty and calm, mainly filled with images of landscapes and trees, which refer to the figurative paintings Mondrian painted early in his career: ‘Trees by the Gein at Moonrise’(1907), ‘Windmill in Sunlight’(1908) and ‘The Red Tree’ (1908). On one spread in the book the pictures mark Mondrian’s transition from figurative to abstract painting. On the left page the reader sees Coppernickel taking a nap under the red tree, which is depicted as a real tree, while on the right page he is walking through a wood of geometrical trees.

Although the picturebook is about the life and work of Mondrian, the focalizer in the text is Coppernickel and not Mr. Quickstep. By choosing Coppernickel as the person from whose perspective the story is told, Van Reek can not only describe Mondrian’s development from figurative to abstract painter but at the same time incorporate the change in public opinion about Mondrian’s work by having one of his protagonists represent this change.

The text expresses philosophical reflections on the concepts of ‘time’ and ‘future’ and invites readers by tell-tale-gaps to further explore them. When Coppernickel and Tungsten meet other people on their way to Mr. Quickstep, Coppernickel says: ‘It seems like everyone’s heading for the future,’ (...) ‘I think we set out just in time,’ thus challenging the reader,



leaving it up to them to figure out what exactly 'leaving in time' means. That the 'future' stands for abstract art is visualized by the trees alongside the road being figurative on the left page and geometrical on the right. Mondrian's idea of abstract art as the future of painting is elaborated on as Coppernickel arrives in a big city. According to Coppernickel, the underground train there makes the future feel 'really close now.' However, city life is also very confusing for Coppernickel, in particular when he cannot find his dog Tungsten anymore. When he finally meets Mr. Quickstep again, Coppernickel feels disoriented. This is expressed by Mr. Foxtrot as he, Coppernickel and Mr. Quickstep are standing in front of an information board which alludes to *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1943):

"Coppernickel?" calls Mr. Quickstep. "What are you doing here? Are you looking for the future too?" "No, I am looking for Tungsten," says Mr. Coppernickel. "He's gotten lost!" "Dogs never get lost," says Foxtrot. "Maybe it's you who's lost."

Unlike Coppernickel, Mr. Quickstep seems at ease. It is an allusion to Mondrian's reputation as a painter who was ahead of his time in his search for the future.

The name of the city is never mentioned, but the images of the cityscape allude to New York, where Mondrian spent the last four years of his life. City life fascinated the painter and inspired him to 'recreate himself once again' as the afterword describes it. Mr. Quickstep's artist studio is where the story ends. In this studio pictures that alluded to Mondrian's paintings earlier in the story are shown again, this time hanging on the wall. On the last few pages Mr. Quickstep says that he is 'on the verge of a completely new future.' 'Future' here refers to a new visual language. But he feels there is still something lacking, 'a touch of something so new it may not even exist yet.' With the help of Coppernickel who sticks tape onto Mr. Quickstep's painting, an allusion to the tape Mondrian used to experiment with the composition of his painting, and Mr. Foxtrot who plays 'the very latest, coolest, most swinging new sound around,' Mr. Quickstep creates a painting that refers to Mondrian's unfinished *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1943). On this last spread the three key words in this life narrative – 'future,' 'new style' and 'ahead of time' – are brought together. What is also interesting to notice is the position of the painting in the middle of the spread, which mirrors the image of the tree on the first spread in the book, thus underlining Mondrian's development from a figurative to an abstract painter.

Both *Mr. Kandinsky was a painter* and *Coppernickel goes Mondrian* fictionalize the life and work of a well-known painter, but the books mingle facts

and fiction in a different way. What is similar, is that both life narratives do not present a traditional biography, telling about a person's life from birth to death, but that they focus on key-scenes in the life and career of both painters. Both picturebooks highlight their artistic development, in particular their search for new forms of expression. The turning points in their careers are fictionalized through the use of novelistic techniques such as the addition of fantasy characters, the distortion of the chronology and made-up speech and thought. In the case of *Mr. Kandinsky was a painter* the latter results in a portrait of a painter so personally involved in his work that the reception of his paintings had an enormous impact on his emotional state of mind and on his everyday life.

Mr. Coppernickel goes Mondrian also makes use of invented dialogues and considerations, which can be seen as referring to how Mondrian discussed his innovative ideas with, among others, fellow artists (Blotkamp 1994, 127). However, unlike in *Mr. Kandinsky was a painter*, they do not give the historical figure of Mondrian much emotional depth, the main reason being the focalization used in the text. It is not Mr. Quickstep (Mondrian) who is the focalizing character, but Coppernickel, which results in the foregrounding of the emotions of the fantasy character instead of those experienced by the painter.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN TEXT AND IMAGES

Because of the common definition of picturebooks as art objects (see, among others, Kiefer 2008, 11) with images that are often inspired by fine art, the genre in general and the art fantasy in particular is, by its very nature a very suitable medium to tell the life narratives of visual artists. Allusions to the work of the artist can be enhanced or complemented by reminiscences of his life and career in the text, or information in the text can be elaborated on in the pictures, so that together they can present a nuanced life portrait in a fictional frame.

Both in *Mr. Kandinsky was a painter* and in *Coppernickel goes Mondrian* the text-picture relationship is complementary in the sense that sometimes the words extend the information given in the images while in other parts of the narrative the images provide details that are absent in the text. An example of the former in *Mr. Kandinsky was a painter* is a page which refers to his flight from the Russian regime and the Nazis after their devastating criticism of his work described earlier. It is the first page where the character representing Mr. Kandinsky is not depicted. The picture shows a painting of a figure on a galloping horse, an allusion to Kandinsky's *Lyrisches* (1911). The accompanying text explains: 'That is why he painted himself, on his horse, fleeing from all those strict, creepy, severe people who found his paintings

so ugly.’ Although at first sight Kandinsky does not appear to be there in the picture, the text explains that in fact he is, being the horse rider in the painting. An example of the images providing details that are not present in the text, is the page that marks the turning point in Kandinsky’s career: his transition from figurative to abstract painting. The text tells the reader that Mr. Kandinsky had always painted according



to the conventions of his time, but that one day he was inspired by his inner voice, the little blue horse who says: Why not paint that house red for a change! Or violet, or make it slanting, or make it smaller or bigger...It is all right when you express what you feel when you see a house like that!’ The picture shows a landscape with a house and trees with Mr. Kandinsky sitting in front of it and painting it, the little horse standing next to him. What the picture adds to the text is that it shows the result of Kandinsky’s experiments when he follows the horse’s advice.

On one aspect text and pictures are in contrast with each other. Although the text draws attention to the fact that only Kandinsky could see the blue horse, the reader also gets to see it through the pictures.

In *Coppernickel goes Mondrian* the text and the images also elaborate on each other. On one spread Coppernickel and Tungsten are taking a nap under the red tree, which is depicted figuratively, like a real tree. The text beneath the picture on the left page says: ‘The further away they get, the more unfamiliar everything becomes. But in the distance things are even more unfamiliar.’ The picture on the right page showing a more abstract, geometrically depicted landscape explains why. On other pages the reader needs the text to be able to interpret the image. An example of this is,

when Coppernickel and Tungsten are having diner after Mr. Quickstep has left, heading for the future, where the expression on Coppernickel's face shows he is clearly unhappy. Here it is the text that provides the additional information that Coppernickel cannot stop thinking about what he is missing by staying at home. The last spread but one in the book is an example of how images can completely take over the storytelling from the text. Without any additional text being given, the image represents the making of *Victory Boogie Woogie*. On the last spread, which was discussed earlier, the text once again is needed to understand the image, the words explaining that it was in this painting that Mr. Quickstep finally found the future he had been looking for from the beginning of his career.

Both picturebooks thus make use of an interplay between text and images to tell a fictional narrative about the life and work of an artist who developed from a figurative to an abstract painter. However, they differ in the way the content of the life narrative is distributed over text and images. In *Mr. Kandinsky was a painter* Kandinsky's artistic development is alluded to mainly by the text. It is the words rather than the pictures that give the reader insight in the development of his poetics and the impact of his art on his emotional wellbeing: his struggle to free himself from a conventional way of painting, his search for the connection between painting and music and his emotions after being rejected by people in his environment. The pictures refer mainly to his career after 1910, alluding predominantly to his abstract paintings. In *Coppernickel goes Mondrian* it is the pictures that have the greater share in sketching the development of Mondrian's poetics. They give an impression of the changes in Mondrian's visual language from his early paintings on. The text alludes to Mondrian's views in more general terms, as reflections on philosophical concepts such as modernity. The predominant role played by the images in the narrative about the life and work of Mondrian also results from Coppernickel being the focalizer. His name being the first in the title shows that it is also very much his story. His emotions and thoughts are expressed mainly through the words, whereas Mondrian's development is first and foremost depicted in the images.

A DUAL READERSHIP

We have already pointed out how many allusions there are to specific works of art in both *Mr. Kandinsky was a painter* and *Coppernickel goes Mondrian*. As was indicated in the introduction 'Allusions to the fine arts and metadiscourse on art are a significant and widespread phenomenon in contemporary picturebooks that appeal to a crossover audience' (Beckett 2012, 147). In her discussion of these references, Beckett (2012) restricts

herself to visual allusions to art works. However, allusions can also be textual, referring to the poetics of the artist or to the influence of (the reception of) their art on their personal lives and wellbeing.

Some of the visual allusions refer directly to the original as is the case with the image of 'The Red Tree' in *Coppernickel goes Mondrian* and the picture of 'Orange' in *Mr. Kandinsky was a painter*, others do so with a twist, such as the reference to 'Improvisation 19' where a hammer and sickle and the swastika were added, and 'Sky Blue.' In the allusion to the latter, the fantasy figures are shaped slightly differently and some of them occur in a different spot on the canvas. Moreover, the characters of Kandinsky and the blue horse have been added. Other visual allusions do not refer to specific paintings, but are used to refer to the visual language of Mondrian and Kandinsky in general.

Not all these visual allusions will be recognized by every reader. Most of them presuppose an informed reader who is familiar with the paintings and the style. Therefore, illustrators often use strategies that make it easier for inexperienced readers to decode allusions (Beckett 2012, 185–204). Although most of the readers unfamiliar with the visual references are young readers, this need not always be the case by definition. According to, among others, Stephens (2000, 18), it is a misunderstanding to assume that adult readers are always better decoders of visual allusions than child readers.

First of all, Beckett (2012, 185–204) points out that the paratext can be a helpful strategy to give information about the artist or the paintings the story alludes to. Another tool is the selection of paintings that have become very popular and well-known in children's literature, such as the 'Mona Lisa' or 'The Scream.' Another way to facilitate the recognition of allusions is the substitution of animals for human subjects in well-known paintings, 'as readers who do not have the competence to understand the significance of the allusion or even to identify the original artwork, will at least recognize (...) the humorous and playful treatment of pre-existing pieces of art' (204). One example Beckett gives is that of Fam Ekman's *Kattens Skrekk* (The cat's terror, 1992). In this story, a cat who is terribly afraid of dogs, visits a museum where he sees the famous *Mona Lisa*, 'humorously adorned with dog ears' (Beckett 2012, 197). The repetition of allusions, putting the paintings in a picture-frame and using meaningful settings like museums or artists' studios are also useful strategies to alert readers to references to art. Of course these devices that are intended to make it easier to recognize the allusions will work best for readers who are already familiar with museums and galleries. For children who are not yet attuned to such cultural places the help of adult readers in shared reading sessions is indispensable for children to recognize and to get a grip on the allusions.

Van Reek and Remmerts de Vries both use some of the strategies Beckett sketches, the paratext already being discussed earlier in this text. At the end of *Coppernickel goes Mondrian*, there is a repeated reference to some of Mondrian's paintings. Besides this, they are hanging on the wall in his studio. This meaningful art context makes decoding easier and the allusion better identifiable. Last not but least, Mondrian working on his famous work 'Victory Boogie Woogie' is presented, with him looking at the painting standing on an easel.

In *Mr. Kandinsky was a painter* the protagonist is often depicted working on his own paintings, both in- and outside his studio, which is a clear reference to his profession. His paintings are sometimes also presented on an easel or hanging on a wall. Moreover, including Mr. Kandinsky or the blue horse in the paintings is also meant to bring in some humor.

The textual allusions, often referring to the poetics of the artist, are even more difficult for inexperienced readers to decode than the visual references, because there are hardly any strategies available that can be used to signal them. Of course the paratext provides information about the artist and their ideas about art, which can help the reader along, but it will not help those who cannot read yet, nor those who are just beginning to. To be able to understand the textual references to the life and art of the painter, these young readers need the help of adult readers to explain things to them in shared sessions. However, what is recognizable for young readers are the emotions that both Kandinsky and Mondrian are going through: the sadness and fear of Kandinsky and the happiness of both painters when they finally manage to realize on canvas what they have been looking for so long. These are basic psychological emotions even very young children can recognize and identify with and which form an interesting starting point for discussions between adults and children about the painters and their art in shared reading sessions. In these interactions children can become familiar with the nuances of the visual and verbal elements of the story, while adults can learn from the way children read the picturebook.

The art educational context in which the books were published, clearly indicates that they were intended to tell young readers about the life and works of the two famous painters. At the same time, once the young reader's interest in the artists has been kindled, and they gradually find out more about them, the allusions make it interesting books for them to read again because they will discover things they were previously not aware of. However, as we have pointed out, many of the sophisticated allusions to the works and the poetics of the artist will also or sometimes mainly appeal to an adult audience. The way both Van Reek and Remmerts de Vries

engage in a creative dialogue with Mondrian and Kandinsky also make the books challenging reading material for readers who are familiar with more traditional biographies about these painters, thus challenging the conventional division between life writing for children and life writing for adults.

CONCLUSION

The observation by Kersten (2011) that adult biographies nowadays are characterized by postmodern experiments with the form of the genre also applies to *Mr. Kandinsky was a painter* and *Coppernickel goes Mondrian*, thus showing that this trend is apparent in children's literature as well. Both picturebooks are works of biographical fiction that elaborate on the facts known through more scholarly biographies by making use of novelistic techniques such as the addition of fictional characters, imagined monologues, dialogues and thoughts and deviations of the chronological order. Moreover, these fictionalized biographies about Kandinsky and Mondrian make a deliberate use of the interplay between words and images to tell about the life and work of these two visual artists. This interaction between the verbal and visual code amplifies the possibilities of highlighting the artistic development the artists went through as well as the changes in their emotional well-being. Finally, this exploration of the text-image relationship and the experiments by Van Reek and Remmerts de Vries with the visual language of both Mondrian and Kandinsky have shown that these picturebooks represent an innovative form of life writing that ignores the boundary between children's literature and adult literature. Instead of being overtly didactic biographies for child readers, these art objects with their sophisticated referencing to the fine arts are a challenging form a life writing for readers of all ages.

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NOTES

- ¹ In the theory about picturebooks, the word is spelled in two ways: picture books and picturebooks. Following Sipe (2001, 23) we spell picturebooks as one word 'to emphasize the use of words and pictures that is the most important hallmark of this type of book.' However, both spellings refer to the same kind of books.
- ² The book has not been translated into English. The translation is ours.
- ³ The book was published originally in 2011 as *Keepvogel en Kijkvogel in het spoor van Mondriaan*. The English translation was published in the United States by Enchanted Lion Books.
- ⁴ In many picturebooks endpapers are white or they may be not endpapers at all. Recently, 'a growing number of picturebook creators have discovered the possibilities of endpapers as additional paratexts that can contribute to the story in various ways' (Nikolajeva and Scott 2001, 247).
- ⁵ Retrieved on 20 November 2013 from http://www.moma.org/explore/collection/ge/styles/blauw_reiter.
- ⁶ Because of the importance of the intended words rhyming with colors in the Dutch original, certain changes have been made in the translation to bring out the original effect. The Dutch text goes as follows: 'Soms was het lastig, dat gekke beest in z'n buurt. Bij de bakker zei meneer Kandinsky: "Doet u mij een volkoren rood...Ik bedoel euh...een halfje wit..." In de schoenwinkel zei meneer Kandinsky: "Ik kom nieuwe groenen kopen..." En tegen een barones die vroeg wat hij van een concert vond, zei meneer Kandinsky: "Ik vond het gele mooie muziek."'.
- ⁷ Retrieved 27 November 2013 from http://www.hermitage.nl/en/tentoonstellingen/matisse_tot_malevich/biografieen/wassily_kandinsky.htm.
- ⁸ Retrieved 27 November 2013 from <http://www.wassily-kandinsky.org/>.
- ⁹ The analysis refers to the American edition.
- ¹⁰ In the Dutch edition it says that Mondrian is looking for 'the new future' which is elaborated on further in the narrative.