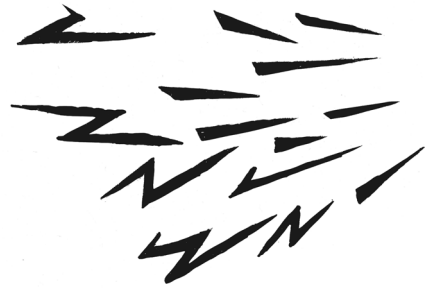




Annika Gunnarsson

synligt/osynligt

RECEPTIONEN AV DET VISUELLA
I BILDERBÖCKERNA OM ALFONS ÅBERG



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English Summary

VISIBLE/INVISIBLE. THE RECEPTION OF THE VISUAL IN THE PICTURE BOOKS ABOUT ALFIE ATKINS

This dissertation is based on a survey of the twenty-four picture books about the character Alfie Atkins (or Alfons Åberg as he is known in Swedish) which were written by Gunilla Bergström and published in Sweden between 1972 and 2010. Alfie Atkins/Alfons Åberg is a popular phenomenon and an ubiquitous picture book figure both in Sweden and internationally. Over the years the Alfie books have been reviewed extensively, primarily with a focus on their literary content. This is an interesting aspect of the reception history which has not yet been systematized. The books are also part of an art historical discourse, though their visual qualities have seldom been discussed before. The aim of this study is to analyse the ways in which the visual elements appear in the Alfie books, and to discuss the aesthetic reception of them from a performative point of view in relation to the reception history. The study focuses on research about the ways in which pictures and language create a notion of a world where reality and imagination coexist, i.e. where things that exist are not always visible, and things that are invisible sometimes take the form of something visible.

Being an art historian, I have chosen to let the term visual apply to all aspects of materiality. The text is therefore included in the term picture, since I focus on that which pictures and text make visible through the overall story, including the visual content, with no hierarchy between picture and text. I also see the picture book as a medium, since it unifies both the physical form of materiality and the communicative function of mediation. Medium can also be linked to format as well as to mass media. The term is problematic



in many ways, since it is used in a number of different contexts. Here medium functions as a denominator for both the material and the immaterial aspects of the artwork.

From questions about how the books are composed, what the pictures look like, what the pictures show and what is typical for them, I have analysed what is made visible to the observer/viewer who experiences the visual, the verbal and the auditory content. The observer sees and takes part in the work like a performer for whom a complete world is created, one which includes both that which can be seen, the visible, and that which is revealed as a response to the effect of the work, the so-called invisible. The latter is formulated in the study as written analyses of how actions are staged in the Alfie books. The aesthetic reception is the immaterial part of the work. I therefore make a distinction between reception as a general and overall term for how the Alfie books have been received and discussed historically, and response as a more specific description of the conditions for the reception of the aesthetic elements.

My hypothesis is that the response of the observer is more important for the reception as a whole (reception history and aesthetic reception combined) than has been discussed in descriptions of the books, mainly in the press, but also in literature referring to Alfie Atkins as a picture book or a character. The literary reception of the books has primarily been based on the texts. I have therefore studied and referred to the visual appearances of other contemporary picture books, how pictures in picture books have been viewed from the 1960s and onwards, and how the Alfie books more specifically have been received by the press, in order to formulate the ways in which pictures and visual content have been discussed over time. The discrepancy between reception history and aesthetic reception appears more clearly when considered as form and content, surface and depth, object (materiality) and aesthetic object (experience) which, from the viewpoint of their respective discourses, can be formulated as visible or invisible.

To have a better overview of what was on the market when the first Alfie book was published in 1972 I have made a visual study of the books that were reviewed by the Swedish media information service, Bibliotekstjänst (BTJ), the same year, as well as during the years 1982, 1992 and 2002, in order to attain a historical perspective. This survey also provides a foundation for how reviewers have discussed and described what pictures should look like. To understand the conditions for and the position of Alfie Atkins on the picture book market, I have studied approximately 375 articles dealing with children's literature in newspapers and periodicals which have Alfie Atkins or Gunilla Bergström as their main subject. The written statements and the

reviews are largely a part of the external narration that formulates who and what Alfie Atkins is.

I also compared four of the sixteen films about Alfie Atkins with the corresponding books, to further extract what constitutes the visual in the Alfie books. The films were produced between 1979 and 1994 by Per Åhlin and Lasse Persson at PennFilm Studio. Seven of the films based on these sixteen books were produced before the books were actually published, although this did not change how either the books or the films were composed, because the books had already been written and were awaiting publication when the films were released. The films are a part of the reception history just as much as they are a part of the response. The world of Alfie also includes events and other spin-off products connected to the books and the character Alfie Atkins, however such events and products are not covered in this study.

The choice of the above mentioned material allows a discussion of the way in which the visual elements happen in the Alfie books and why this is crucial to the response of the observer. By examining the books as individual works, as well as by comparing them to each other and to the films, a metafiction that relays its own story is formulated as the response of the observer. The inter-visual references are so consistently created that they make the so-called invisible content visible, i.e. they are linguistic, though not verbalised through the text. It is the given response to the world of Alfie that is the common denominator for the world shared by Alfie and the observer. The pictures and the texts describe a much larger world that reaches far beyond the material aspects of the books in combination with the response of the observer.

The point of departure for my analyses of the Alfie books is the term *perspicuity* rather than the term *literacy*, which is more often used to discuss pictures and texts in picture books. To set a frame of reference for this I refer to more contemporary theories on picture-text to show how these discourses often are schematic systematisations of the picture, where the linguistic formulations do not present the picture, but rather describe it. The vocabulary used in the discourses either includes the picture in the text or constructs new terms combining the two. Picture books most often contain pictures and texts, which distinguish them from other works of art consisting of pictures and texts, where the text is outside of the format of the picture so to speak, but part of the narration. This way of seeing pictures and texts as separate entities has long been the customary way of discussing the content of picture books, with the text as the given point of departure. In this study the pictures are the starting point. Without overlooking the text, they are presented so that the focus is on the pictures.



In the Alfie books the pictures and the text do not depend upon one another in order to be explained or described. They narrate and describe simultaneously without distinction, and each element has been allowed enough space for individual expression which is not opposed to or dependent upon the other. The linguistic content together with the non-verbalised pictures and the verbalised text provide the mutual conditions for the observer's response. In the Alfie books the visual oscillates between pictures and text. In this way action is created whereby antithesis and resemblance are mirrored, and the visibility of the text does not foreshadow that which is invisible in the pictures. Each picture narrates and clarifies what a (trained) observer notices. When pictures narrate, other visible content appears. In the Alfie books the equilibrium is exactly where the reduced pictures and texts are seen as an unified whole. The performative method allows the picture to be reduced, simplified, dynamic, descriptive and narrative all at the same time.

Within the performative analyses, I examine the more traditional terms of colour, form, figure, composition and symbol. In art history these elements have signified a practical way of discussing the overriding construction of the picture as well as the underlying meaning. In the analyses of the Alfie books they organise the picture while simultaneously constructing the meaning. The written analyses are a step towards showing the conditions and effects of the visual as an aesthetic basis for the observer's response.

During the working process the material was structured into four categories, Emotional Dramas, Relations, Play and Imaginations and Abstractions. These four groups are also the titles of the four chapters in which I analyse the Alfie books. This categorisation makes it possible to concentrate on and discuss how central abstract concepts also recur in new combinations, which creates new meanings as well. This division will serve as a formal way of supporting my argument for perspicuity as an aesthetic experience, where the non-verbal visual function actually does narrate.

The study is divided into three parts focusing on the reception history, the reception aesthetics respectively, followed by a discussion of the results stemming from the first two parts. In the first chapter, Children's Books – Picture Book – Art, I discuss aspects of what comprises a picture book, how picture books have been analysed within the history of literature as well as what picture books actually looked like during the period of study. I also make a concentrated compilation of the different positions taken on picture book research, the market, which stories were published, together with the conventions for picture books around 1972 and today's postmodern picture

book discourse. The second chapter, Publication, briefly describes the material conditions before, during and after publication of the Alfie books, and what happens to the pictures in the books when they are translated into other languages for different cultures. In the third chapter, Critique and Reception, I show how the reviews are linguistically governed. By describing how the Alfie books were received and discussed in newspaper criticism, the status of the books is indirectly shown. Generally the reception presents the function of the books as separate from the function of the critics as bearers of taste and style. To some extent, this chapter shows a pre-understanding connected to the Alfie books which is one element of their overall reception history.

In the second part the analyses of the Alfie books are structured according to the above mentioned categories. In Emotional Dramas I discuss how conflicts, bullying, guilt, loneliness and identity crises are visualised. Knowledge and uncertainty, expressed through the pictures' visualisations of that which is more certain and the formulations in the texts that are more vague, appear as diametrically opposed. In the chapter discussing Relations I formulate how more everyday relationships in life related to friendship, solidarity, confidence and family are visualised. The lack of a direct correspondence between picture and text is the tension, what I call the logic of the opposite, which is expressed through that which is visualised and the way in which it is visualised. Picture and text will therefore approach the story from different angles. Play formulates and visualises things to be done, but also the sharing of experiences and things with others, which also points to more philosophical aspects. The use of idioms and linguistically set expressions is playfully mastered when staged visually. The discrepancy between picture and text is made clear through the symbolic use of each expression. By placing them together, a dynamic and expansive response is possible. An interesting antipole to play is orderliness. Finally Imagination and Abstractions takes into account the visualisation of thoughts, ideas and wonders, where feelings and secrets are invisible abstractions made visible. There are two separate expressions of invisibility. For example, ghosts, monsters and secret friends are substitutes for abstract expressions such as feelings. Time, warmth and coldness, as well as feelings are the so-called non-visual moments that are visualised through the use of colour and line. The final chapter of this section discusses how the Alfie books are made into Alfie films. The visual elements of the two media, the openings in the books and the corresponding sequences in the films, are compared by discussing the choices made to visualise the story. For example, motion is visualised through abstract symbols, colour, composition and page-turning in the



books, while the films are kinastic in line with the inherent techniques of the medium, which creates constantly ongoing motion. That which is medium specific in the former case is used to play with conventions, just as it is the conventional basis for the narration in the latter. The comparison between the two media makes it clear exactly how important this coexistence is, as well as how terms and definitions in each medium can be transmediated to reformulate more common ideas and conventions. This could eventually lead to an expanded media discourse.

The third part of the dissertation consolidates the results of the study. It begins with a chapter on Fiction and Reality, where the book *Alfons och soldatpappan* (not published in English) is discussed from the viewpoint of all of the above four categories in order to summarise the structure of the Alfie books relative to their reception history, which is purely linguistic. The idea is to formulate just how delicate and uncontrived the Alfie books are, and to show that the four categories can be found in all of the Alfie books. The next chapter, The Visual in the Alfie Books, explains the meaning of colour, form, line, composition, language and what comprises the visual elements in pictures and text. In the final chapter, visible/invisible, the conclusion of the study is presented. Here I formulate what results a study of this kind can generate today, and how the visible/invisible functions on different levels and from different points of view, both in the story itself as well as in relationship to the descriptions of the same.

As a single contemporary picture book character, Alfie Atkins acquires both aesthetic knowledge and a verbal knowledge of languages. Seen as a whole – the books, the pictures, the text, the language, the verbal content and the subjects – the stories are expansive as a result of the reduced amount of information that is presented. The books about Alfie Atkins still remain somewhat outside of the more theoretical schools of contemporary picture book research. In no time at all, the Alfie books were met with huge sympathy. New editions, new books, translations, films, TV programs, theatre plays, exhibitions, computer games, web pages, and now even a Facebook group, have transformed Alfie into a phenomenon. This places his character and the books somewhere in between the documentary trend of the 1970s and mass market literature with the more expressive and expanded books praised by the literary criticism of the 2000s. The books both suit and fit contemporary ideologies while simultaneously giving rise to new ones. The books were not considered innovative when they first were published, however seen from today's perspective, they introduced new ideas and novel ways of expressions when they first arrived on the picture book scene. All of

the Alfie books deal with philosophical and psychological subjects which were new when they first appeared, and they have become more common now. In a central way, the Alfie books show how children's culture has focused on and discussed more differentiated subjects over the last forty years.

The Alfie books do not fit the more linear, logical and descriptive systems that are used to describe picture books. I have drawn the conclusion that motion in the Alfie books is visualised both through existing conventions, i.e. through the interplay of what is visualised, and through the circular interrelationships between the pictures. This means that the pictures can refer to both what is visualised before and after an event. Pictures can relate to circumstances-chance and temporality-worldliness, as well as the more material sides of being, through the real-time aspects of the pictures. The work is performed in different places, on different occasions by different observers. Temporality, motion and space are so closely connected to one another that they determine the visual and linguistic dimensions of the Alfie books collectively. Sensation, thought, knowledge and aesthetics are combined within the same visual framework in the Alfie books.

The shifting boundaries between imagination and reality, between what is real and what is not, are expressed through visual representations that both reflect and reform the given system of symbols. The visual oscillates between symbolization and illustration or depiction, which shows that different forms of expression can become corresponding visual elements. The visual can then shift between what is concrete, realistic, abstract and imaginary without questioning the credibility of the story. Thus the haptic determines the staging of the stories. This does not mean that the books about Alfie remain outside of realism as a principle. The Alfie books are definitely realistic. Instead they re-evaluate the amount of information needed to transfer that which can be perceived as something real, even though it is imaginary.

In the study I show that the Alfie books deviate from other picture books during this time period. This has been noted in the press, but no extensive research or mention has been made in the literature on picture books from this time. Studies on the works of other picture book artists might give a more varied perspective as to what determines which works will survive, as well as the response to these works. Further studies on particular aspects are therefore just as necessary as anthologies. Research projects should thus look beyond the more given theories, and the visual capacity of picture books as an expression and work of art as well. This study also reflects the more common ontology of picture books. Though it might be perceived as a



uniform description, with questions and results viewed from an art historical perspective, it is as important to acknowledge how picture books might be centred in different fields of research, without making restrictions on the interpretation of them. A more general discussion of the term visual, connected to the discourse of the contemporary art scene, would be another important field for further study.

Learning about pictures happens through visual training, formulated linguistically and confirmed by the production of texts. As long as perspicuity and visuality are defined by researchers within other disciplines such as media, language and literature, the entire potential of the visual expression of the pictures will not be formulated. As an art historian I have been trained to see, to observe, to collect visual sensations and formulate them in written texts, as I have done in this study. I hope that this dissertation and the results that I have presented here will be useful in other areas of research on visual expression dealing with pictures and text. It is on this note that I end the study of the visual in the Alfie books – as one specific way of looking at the visual/non-visual reception of and response to the stories.