

New Lived Spaces in the Post-industrial World: The Sound of Colors by Jimmy Liao

Leonor Ruiz-Guerrero

Published: December 30, 2019

Abstract

The post-industrial era brought new spaces whose lack of habitability soon led to call them non-places. These are transit spaces that often exceeded the human dimension, architectures that were frequently hostile to the body. Literature did not take long to incorporate them, also children's literature. Airports, train stations, subway, began to populate the pages of books for children.

The Sound of Colors, by Jimmy Liao, is an example of this. In this paper, this book has been analyzed, with an attempt to show the complexity of author treatment of the space. In this picturebook, a blind girl faces the everyday life in the subway stations. The whole narrative is developed between two interconnected worlds, the real one depicted by this non-place, and the other, poetic, by the girl. A qualitative methodology has been employed to study this work. Findings lead to thinking that current children's literature spaces are increasingly multifaceted.

L'era postindustriale ha portato con sé nuovi spazi, presto chiamati "non luoghi" per la loro inabitabilità. Si tratta di zone di transito non a misura d'uomo, spazi architettonici spesso ostili al corpo. I non luoghi presto compaiono in letteratura, anche quella per l'infanzia: aeroporti, stazioni ferroviarie, metropolitana cominciano ad apparire nelle pagine dei libri per bambini.

The Sound of Colors di Jimmy Liao è un esempio di questo fenomeno. Nel presente lavoro, si analizza l'opera di Liao nel tentativo di mostrare la complessità del trattamento dello spazio da parte dell'autore. In quest'albo illustrato, una ragazzina cieca affronta la vita di tutti i giorni nelle stazioni della metropolitana. La narrazione si svolge tra due mondi collegati: quello reale del non luogo, e quello poetico della ragazzina.

Nello studio dell'opera abbiamo utilizzato una metodologia qualitativa. I risultati inducono a pensare che nella letteratura per bambini attuale gli spazi siano sempre più multiformi.

Keywords: Non-places; Children's Loo; Intertextuality; The Sound of Colors; Jimmy Liao.

Leonor Ruiz-Guerrero: Universidad de Murcia (Spain)

✉ lmruiz@um.es

Teacher of Didactics of Language and Literature at the Faculty of Education, University of Murcia (Spain). Studies: bachelor's degree in Fine Arts; bachelor's degree in Infant Education; and master's degree in Gender and Equality. Lines of research: picturebooks and education; picturebooks to promote democratic citizenship; metafiction; post-modern picturebooks.

1. Introduction

The post-industrial era brought new spaces whose habitability (or rather the absence of it) soon led to call them non-places. These are transit spaces that often exceeded the human dimension, with architecture that was frequently hostile. Literature, and children's literature in particular, did not take long to incorporate them and echo these characteristics. Airports, train stations, subway, shopping centers, began to populate the pages of books for children -books in which the lack of humanity was even more evident, since it was shown through children's eyes. The contrast was not only spatial; time was also in disagreement. These non-places presented an accelerated time, not conducive to conversation, reflection, or play. They were not suitable for the children's tempo, which is different from that of adults. Literature adopted them as an analogy with the forest, something similar to the ancient transit spaces linked to fear and violence (Grilli, 2019).

The Sound of Colors (henceforth *The Sound*), by Jimmy Liao, is an example of this. In this paper, this book has been analyzed, with an attempt to show the complexity of the treatment of space that the author presents. With a plot apparently simple, Liao makes in this picturebook a deep reflection about human relationships in an urban context, how non-places are, and how a child can feel there.

Firstly, to understand Jimmy Liao's work, it is necessary to consider the spatial-temporal context in what it emerges. It is feasible to say that his first books belong to the named post-industrial era, as they were published at the end of the 20th century (1998). According to Colomer, a post-industrial society characterized by:

The ownership of a welfare state, the political organization in democratic systems, the vindication of the right to the equality from different groups, the importance of the human resources management in the productive system and the access to leisure in forms of consumption (Colomer, 1998, quoted in Colomer, 2010, p. 61).¹

This society is located in urban contexts, and, like a counterpoint to that welfare state, it provides its inhabitants with a feeling of alienation, isolation, loneliness, and lack of communication. As mentioned earlier, children's literature soon reflected these traits, bringing to its pages not only urban landscapes but also the negative consequences of living there. Colomer points out that: "The criticism of the urban life, related to the ecological vindication and the praise to nature, was the big social theme of the '80s in this literature." (1998, p. 226).

Since the early nineties, a negative view of urban spaces extends. Critical voices claim that these spaces lead to the disappearance of interaction among people. The city is depicted as an anonymity space, where people's lives cross without touching each other. Indeed, the non-places, inside the cities, are seen as glaring examples of this fact.

Liao's work follows this line of thought, as he shows the feelings and sensations which can experience people living in urban landscapes. In his literary corpus, both loneliness and lack of communication are constant, as well as the desire to run away to natural environments, frequently combined with fantasy and daydream. The author states: "Living in a city, I always feel a sense of solitude. But I enjoy the time when I work alone. It's a beautiful solitude. I want to put such feelings into my works. I want to turn the loneliness into beauty." (Siu, 2008).

In this sense, though his work is plenty of melancholy and criticism, his speech seems to distance from that of other authors who deal with similar subjects. In his case, it is possible to find some solace in his texts. Facing the hostility of the city, it exists the opportunity to escape. Moreover, unlike the weakness of other characters of children's literature, Liao's are equipped with resources not to be defeated by the downheartedness.

The present research has been underpinned by previous studies, such as those of Janet Ng (2011), José Trabado (2016), or Xiaofei Shi (2016). Both the lack of translations and the thought that his picturebooks are for adults (Desmet, 2004) seem to result in a paucity of investigations about Liao. This paper tries to fill that gap and could be a contribution to the field.

1. All the quotes in Spanish from the source texts (by Colomer, Trabado, and Babar) have been translated by the paper's author. Also, the quotes from the Spanish version of *The Sound of Colors*.

2. Non-places

The notion of non-places was coined by Marc Augé in 1992, in his work *Non-lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*. According to this author, the space in the supermodernity (the obverse of the postmodernity) has these features: “urban concentrations, movements of population and the multiplication of what we call ‘non-places’” (Augé, 1995, p. 34). He defines then these non-places as opposed to places (“a culture localized in time and space”, p. 34).

The installations needed for the accelerated circulation of passengers and goods (high-speed roads and railways, interchanges, airports) are just as much non-places as the means of transport themselves, or the great commercial centres, or the extended transit camps where the planet’s refugees are parked. (Augé, 1995, p. 34).

Augé emphasizes what non-places lack: “a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.” (Augé, 1995, pp. 77–78). Therefore, they are spaces where people feel alienated, as a result of the impossibility of self-recognition or interaction with others.

Nevertheless, the opposition between places and non-places is not radical (Augé, 1995, p. 79).

Finally, Augé completes the definition talking not only about the space but also about the relationships that take place in there: “Clearly the word ‘non-place’ designates two complementary

but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces.” (Augé, 1995, p. 94).

The individualism, the solitude, the permanent transit are linked to these non-places. They are related to the ephemeral as well (Augé, 1995, p. 78). The return to the place seems to be the only consolation to those who frequent non-places (Augé, 1995, p. 107).

In a similar vein, Véronique Aubert-Gamet and Bernard Cova, in their paper from 1999, add: “In modern non-places, the individual finds neither the landmarks for a lost identity nor the conditions of an interaction or a dialogue with others. People are not necessarily unhappy in these circumstances but they are alone.” (Aubert-Gamet & Cova, 1999, p. 40).

Loneliness is the keyword to describe this type of spaces.

Therefore, non-places are the new lived spaces in the post-industrial world, and they are perfectly depicted in Liao’s work.

3. The author: Jimmy Liao

Liao was born in 1958 in Taipei, Taiwan, that is why the original language of his works is Chinese. He studied Fine Arts at The Chinese Culture University in his city. For twelve years Liao worked in the advertising industry but quit in 1998. That decision was determined by the leukemia he suffered since 1995. The forced isolation the illness provoked led Liao to employ his time in the creation of drawings. These served him to catalyze his emotions at that time. Once the disease was overcome, a new perspective on life (“A serious illness changed my way of thinking about many things”, dPICTUS, 2015a) made him focus all his energies on producing picturebooks.

4. Literary Corpus

Liao has written almost fifty works since 1998. His last book was published in 2017 (*Under the Same Moon*), but it has not been translated into Spanish or English. Scholars do not agree about how to describe Liao’s work. Some think it is aimed at children (Salisbury & Styles, 2012), and others that it is for adults (Desmet, 2004). In some papers, his books are defined like graphic novels, whereas in others they are considered picturebooks. Other researchers conclude that this is crossover literature (Trabado, 2016; Shi, 2016). Liao talks about himself like a picturebooks maker, so in this paper, we are going to adopt this point of view.

The intended audience is a persistent topic concerned with picturebooks. For the author, his books are: “for all the ages” (Babar, 2014). The most relevant point is that Liao takes the children’s perspective,

in order to show the differences between adults' and children's worlds. Adults are often portrayed as people in need of explanations by children (such as in *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry). In fact, in Liao's work, childhood is a recurrent subject: a complex one, as children possess an astounding interior world, and can reflect on their circumstances and the relationship with adults. Children are usually the main characters of Liao's books; even sometimes, they are the only ones, and grown-ups are excluded.

Liao's corpus is very peculiar as he creates his own poetic world, with a profusion of visual and textual metaphors. He frequently employs some pictures that work like icons: rabbits, moons, labyrinths, forest, teddy bears, birds, cages, angels, or stairs.

He has designed most of his works alone, but he is also the co-author of several books. He has illustrated picturebooks written by Joyce Dunbar, Jerry Spinelli, and Sean Taylor.

Another remarkable feature of Liao's corpus is the different styles used in his works, from the sobriety of black and white (for instance in *Beautiful Solitude*), to colorful illustrations (for example in *Starry Starry Night*). This shift in his style is most evident when he illustrates works written by other authors. Liao places this difference in the origin of the works: "My books normally come from an emotional tone, not from a linear story" (Babar, 2014). When he makes pictures for anyone else, he is determined by the text.

Regarding the spaces, Liao's works usually expose two opposed scenes: the city and nature. The first is often an uneasy place to live, linking these books to a previous literary trend brought to the fore in Grilli's words: "Nei libri per bambini anche dei nostri tempi, se la città compare o costituisce lo sfondo, lo fa spesso come elemento terrificante." (2019, p. 79). On the contrary, nature is a shelter where people can go when they run away from the city. It recalls the idea of idyllic nature from the 19th century, correlated with childhood, which lasts until today.

Despite it, in Liao's work at times urban and nature are combined, for example in some hedge mazes (*The Sound*) or labyrinths created with plants and flowers (*Starry Starry Night*). However, nature is not always kind. It can be dangerous; occasionally, it can turn into a cage.

Nature adopts a specific form in the work of Liao: the forest. Its meaning is ambiguous, as it can be both friendly and warm or look like threatening, with hidden and unknown animals lurking. It is similar to the forest in fairy tales.

Apart from childhood, throughout his works, Liao addresses the death, the lack of communication, the family relationship, the failing meetings, the solitude, the fantasy, or the children's imagination. He likes, also, using intertextuality, intratextuality and interpictoriality (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2015; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006; Oittinen, Ketola & Garavini, 2019), inserting artworks, characters of children's literature, and characters of his works.

His books are generally more extended than picturebooks used to be, as they have more than 32 pages. For instance, *The Sound* has 128 pages.

Part of his works has been adapted for films, TV series, and theater. *The Sound* was loosely adapted for film in 2003 by Joe Ma Wai-Ho. This filmmaker turned the book into a love story (Kozo, n.d.). This picturebook has also been adapted into a TV series and has a theatre version (Wing-Sze, 2003).

Even though his literary corpus gives the impression to be little known, in 2008 an exhibition about it took place in Times Square, New York, titled *One Decade Exhibition – Never Ending Story* (Yeung, 2008). Furthermore, Liao has received several literary awards in Taiwan, Belgium, Sweden, and Spain. He has been nominated twice for the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award.

In Taipei, Taiwan, where Liao was born and lives, some places have been decorated with illustrations from his books. For example, the Nankang Subway Station exhibits pictures from *The Sound* (Her, 2009).

Some titles of his vast corpus are (Table 1):

Table 1 – Liao’s Corpus

Title	Chinese	English
<i>Secrets in the Woods</i>	1998	Not translated into English
<i>A Fish that Smiled at Me</i>	1998	Not translated into English
<i>Turn Left, Turn Right (or A Chance of Sunshine)</i>	1999	2006
<i>When the Moon Forgot</i>	1999	2009
<i>The Sound of Colors</i>	2001	2006
<i>Mr. Wing</i>	2003	Not translated into English
<i>Beautiful Solitude</i>	2004	2008
<i>The Blue Stone: A Journey Through Life</i>	2006	2008
<i>Thank You, Furry Bunny, for a Wonderful Afternoon</i>	2006	Not translated into English
<i>How to Own a Corner</i>	2008	Not translated into English
<i>The Beginning of Jimmy’s Story (Memoirs)</i>	2008	Not translated into English
<i>The Monster Who Ate Darkness</i>		2008, with Joyce Dunbar
<i>Starry Starry Night</i>	2009	Not translated into English
<i>I Can Be Anything!</i>		2010, with Jerry Spinelli
<i>The Rainbow of Time</i>	2011	2015
<i>The World Champion of Staying Awake</i>		2011, with Sean Taylor

As can be appreciated, the translation into English can take four to ten years.

5. The work: *The Sound of Colors*

The author wrote this book in 2001, three years after his first, and it has been translated into numerous languages. The English version was published five years later than the Chinese, although with fewer pictures and text than the original. This abridgment can imply more than a few crucial nuances in the meaning of the work. For instance, the reference to death is absent in the English edition. Shi (2016) has deeply studied these differences between the original Chinese text and its English translation, to stress the crossover nature of *The Sound*. To this author, the book crosses sociocultural boundaries.

The crossover books, according to Ommundsen (2015), may be divided into three main groups: Naïve, Complex, and Existential. *The Sound* could be labeled as Existential, owing to its topics. This kind of works: “may be challenging for both children and adults alike, as they tackle crucial questions in human life: life and death, love, friendship and loneliness, identity and belonging.” (Ommundsen, 2015, p. 73).

Notwithstanding, to Shi (2016) *The Sound* could be considered as crossover literature not for the subject matter but for the way to address it. In her words: “crossover literature is more about a way of representation than the subject matter itself, and the investigation of crossover literature should situate the text within its context of production and reception.” (Shi, 2016, p. 407).

Shi prefers to call adaptation to the translation into English of *The Sound*, due to the many significant changes made (2016, p. 409), concerning mainly the themes of loneliness and death. Shi (2016, p. 411) points out that: “The English translation diminishes the sense of loneliness, whilst the original Chinese version brings it to the fore.” This scholar (2016) thinks that the negative connotations of that feeling in the picturebook could have led the translator or publisher to avoid it (p. 411).

Regarding the theme of death, as abovementioned, the two spreads about it has been removed in the English translation. Although the topic is not new in children’s literature, it is affected by the specific socio-historical contexts (Shi, 2016, p. 416).

Unlike the English, the Spanish edition is more complex and loyal to the Chinese source text, as it is a translation (by the expert in Chinese language and culture Jordi Ainaud i Escudero), not an adaptation. It leads to the study of the Spanish version and not the English in this paper.

It is possible to underline some of the differences between the Spanish and English versions:

On the one hand, the Spanish version concentrates on the difficulties and dangers of daily life in the city. Also, it points out the nostalgia of childhood. The book shows how the girl transcends these circumstances using her imagination.

On the other hand, the English version emphasizes the imagination itself, as we can see in the explicit subtitle (“A journey of the Imagination”). The poetic tone is diluted. The city seems less dangerous and alienating in this version.

Concerning the topics of loneliness and death, the Spanish version does not omit them or tone down either. Even, in this translation, certain ambiguity is added; the text may be talking about a death produced in the character’s childhood, or about the end of childhood itself.

Translators are not a neutral figure; they are human beings influenced both by the context and their individual ideologies (Oittinen, 2006; Oittinen, Ketola & Garavini, 2019). Notwithstanding, the factor which has a major impact on translation is the child image (Garavini, 2019; Oittinen, 2006). Deletion, omission, and adaption depend on this view. Garavini (2019) also suggests that they are the publishing houses which decide these actions, instead of the translators. It seems that the child image of the English edition of *The Sound* differs from the child image of the source text.

The whole narrative of this picturebook is developed between two worlds interconnected, the real one rendered by the subway as a non-place, and the own, poetic, from the girl. In turn, there are continuous references to the children’s literature, maybe since the paradox to be an ambiguous place/non-place habitable.

Turning to the original Chinese version, the title of the work is *Subway*, focusing on the means of transport, not in the blindness or the imagination.

6. Literature review

The research about the work of Liao presents a few difficulties, especially in the Anglo-Saxon context. The first obstacle is the lack of translations. Liao began to create picturebooks in 1998, nevertheless until 2006 not a single work had been translated into English. Likewise, there is a significant amount of books that have not been already translated. Indeed, this hinders the understanding of the complexity of Liao’s corpus, as his works are interconnected.

Furthermore, as we have said in the introduction, studies are scarce, and there is no continuity between them. To this paper, we have drawn on the research of Janet Ng (2011), and José Trabado (2016).

Ng (2011) pays attention to the development of the subway in Taipei as a symbol “of advanced capitalism and urbanity” (p. 131). This author highlights how the features of this non-place are reflected in the picturebook *The Sound*. Subway is not only a space of progress but also an inhuman one where people do not connect and feel alone.

This condition of daily alienation is reflected in a couple of illustrations in which he depicts dozens of characters with expressionless, dazed faces, physically contorted as they fit themselves and their possessions into the crowded trains. [...]. Back and forth, journeys neither bring people to one another, nor connect them with one another. (Ng, 2011, p. 141).

This scholar thinks the main character in the picturebook is blind in order to reveal this alienation and lack of identity (Ng, 2011, p. 143).

Trabado (2016) studies Liao's work as crossover literature. This researcher underpins this idea in the length, subjects, intertextuality, and the artwork of the books.

Trabado underscores the employ on the part of Liao of children's look. Moreover, he reminds us that the literary corpus of Liao "can be conceived as an organic whole in which the diverse parts interrelated not only by the unitary style but also by the recurrence of topics." (Trabado, 2016, p. 1146). He points out some concerns addressed by Liao, particularly those of people trapped in a labyrinth and the city/forest duality.

Another interesting idea from Trabado that can support the present research is that of the catharsis (2016, p. 1149). The picturebooks, through the children's eyes, help adults to process and assume their losses and problems. Mainly, they help them to face the nostalgia for their lost childhood.

The subway space is one of solitude because there is where adults are expelled from the paradise of childhood. As Carpenter asserts: "Growing up becomes synonymous with the loss of Paradise" (1985, p. 9). This lost place is represented by nature and fairy tales. That way, the children do not fit in the city; the non-places of the post-industrial era are not for them (Grilli, 2019).

The blind girl, who is living in limbo amid childhood and adulthood looks like Charon, the mythological boat owner. Indeed, she talks about the death of childhood. She is so aware of it like just an adult can be. That is why it can work as a catharsis. The picturebook tries to facilitate the transit. Imagination seems to be the only means of transport, the only resource to non-places becoming places. However, limbo is also a lonely place.

Finally, Ph.D. LiChung Yang,² from the National Taipei University of Education, has also researched Liao's work, and specifically *The Sound*. She is interested in how urban childhood and everyday life are rendered in picturebooks. Unfortunately, it has been impossible to get her papers.

7. Methodology

A qualitative methodology has been employed to study *The Sound*. Content analysis has been the primary technique. Since the selected picturebook is quite complex, we made a diagram to simplify the examination. There are two paramount categories, although not exclusive: Subway, and the Poetic world. Inside these categories, there are some opposed pairs of elements that describe the category. It sounds simple, notwithstanding, they are complicated, given that the pairs are not totally opposed, and since a category can be defined at the same time with an element of the pair and with the opposite.

Furthermore, the pairs are also interrelated.

The analysis has been applied to visuals and text. The content has been studied as profoundly as we have been able. Likewise, how the text is expressed deserves attention. There is not an omniscient narrator who tells the story. Instead, the girl herself reveals her thoughts and feelings, as if she was whispering some secrets to the readers. Sometimes it gives the impression the girl is talking directly to them, while in others it appears she is talking to an invisible companion (maybe the guardian angel).

Whether the reader is a child or a grown-up, it is clear that the author seeks empathy with the girl. The sense of solitude can unfold it in both cases.

The next table shows the categories and the pairs (Table 2):

2. This scholar shared her analysis of *The Sound* in *The 20th Biennial Congress of International Research Society of Children's Literature (IRSCL). Fear and Safety in Children's Literature*, which took place in Brisbane, Australia (4–8 July 2011). Her paper was titled: Jimmy Liao's *The Sound of Colors*. In *Search of the Child Flâneur*. However, the proceedings of this Congress were not published.

Subway				
Non-place	Reality	Inhospitable	Adult's world	Indoors
↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
Place	Fiction	Habitable	Children's world	Outdoors
Poetic world				

Table 2 – Categories and pairs for the analysis

These pairs are going to be the point of depart to do the content analysis.

8. Results

8.1. Non-place/Place

The subway is a non-place by definition. All the characteristics of the non-places can be appreciated in it: the lack of communication, the solitude, the accelerated time, and the alienation.

Moreover, the subway depicted in *The Sound* could be the one in any city. It is an impersonal space, basically aimed at transit, which anyone can recognize, even though in his/her city this means of transport does not exist.

There should be a place facing this non-place, and it emerges from the imagination of the girl. She tries to personalize the subway space to give it an identity, creating a poetic world. According to Ng: “The blind girl’s effort in the subway, populating it with her imaginary creatures, is merely to individualize the public space” (2011, p. 152). Despite it, she appears to be the unique perceiving the changes.

Liao employs various strategies to display the attributes of these two spaces:

First, we are not allowed to know the name of the blind girl, like a sign of the anonymity of the city.

Second, the protagonist, the blind girl, only interacts with other characters in the poetic world (place), not in the real world of the subway (non-place). There is just an exception: the girl talks to a little boy who asks her how to go back home. This meeting is very significant, as he is as lost as her. Children are misplaced in the adults’ world.

Moreover, this meeting takes place in a symbolic station, where the platform is reproduced as the yellow brick road from the *Wizard of Oz*, and the characters of this book are inside the subway cars (the Tin Woodman, the Scarecrow and others). They are accompanied by Little Red Riding Hood and the disguised Wolf. The little boy asks the blind girl the same question that Dorothy posed to all people she met because she did not know how to go back home (Figure 1).

The lack of interaction is also evident in other elements of the subway station. When the blind girl goes upstairs or downstairs, is on the platform or inside the subway car, she is always alone. There is just a time she meets other passengers in the stairs, but she is against the current, which does not look at her. This situation reinforces the idea that non-places are isolation spaces (Figures 2 and 3).

Apart from that, in the poetic world, the interaction is mostly with animals (penguins, elephants, bears, and others). Though there are some humans in that world, there is not a clear interaction with the girl. The solitude is persistent.

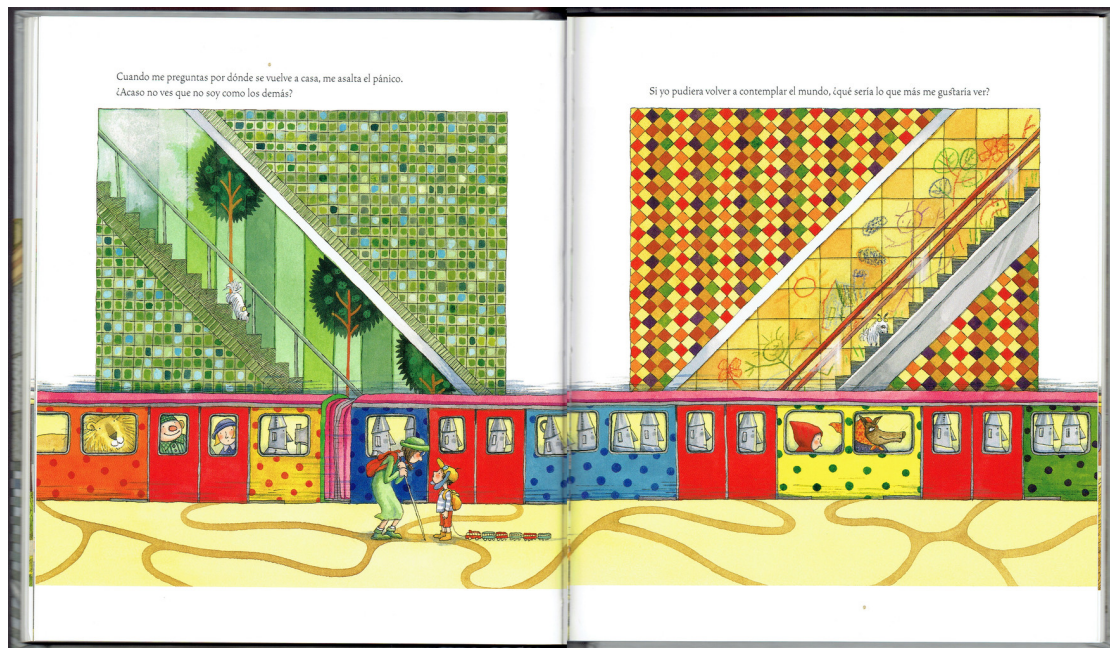
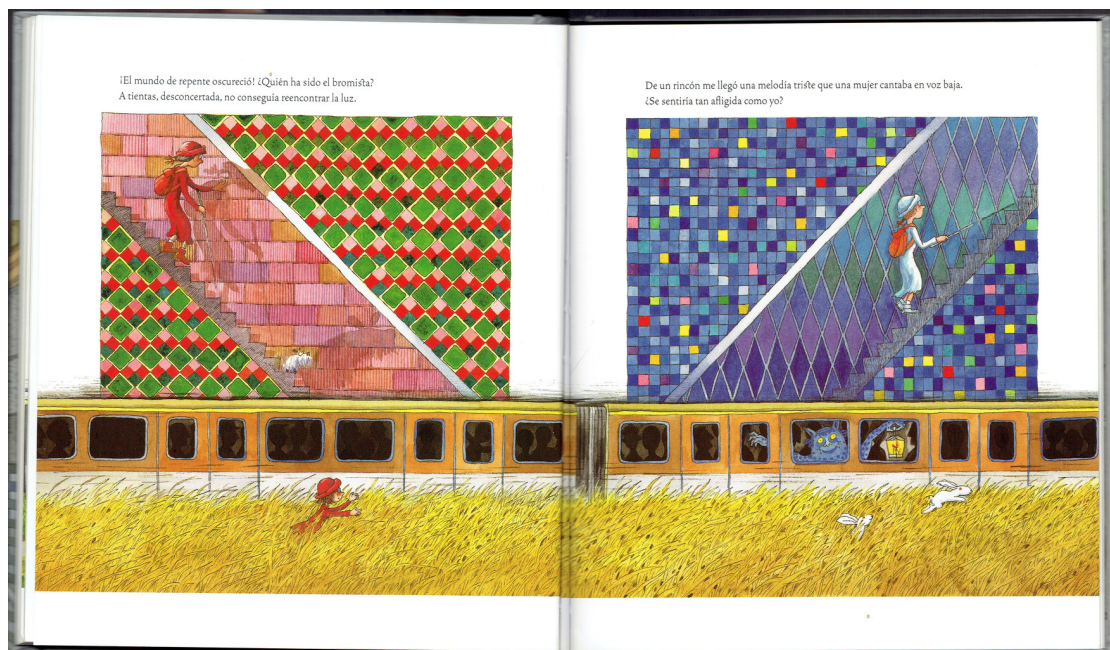


Figure 1. Meeting with the little boy.





Figures 2 and 3. Lack of interaction.

Furthermore, other passengers do not relate to each other. Only in the first visual of a subway car full of people we can see two middle-aged individuals talking (a man and a woman).

As evidence of the effects of the non-places, people in the picturebook look serious, upset, or anxious; only a few people seem to smile.

Surprisingly, no one appears to notice the presence of the girl. We only have the impression passengers do it on two occasions. First, when the main character falls by the subway stairs. Then, some worried passengers look in that direction (all of them wear glasses like those of the girl). Second, when the girl is walking a tightrope, and all commuters in the subway car stare frightened at her. That is, they only realize the presence of the girl when she is in danger in front of them. However, they are inside the subway car, the train is in motion, and they are not able to help her (Figures 4 and 5).

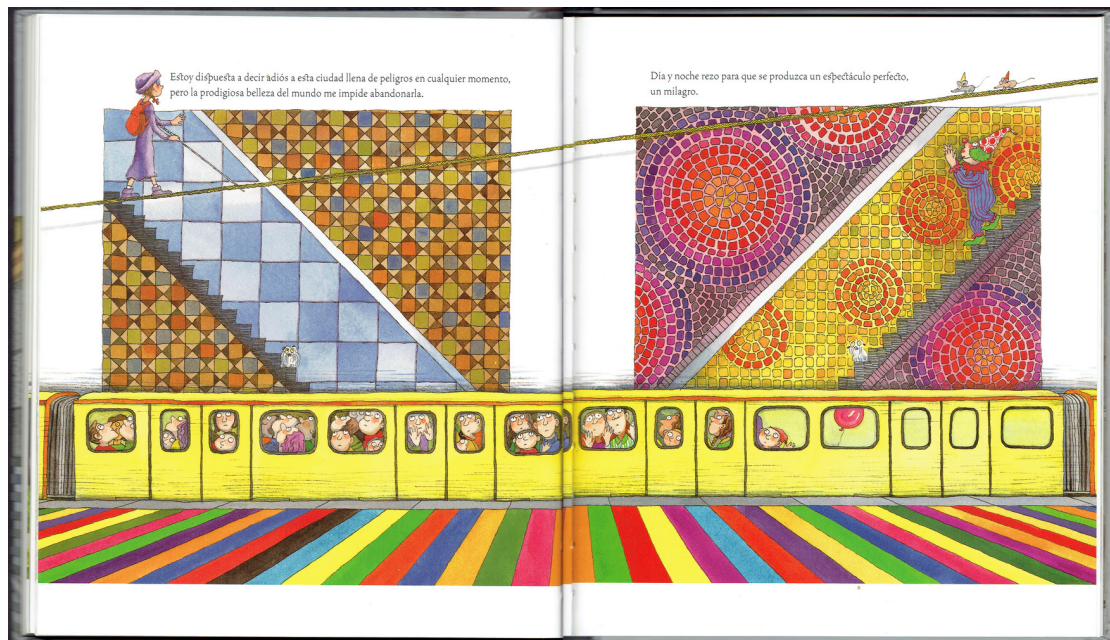
Despite this, in a double-spread, while the text talks about saying farewell, passengers seem to wave at her. However, the visual perspectives employed by the author appear to convey that instead, they are waving at the reader.

In this sense, sometimes the beholder has the feeling that some of the characters are looking at him/her. If this character is a person in the subway, the glance is suspicious, whereas if the character belongs to the poetic world, it appears amicable. According to Ng (2011, p. 141): "In the drawing, the human characters all look outwards at the reader as if stunned by a photographer taking a snapshot of their condition in their quotidian trips."

Concerning the text, the girl is continuously posing questions about the relationship with others. She asks herself if anyone is waiting for the passengers when they leave the station. She makes the same question about herself. She dreams of someone who wants to spend the time with her, but she is not able to find it in the subway. There are three visuals very unsettling and poignant about this topic: in one of them, the girl is alone in a vast library, she looks so helpless; in another, the girl is isolated in a gray and completely impersonal subway station. There are neither people in the stairs or the subway cars nor in the platforms (Figure 6). In the third example, a double-spread shows us the girl sat among several rows of empty chairs. Suddenly, readers notice that a chair is missing.

As we have seen, the subway is not a relational space, and as we are going to see now, neither an identity nor a historical space.

The blind girl tries to give the subway space an identity, filling it with her memories and dreams. These souvenirs and fantasies invade the platforms, the stairs, and for a moment, it gives the sensation



Figures 4 and 5. Passengers notice the presence of the girl.

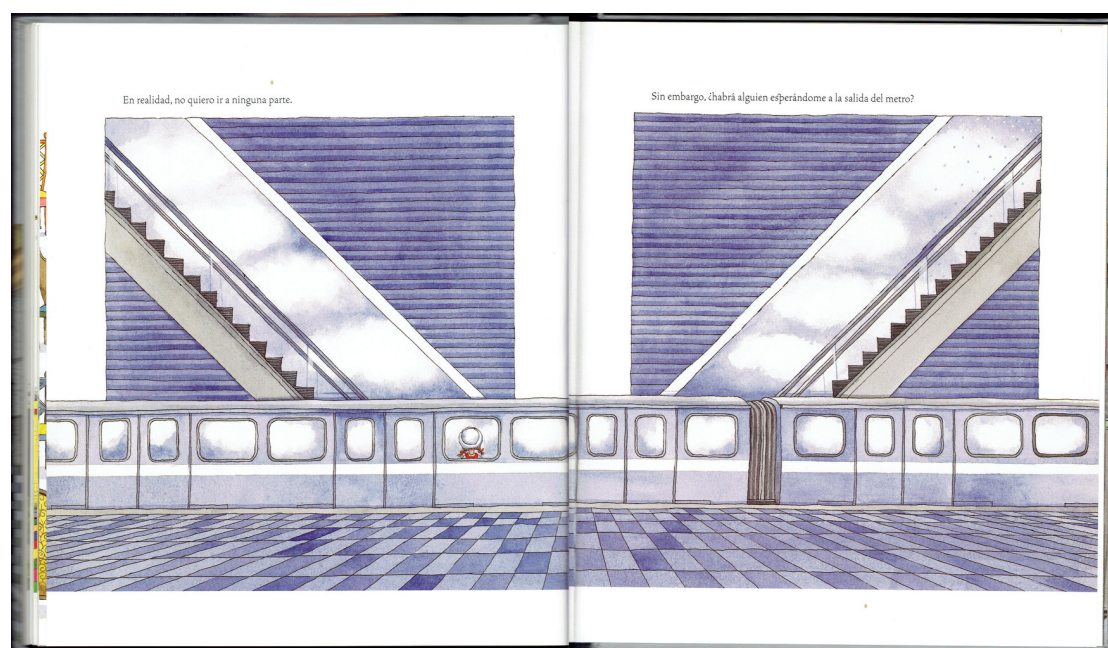


Figure 6. Loneliness.

of having changed the space. Instead, the girl is the only one who can see those elements. She is not capable of sharing it to create a collective identity. Also, it is impossible to give the subway a historical sense because the girl herself cannot recover her history to transfer it to the non-place. She painfully becomes aware her childhood is now only a secret garden where she can go back sometimes, but where she cannot live again. She, herself, has become a small souvenir in a world that does not yet belong to her (Figure 7). Despite the enormous unfolding of elements of fantasy, despite colors, readers finish the book with the uneasy impression that the girl has failed to turn the non-place into a place. They finish with a bit bittersweet feeling, wondering if she has not also failed in return to the place. Remembering Augé (1995), it was the only hope for those who frequent non-places.

The notion of the secret garden is a commonplace in children's literature since the 19th century, vastly studied by Carpenter (1985). Liao seems to agree with the idea that "the child (it is suggested) has some special kind of vision that is denied to most adults, and is therefore perhaps the inhabitant of a kind of Arcadia" (Carpenter, 1985, p. 104). In that Good Place, which Liao recovers tinged with nostalgia, there is harmonious and ideal coexistence between children and nature. This Arcadia is also an escape place from adults and urbanization.

Nikolajeva and Scott (2006) present similar views, as they think that "Rural settings reflect the adult writers' idealization of the child, which goes back to the Romantic view of childhood as innocent, happy and natural. By introducing threatening urban settings, children's writers often question this view" (p. 71).

The poetic world that the girl creates can be associated with the notion of place as long as some nuances are introduced. It could be considered a place in the sense of being the opposite of the non-place linked to the subway. However, as abovementioned, it lacks other features of places such as interaction among people. Furthermore, it cannot be seen as a historical space because the history that is not told cannot be understood like real history. Likewise, Liao does not allow readers to know the girl in this space; there they face the same gaps in her identity than in the subway space (they do not know her name or where she lives).

Children's literature, which permeates the imaginative world in *The Sound*, could be considered as a place by some scholars, as it contains a collective identity. However, fantasies and stories do not fit in the definition of place as they only exist in the imagination of people.

A final word about the structure serves to conclude the analysis of this pair. The picturebook seems



Figure 7. Childhood is a secret garden.

to own a circular design, as the girl leaves home at the beginning, a safe place that shares with her cat but that we cannot see, and she comes back at the ending, to an unexpected house in a tree. This structure shows the city/nature duality and its parallelism non-place/place again. If the city is a dangerous place, nature is safe. The transition between spaces is risky; a crane hook is used by the girl to arrive at home. The footbridge is broken, and for a while, readers fear that the girl has fallen. That emotion persists because the protagonist is in an impossible balance, barely setting her feet on the ground.

8.2. Reality/Fiction

The reality is depicted by the subway cars, people inside it, the subway stations, and the city landscape. The scenes imagined by the girl represent fiction. Nonetheless, there is not a clear border between them, as a result of:

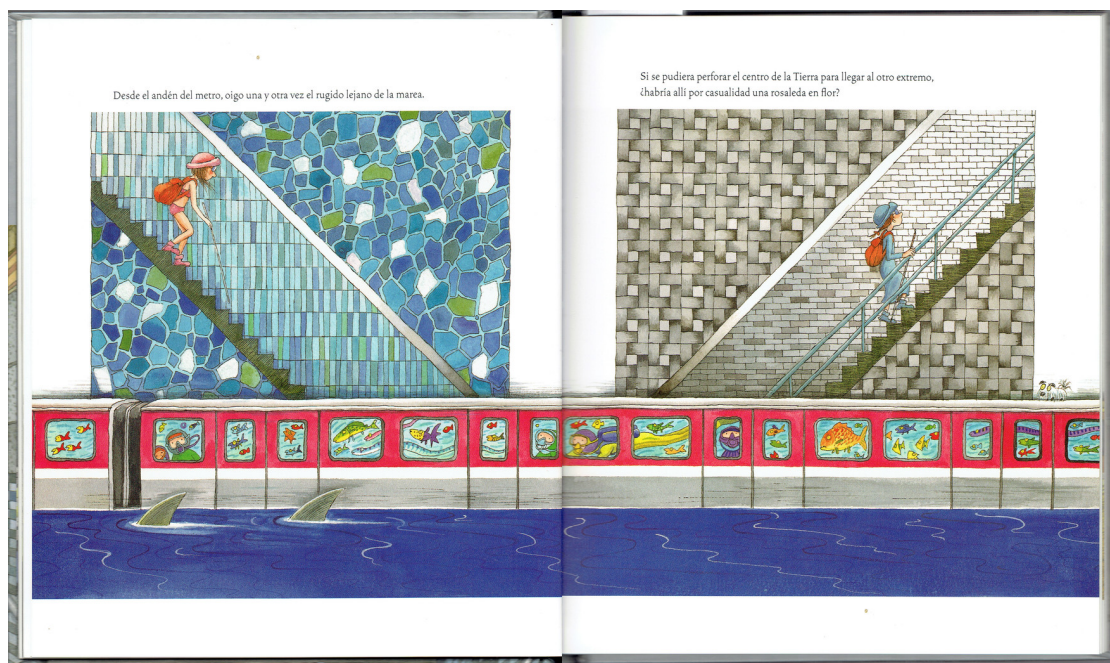
Characters of fairy tales are inside the subway cars.

The continuous mixture, for example in a double-spread the girl is swimming with dolphins and fishes outside the subway, and a bit later are the fishes which are inside the subway station and subway cars (Figures 8 and 9).

The idea of fiction is also emphasized by the curtain that readers can see firstly in the forest, a bit hidden, and later when the blind girl expresses gratitude to someone for having accompanied her (the reader or the guardian angel?). The big curtain descends, and light focuses on the girl, who is greeting like in a theatre (Figure 10). It can disturb readers, as they seem to have been theatergoers without knowing it.

Another strategy of Liao to blur borders between reality and fiction is the continuous reference to the reader. So he does not do it to the implied, but the real one. Liao plays with the idea that characters can see and look at people who are reading the book. The composition of the double-spread underscores that feeling. That creates a paradox, while the city raises a feeling of isolation, an atrocious distance between people, the reader is demanded to approach the blind girl. Readers can perceive a real danger when she is about to fall or gets lost. Liao breaks the fourth wall through this resource.

These blurred borders between fantasy and reality are a feature of postmodern picturebooks, as observed by Arizpe and Styles (2003, p. 22).



Figures 8 and 9. A mixture of reality and fiction.

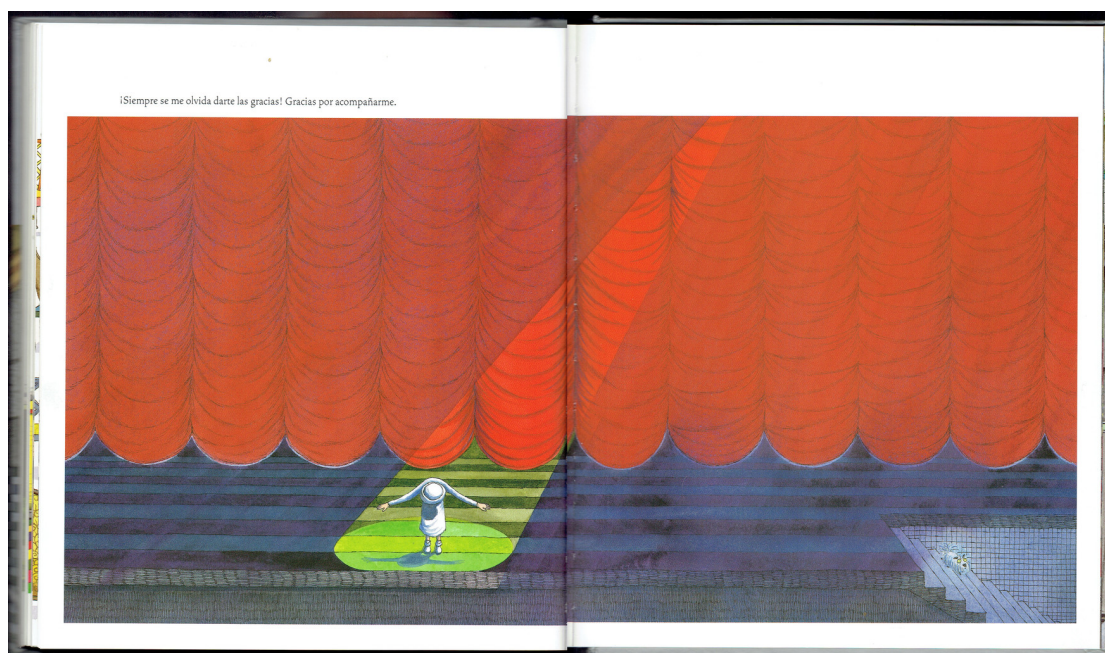


Figure 10. Strategy to reinforce the fiction.

Fantasy appears in *The Sound* as a need to overcome reality and escape from city life, as it offers a “diametric reversal of the ground rules” (Rabkin, 1977, p. 42). It seems to be the only way to recover the humanity in that cold gray world. The reality is a space of danger and uncertainty, whereas fiction is a safe place, with all under control (or not).

Ng (2011) describes this opposed pair.

Contrary to the accustomed route and “destination of discipline” of the subway trains, the girl is transported and released into fairy tale worlds of forests, oceans, beautiful gardens, dollhouses, and amusement parks. In this way, she transforms the entire commuting experience from stupefaction, deprivation, and boredom into one of sensuality, discovery, and surprise (p. 146).

However, fiction could also represent the loss of childhood, the forced transit between the adult’s world and that of children. This journey is painful and difficult.

The imagination of the girl is powerful, yet non-places in this post-industrial world can defeat it. “For all the individual effort in turning the subway into a comfortable and friendly space, she is no better than any other passengers in finding a way out of her sense of alienation” (Ng, 2011, p. 152).

Trabado (2016) has not a more hopeful view, in his words: “This [the child] ceases to be just a character to become a symbolic archetype of the human condition: an Arcadian and fanciful realm destined to be invaded by a poor reality” (p. 1143).

8.3. Inhospitable/Habitable

To express the inhospitality of the subway space, Liao inserts readers into the mind and the point of view of the girl.

Regarding the artwork, Liao uses some strategies thoroughly studied, such as a disproportion between the girl and the city spaces. While she seems to be smaller, the spaces appear as terrifying gigantic (Figure 11).

Moreover, colors depend on the space rendered. In the subway, cold and grayish tones dominate, whereas, in the poetic world, spaces are colorful and linked to nature. Notwithstanding, Liao starts

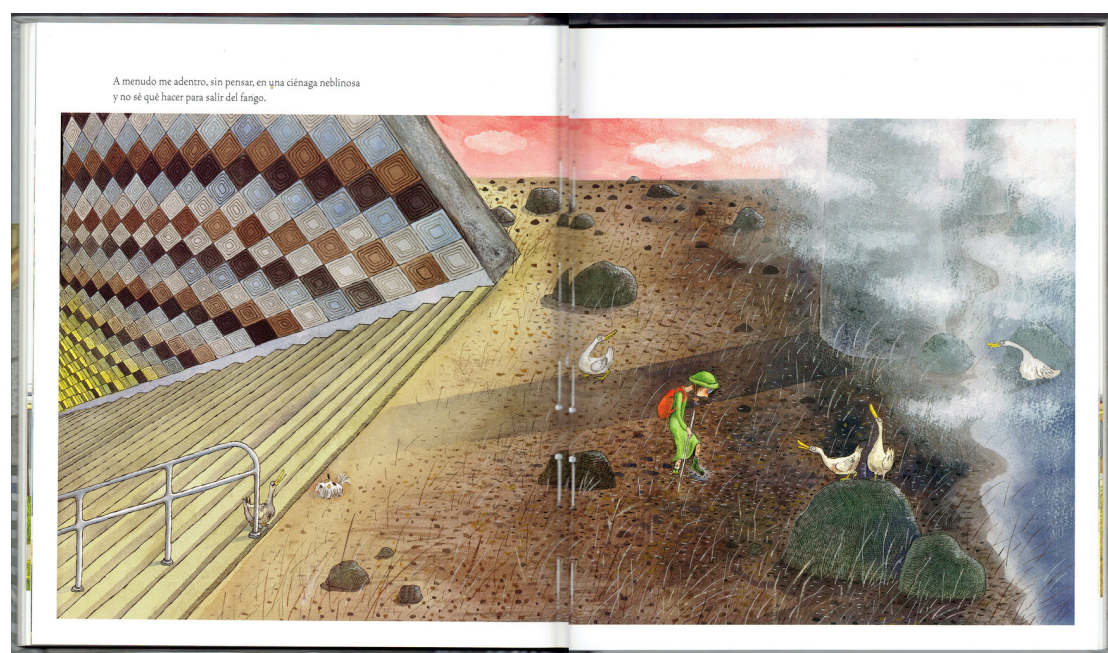


Figure 11. Disproportion.

later to interconnect these spaces, and that means that colors exchange. Some notes of color invade the subway station or the city; and some notes of gray dye the imaginative world. This mutual exchange is evident in Figures 12 and 13.

Some lurking animals and girl's falls show how dangerous are the subway spaces (Figures 14 and 15).

Concerning the verbal narration, the blind girl tells readers the difficulties of everyday life in the subway: she gets lost in the stations or among people who are always in a rush; she hurts herself, and she continually takes the wrong train. She thinks "the world is a labyrinth with no way out." Her feelings are ones of despair and sadness.

In contrast to unfriendliness, there is the habitable space of the poetic world, where nature is generous with the girl, giving her food, calm, and hopes (Figure 16). However, in this space, there are also threatening animals or some dangers. The main difference is that here the girl has resources to face the obstacles. She talks about a guardian angel that helps her.

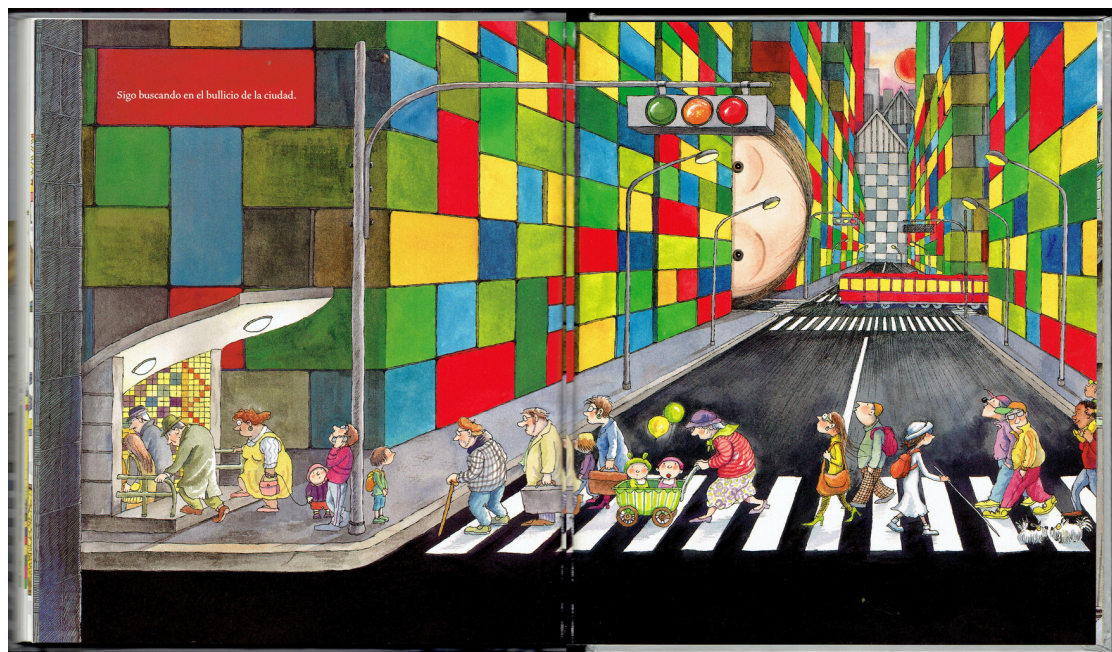
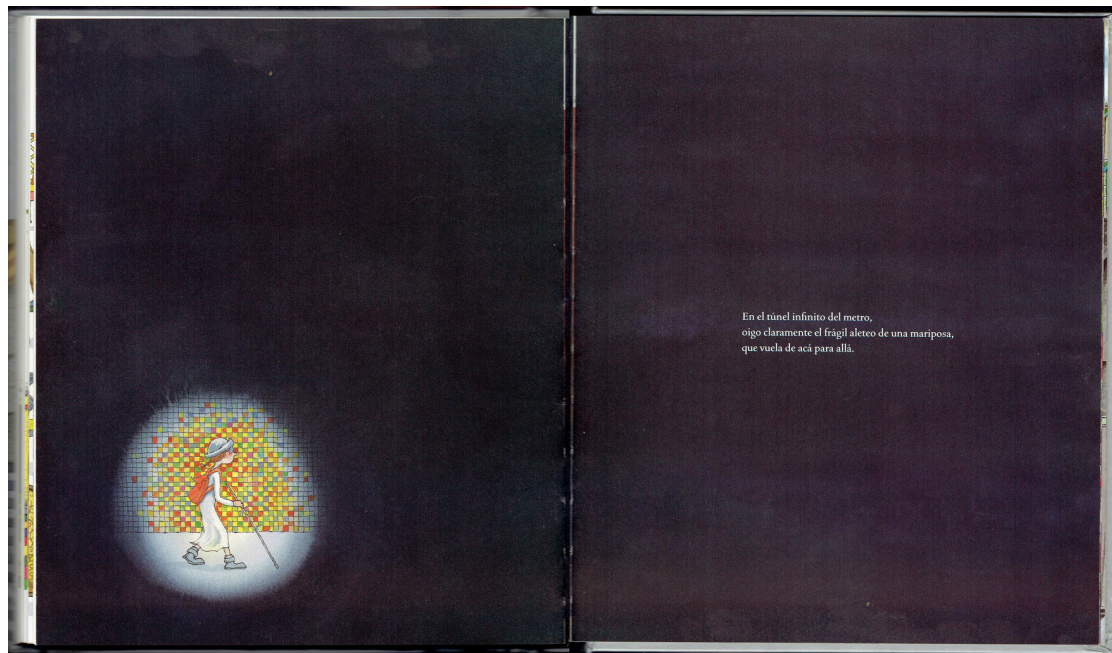
8.4. Adult's world/Children's world

In the environment of the subway, there is a majority of adults. They do not do another thing than being transferred from a place to another. However, children are a minority, and they are supervised by adults. In the first scene of a subway car interior, it appears that grown-ups are scared and need to protect children with their arms. They stare in front of them (to the reader?) as if danger was about to come from outside.

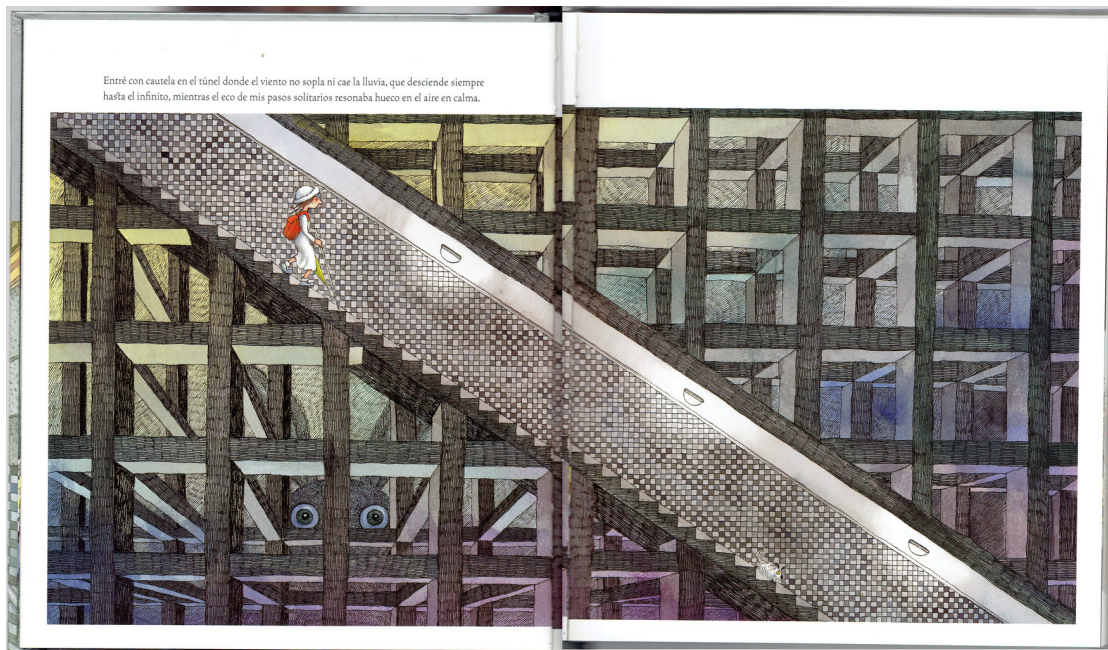
In the subway stations and cars, people seem to be unhappy, worried, even upset. Children adopt the same mood. The only happy children are in the poetic world playing with magical flying brooms. Some adults are with them, and they look happy and not frightened.

The border between adults' world and children's is the subway entrance. Adults are indoors, children outdoors. The world of the children is that of dreams, fantasy, and childhood ephemera. Hence, it is apt to think the blind girl should meet some children in the poetic world. Nevertheless, it does not occur. She is always alone, and when there are several kids (playing with the brooms), they do not relate to her (Figure 17).

Indeed, to show this pair, Liao draws on children's literature and fantasy. Adults stay outside of these places, while children live there. When an adult is allowed to be in the children's world, it is because



Figures 12 and 13. Exchange of colors.



Figures 14 and 15. Animals and dangers.



Figure 16. Nature in the poetic world.



Figure 17. Adults and children.

he/she is accompanied by a child. This idea is recurrent in Liao's work and recalls that of childhood as alterity to adulthood (Carpenter, 1985; Grilli, 2019).

Paradoxically, in this picturebook adults are who suffer blindness to face the fantasy, whereas the blind girl can see it.

The opposition between adults and children is rooted in the link between childhood and nature. The urbanization of spaces is seen not only as of the destruction of nature but also as the disappearance of childhood itself (Grilli, 2019). Because adults provoke this destruction, they appear as the antagonist of children (Carpenter, 1985). Notwithstanding, as Liao exposes, children can find small places of resistance, where they keep the alterity and elude the adult control (Grilli, 2019). In fact, the home to which the girl comes back is a house in a tree, not a building.

Liao connects children's literature with *The Sound* employing places and characters. In the picturebook there are references to *Cinderella*; *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*, by Andersen; *The Three Little Pigs*; *Little Red Riding Hood*; *The Wizard of Oz*, by Frank Baum; *The Little Prince*, by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry; *Alice in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll; *Where the Wild Things Are*, by Maurice Sendak. Also, maybe, to *The Red Balloon*, a film by Albert Lamorisse (1956).

The angel recalls that of *Wings of Desire*, a film by Wim Wenders (1987). In this film, shot in an urban context, only children and adults with a pure heart can see the angels. One of them falls in love with a trapeze artist (the circus is present in *The Sound*). There are also allusions to the European mythology, for instance, the golden leaf in the picturebook can remit to the myth of the Golden Bough because it was: "a tree branch with golden leaves that enabled the Trojan hero Aeneas to travel through the underworld safely" (Squires, 2010). Death is a very present topic in *The Sound*. It is possible that the butterfly which appears at the ending of the book remits, in the same way, to the soul in Greek mythology. Another story in which Liao could have inspired his work is that of Lohengrin, the swan knight, "The basic story tells of a mysterious knight who arrives—in a boat drawn by a swan—to help a noble lady in distress. He marries her but forbids her to ask his origin" (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2012). Our protagonist is helped to cross a lake by a boat with a swan shape, and she says it has been done by the guardian angel (Figure 18).

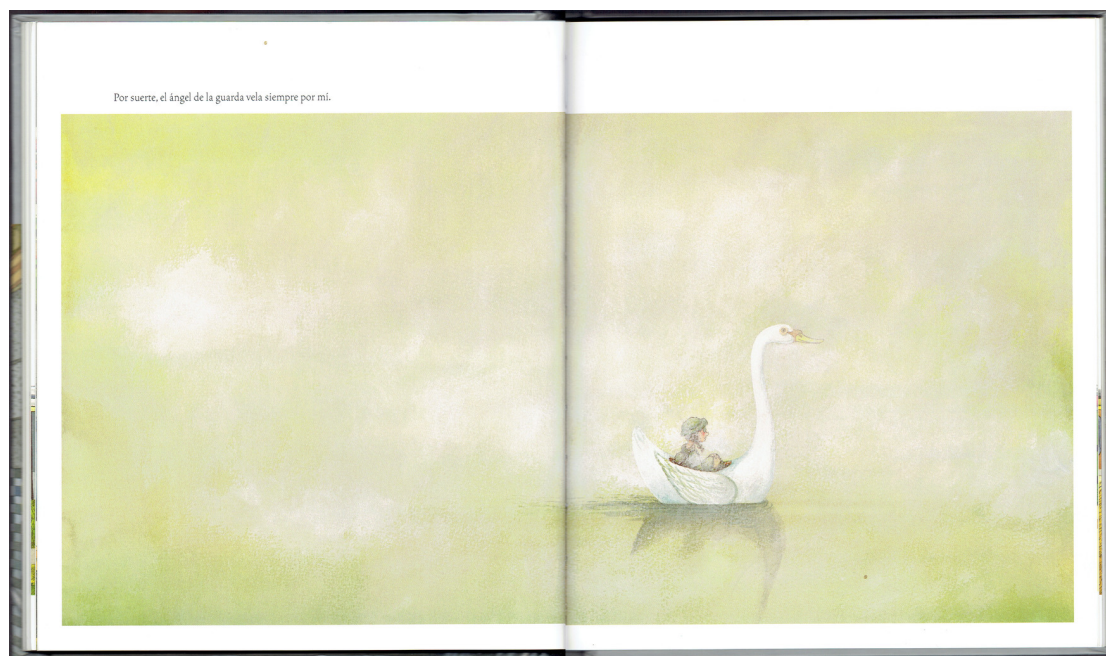


Figure 18. Possible reference to Lohengrin.

Furthermore, Liao makes use of intertextuality, "artistic allusions to renowned works of art, that is, paintings, sculpture, and architecture, familiar picturebooks, and artifacts from popular culture"

(Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2015, p. 254). This feature defines *The Sound* as a postmodern and crossover book. Some of the references to works of art are the impossible stairs by Escher or the dancing people by Matisse (Figures 19 and 20).



Of course, it cannot lack self-quoting or intratextuality (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). In the pages of *The Sound*, it is possible to see the couple of *Turn Left, Turn Right*; however, they continue without meeting. The characters of *A Fish That Smiled at Me* and of *When The Moon Forgot*. Also, the rabbit of *Secrets in the Woods*.

Ng (2011) makes a reflection about the use of these resources to depict the childhood in the picture-book, and how it connects with the readers: “The images conjure a version of childhood that is, if not directly from personal memory, one that easily substitutes for one’s own, because the images and references are familiar and ubiquitous worldwide” (p. 149).

Furthermore, to Joe Moran, childhood portrayed in that way has a symbolic and more critical sense: “Joe Moran points out that the attachment to the notion of childhood innocence and the objects associated with it, reflects a rejection of the values of contemporary society, specifically the capitalist consumerist society” (Ng, 2011, p. 150).

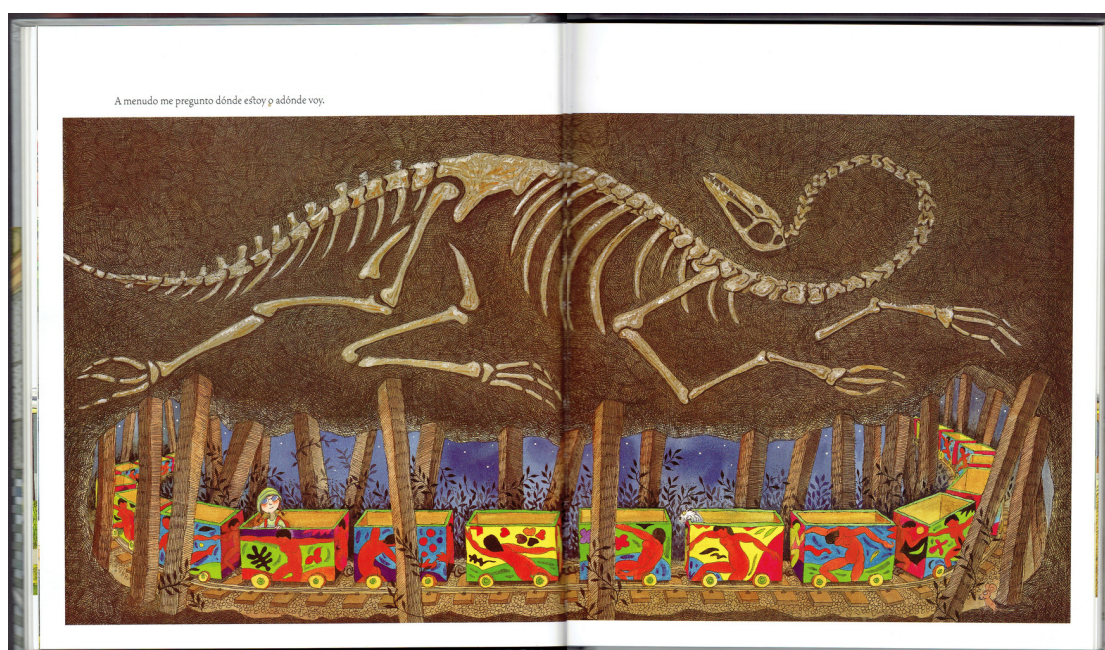
8.5. Indoors/Outdoors

In this picturebook, there are two delimited spaces, subway’s (indoors), and those of the girl’s fantasies (outdoors).

Interior spaces are cold and threatening at the beginning, whereas exteriors are colorful and welcoming. Nevertheless, little by little, both spaces penetrate each other.

Moreover, there are some interior spaces in the imagined scenes. For instance, when the girl is in a library or catching bottles in a garret. These spaces are a bit confusing because the girl accesses them leaving the subway. So, the reader expects she comes out on the city streets. However, more disturbing is the mixture of both interior and exterior spaces at the same illustration, for example, when the girl is behind a window, and there is a boy on the other side.

In each page where there is an interior space, readers find a cue that anticipates the next exterior or reminds the previous (a character, a plant, or a drawing). Hence, all the spaces are connected.



Figures 19 and 20. References to art works.

At the beginning of the book, the double-spreads of the subway stations are claustrophobic. They are delimited by two broad black stripes, on the top, and the bottom; or by big rocks evidencing the fact of being underground. Later, the alternation and combination with the pictures of exterior spaces weaken that feeling.

In contrast, the double-spreads that represent the exterior spaces give a sensation of wideness and freedom. They are not framed, or the frame is small. At the ending of the book, all the frames disappear.

It must also be pointed out that the walls of the subway stations change as the story progresses. They reflect the present scene, the prior or the next, taking part in the sense-making process (Figures 21 and 22).

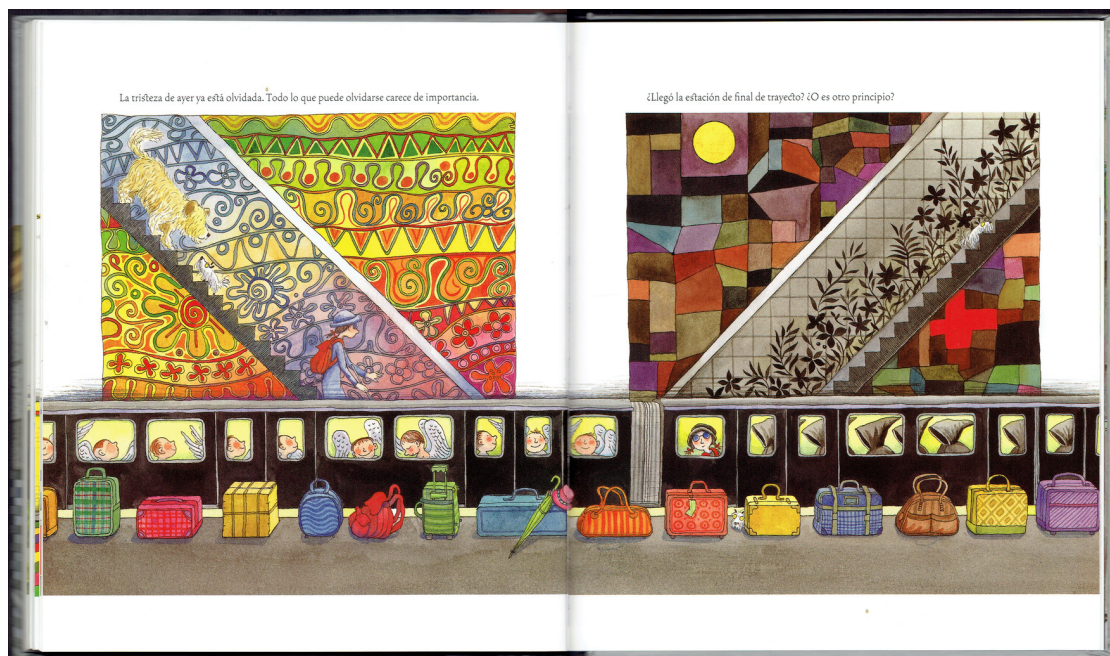
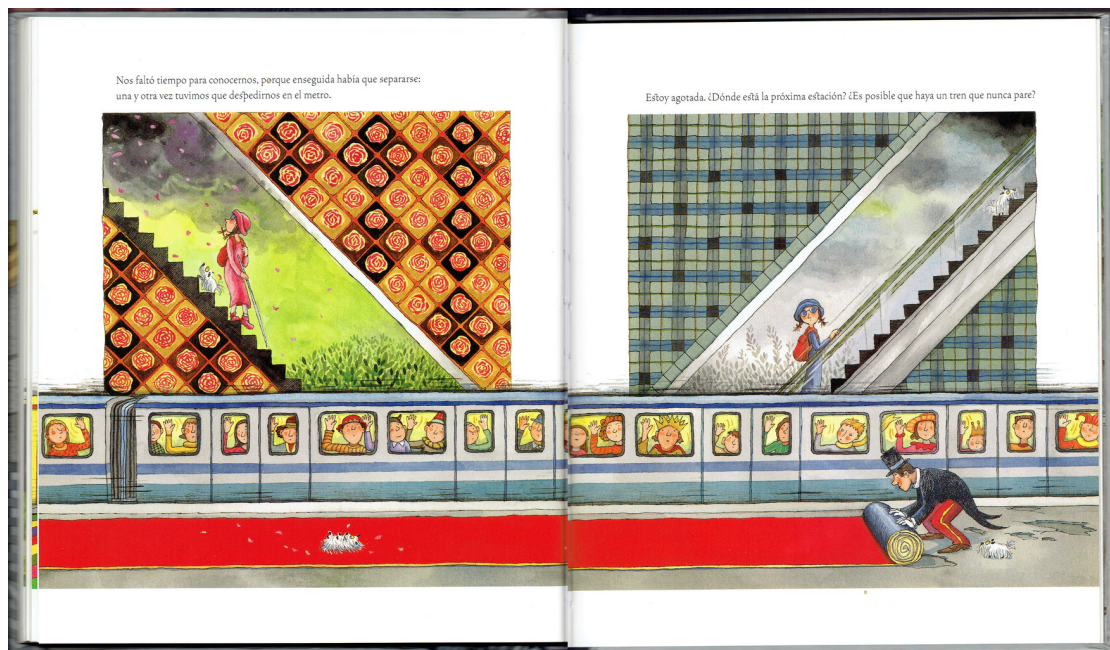
9. Discussion and Conclusion

The Sound is a Daedalian picturebook that reflects through diverse strategies the complexity of urban life. Nevertheless, Liao does not need too many spaces to show it, as the subway space is enough to tell us the dream-like adventures of a blind girl. The author traces a web of opposed ideas so that readers feel the solitude of the girl and her unceasing search for someone to accompany her.

Anyone can identify with her because, in the post-industrial era, all people need to interact with others. People hope the girl's attempts to find a place to be successful, as their hopes are also at stake. As Ng (2011) states: "If the riding of commuter trains creates a privatization of the urban landscape, Jimmy's solitary heroine captures the extreme sense of urban alienation of the 21st century through retreat into the internal garden of personal sentiment" (p. 153).

If we take into account the whole work of Liao, his recurrent topics, it is possible to conclude he accurately portrays the individual of the urban context, trapped in the city and seeking desperately a place that can comfort him, and knowing, at the same time, that likely this place does not exist. Adopting the children's perspective emphasizes it and adds a symbolic nuance that it is worth being studied.

On the other hand, Liao's picturebooks allow understanding of how spaces have become more and more sophisticated in current children's literature.



Figures 21 and 22. Different walls of the subway.

References

- Arizpe, E., & Styles, M. (2003). *Children Reading Pictures. Interpreting visual texts*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Aubert-Gamet, V., & Cova, B. (1999). Servicescapes: From Modern Non-Places to Postmodern Common Places. *Journal of Business Research*, 44, 37–45. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963\(97\)00176-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963(97)00176-8)
- Augé, M. (1995). *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso.
- Babar (2014, 16 February). Entrevista a Jimmy Liao. *Revistababar.com*. Retrieved March 11, 2019 from <http://revistababar.com/wp/entrevista-a-jimmy-liao/>.
- Carpenter, H. (1985). *Secret Gardens. A Study of the Golden Age of Children's Literature*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Colomer, T. (2010). Álbumes ilustrados y cambio de valores en el cambio de siglo. In T. Colomer, B. Kümmerling-Meibauer, & M.C. Silva-Díaz (Coords.), *Cruce de miradas: Nuevas aproximaciones al libro-álbum* (pp.58–73). Barcelona: Banco del Libro y Gretel.
- CUHK (The Chinese University of Hong Kong) (2014, 10 January). *Renowned Picture Book Author Jimmy Liao Spoke on CUHK Campus Today for Shun Hing Lecture in Arts and Humanities. 1,500 People Filled the Lecture Hall*. Retrieved February 4, 2019 from https://www.cpr.cuhk.edu.hk/en/press_detail.php?id=1735&t=renowned-picture-book-author-jimmy-liao-spoke-on-cuhk-campus-today-for-shun-hing-lecture-in-arts-and-humanities-1-500-people-filled-the-lecture-hall.
- Desmet, M. (2004). The Universe of Jimmy: Creating Picture Books for Adults in Taiwan. In P. Pinset (Ed.), *Books and Boundaries: Writers and their Audiences* (pp. 68–84). Lichfield, Staffordshire: Pied Piper.
- dPICTUS (2015a, 8 December). *Jimmy Liao | Part 1*. Retrieved February 6, 2019 from <https://blog.picturebookmakers.com/post/134783021716/jimmy-liao-part-1>.
- dPICTUS (2015b, 15 December). *Jimmy Liao | Part 2*. Retrieved February 6, 2019 from <https://blog.picturebookmakers.com/post/135244381846/jimmy-liao-part-2>.
- Garavini, M. (2019). The Polyphony Aspects of Picturebook Production. In R. Oittinen, A. Ketola, & M. Garavini, *Translating Picturebooks. Revoicing the Verbal, the Visual, and the Aural for a Child Audience* (pp. 32–38). Oxfordshire/New York: Routledge.
- Grilli, G. (2019). La città che non c'è. Bambini, natura e ambiente urbano nella letteratura per l'infanzia. *Encyclopaedia*, 23(54), 65–91.
- Her, K. (1 June 2009). Museums on the Move. *TaiwanToday*. Retrieved January 29, 2019 from <https://taiwantoday.tw/news.php?post=25068&unit=20,29,35,45>.
- Kozo, (n.d.) (2004). *Sound of Colors* (地下鐵). Retrieved January 27, 2019 from http://www.lovehkfilm.com/reviews/sound_of_colors.htm.
- Kümmerling-Meibauer, B. (2015). From baby books to picturebooks for adults: European picturebooks in the new millennium. *Word & Image*, 31(3), 249–264. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02666286.2015.1032519>
- Liao, J. (2006). *The Sound of Colors. A Journey of the Imagination*. Boston, New York: Little Brown and Company.
- Liao, J. (2008a). *El sonido de los colores*. Cádiz (Spain): Barbara Fiore.
- Liao, J. (2008b). *Desencuentros*. Cádiz (Spain): Barbara Fiore.

- Liao, J. (2008c). *Secretos en el bosque*. Cádiz (Spain): Barbara Fiore.
- Liao, J. (2012). *Dixiatie (The Sound of Colors)* – 幾米: 地下铁. Beijing (China): Dolphin Books.
- Liao, J. (2014). *La Luna se olvidó*. Cádiz (Spain): Barbara Fiore.
- Ng, J. (2011). The Taipei MRT, Jimmy Liao's Picture Book, and the New Mass Rapid Transit Culture. *Modern China Studies*, 18(2), 129–160.
- Nikolajeva, M., & Scott, C. (2006). *How Picturebooks Work*. New York/Oxon: Routledge.
- Oittinen, R. (2006). No Innocent Act. On the Ethics of Translating for Children. In J. Van Coillie, & W. P. Verschueren (Eds.), *Children's Literature in Translation. Challenges and Strategies* (pp. 35–45). Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing.
- Oittinen, R., Ketola, A., & Garavini, M. (2019). *Translating Picturebooks. Revoicing the Verbal, the Visual, and the Aural for a Child Audience*. Oxfordshire/New York: Routledge.
- Ommundsen, A. M. (2015). Who are these Picturebooks for? Controversial Picturebooks and the Question of Audience. In J. Evans (Ed.), *Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks. Creative and Critical Responses to Visual Texts* (pp. 71–93). Oxon/New York: Routledge.
- Rabkin, E. S. (1977). *The Fantastic in Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Salisbury, M., & Styles, M. (2012). *Children's Picturebooks: The Art of Visual Storytelling*. London: Laurence King.
- Shi, X. (2016). Implications of Jimmy Liao's Picturebooks and Their Translations for Theories of Crossover Narrative. *Forum for World Literature Studies*, 8(3), 406–419.
- Siu, J. (25 March 2008). Solitary man. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved April 14, 2019 from <https://www.scmp.com/article/631161/solitary-man>.
- Squires, N. (18 February 2010). Golden Bough from Roman Mythology 'found in Italy'. Italian Archaeologists Claim to Have Found a Stone Enclosure which once Protected the Legendary "Golden Bough". *The Telegraph*. Retrieved March 12, 2019 from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/7258607/Golden-Bough-from-Roman-mythology-found-in-Italy.html>.
- The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica (2012). Lohengrin. In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved March 14, 2019 from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lohengrin-German-legendary-figure>.
- Trabado, J. M. (2016). Remodelando el álbum ilustrado: Jimmy Liao y el autorretrato melancólico. *UNED Revista Signa*, 25, 1131–1152. <https://doi.org/10.5944/signa.vol25.2016.16947>
- Wing-Sze, L. (22 September 2003). Liao's Book Hits the Stage. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved April 17, 2019 from <https://www.scmp.com/article/428709/liaos-book-hits-stage>.
- Yeung, M. (3 April 2008). Taking a Colourful Look at Life. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved April 17, 2019 from <https://www.scmp.com/article/632403/taking-colourful-look-life>.