

**SELF-REFLEXIVITY AND
CONTEMPORARY
ILLUSTRATED CHILDREN'S
BOOKS**

AIDAN WINTERBURN

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OUTPUT INFORMATION

Title:
Self-reflexivity and Contemporary Illustrated Children's
Books

Output Type:
D - Journal article

Title of journal:
VaroomLab

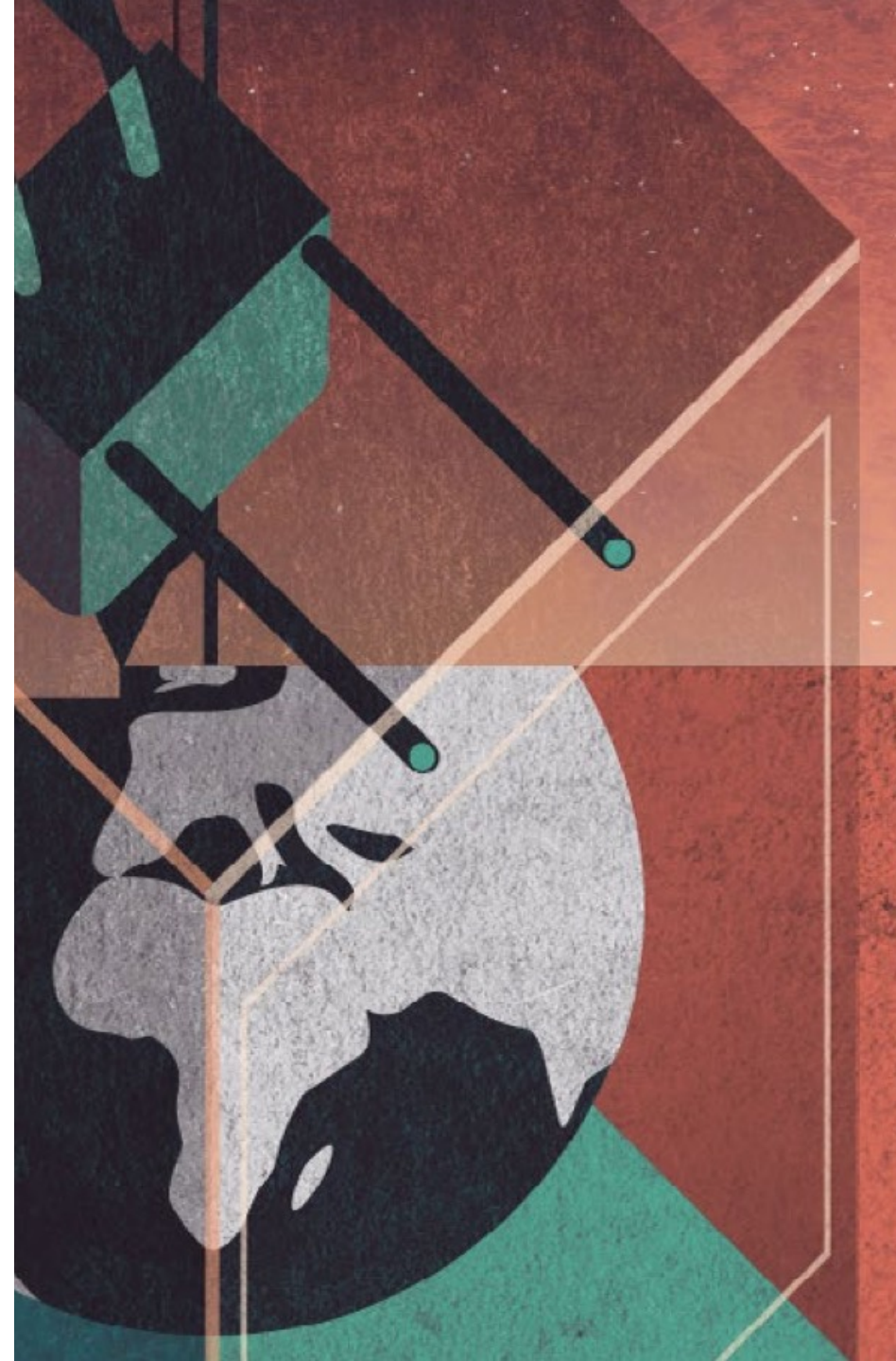
First page:
124

Volume:
4

ISSN:
2052-1820

Year of publication:
2016

Research Groups:
Experimental Publishing



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION STATEMENT

Research for this illustrated essay originated from observing my daughter's graphic literacy: her comprehension of images, ideograms, pictograms. Highlighting the book's ability to stimulate a child's imagination through gestalt (the apprehension of information as cohesive units, rather than as separate parts), I explore reading as an expanded activity involving more than just verbal literacy: how children approach books as objects.

Showcasing books that favour these gestalt methods (Norton Juster's *The Dot and the Line*, Iela Mari's *The Red Balloon*), I used Walter Benjamin's examination of the child's physical and psychic immersion in books (their 'suffusion' with content), also drawing on Brechtian alienation theory and Martin Salisbury's idea of the 'scripto-visual'.

Presented as a paper at the Varoom Lab Visionaries Symposium (Birmingham City University, 2015), the essay appeared in *VaroomLab* ('Visionaries' edition, No. 4, 2016). A leading illustration magazine with a global audience, *VaroomLab* is published by the Association of Illustrators, Somerset House, and edited by Dr John O'Reilly, Central St. Martins, its ambition being to redefine our understanding of illustration in the context of 'an ever-expanding range of practices...changing ideologies, forms of production, [and new] economic and cultural trends'.

In an age when children encounter an eclectic range of hyper-real media (games, movies, the Internet), I propose that their navigation of the book now involves a synergy of different cognitive faculties, with word and image combining to elicit more multivalent readings than before. Very young children approach books, not as things to be decoded according to paradigms of verbal literacy, but as vehicles appealing to the whole cognitive system. Grappling with distinctions between representation, abstraction, and signification, children use books to construct their own visual worlds, rather than translating information into 'accepted' forms – the challenge of education being how to reconcile these 'vernacular' readings with more generic curricular demands.

Keywords:

Illustration

Children's Books

Gestalt

Links:

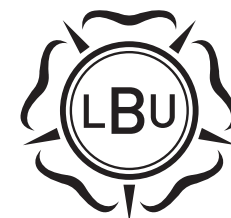
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55a57075e4b089d29505b2e3/t/57ece013d1758e4958761342/1475141679933/VaroomLab- Journal-4.pdf>

Email:

A.Winterburn@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

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