

Home, lived-in spaces and childhood in European picturebooks from 1945 to the present day

Carla Callegari and Marnie Campagnaro

University of Padua

Abstract

The concepts of home and *espace vécu* play a large role in children's literature. The home is not just an objective and architectural space, but also an intimate space with sensory, symbolic, cultural, social and political dimensions. The concept of *espace vécu* refers to a relationship between what "exists" and what "is perceived". Children build their own identity in the context of their families, developing relationships not only with people, but also with places and things. The aim of this special issue is to identify and analyse the evolution of the representation of these spaces in European picturebooks published in the period 1945-2010. An historical and comparative international survey on picturebooks has been carried out by researchers of children's literature, comparative education and geography from various European countries (Italy – coordinator, Croatia, France, Germany, Norway, Portugal), emphasising as the interdisciplinary study of domestic spaces represented in picturebooks is a particularly promising investigative field for reading, within an original perspective framework, social and cultural changes also occurring in the history of childhood.

Keywords: European picturebooks; home; *espace vécu*; comparative studies; representation of childhood

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1. The concept of home and *lived-in spaces* in history and children's literature

The concept of private living space or home environment, as we understand it nowadays, is the result of a fairly recent conquest. As highlighted in their work of the reconstruction of private life over fifteen centuries, editors Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby show how, although as early as the fifteenth century a process of progressive transformation of residential architecture began to take place, nudged forward by the formation of numerous new spaces in various sectors of public life, only in the nineteenth century did a full, conscious privatisation of the home environment begin to take place. The home was to become “the private domain par excellence, a solid foundation of the family and a pillar of social order” (Perrot, 1988, p.244), an element of stability that was upheld by the parcelling out of private spaces, which were adequately protected by exterior walls, windows, partitions, curtains, etc. This transformation was made evident by the creation of separate domestic spaces, necessary to ensure a degree of intimacy for a family.

Although the nineteenth century was a relatively important period for the construction of the concept of the home, intended as a projection of the family unit and of the sense of belonging, the twentieth century would turn out to be absolutely the century of the home. The architectural formulae and experimenting that began to develop in that period managed to shape and represent new social identities and new styles of family and social life. The extraordinary resonance of certain rather well-known buildings bear witness to that: *Casa Battlò*, by Antoni Gaudí i Cornet (1904-1906), *The Schröder House*, by Gerrit Rietveld (1924), *Villa Savoye*, by Le Corbusier (1931), *Fallingwater*, by Frank Lloyd Wright (1939), *The Eames House*, by Charles and Ray Eames (1949), *The Farnsworth House*, by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1951) and *Gehry Residence*, by Frank Gehry (1978).

This renewed focus on domestic spaces would become particularly apparent after the Second World War. The industriousness required to reconstruct the European countries destroyed by war united with new forms of political, social, cultural and economic liberalism (although, with reference to Europe, the time frames varied rather wildly) would lead to a general re-organisation of lived-in spaces, inside and outside of

the home. The individual, his/her needs – real or induced – the space he or she lives and moves in would be the focus of an original work of study and experimentation. The living space was increasingly becoming, for example, a catalyst of the consumer market. It was inside the house, indeed, that the representation of new lifestyle habits and of a determined standard of living occurred and the rapid irruption of cultural and ideological elements took place.

In the same period, the concept of the geographies of daily life began to take shape. Armand Frémont, the leading light of French geographical teachings, coined the concept of *espace vécu*, or lived-in space (1974). Place became a fundamental element for structuring the space of human daily living, a place also linked to “a limited, yet well-defined space not without some extensions: the home, the field, the road, the square. [...] It links small but strongly cohesive groups: the same family, the same trade or the same people frequented every day” (Frémont, 1978, p.95). People began to start paying more and more attention to the set of values, symbols and meanings that various different societies had given and continued to give to the places they inhabited. The subject of the analysis was no longer how humans inhabit their lived-in space, but how they view and perceive it. The focus shifted to the relationships of representation of space – including invisible and unexplored relationships.

It seems clear that these factors were not limited to redefining the domestic geographies of the world of adults, but also activated a process in the paths of change in spaces experienced by children. Urban settlements, architectural transformation of domestic spaces (and therefore of the neighbourhoods and cities in which they were built), the reorganisation of family and social assets significantly redefined the geography of the home of children born in Europe after the Second World War.

A substantial transformation in the use of open-air spaces began to worm its way into their life. The public, socialising space of the streets, courtyards, riverbanks, fields and forests would be experienced in an increasingly different way compared to the past. The private, individualising space of domestic environments would acquire importance, which had up until then been unknown. Such accelerated transformation of the home as a concept and a physical place has necessarily led to a modification in the representation of the traditional housing models that were related to it. We are obviously referring to the transformations that took place, for example, in European

social and cultural history, but also to those disciplines more closely linked to the world of childhood, like for example the history of children's literature.

In children's literature, the home, the place where one lives and learns, is an inescapable *topos*. It is consequently evident that if the brick house, in which many little boys and girls in Europe were raised and educated, underwent profound changes, then the symbolic home depicted in children's literature was also, more or less, involved in these transformations and by carefully examining it and its graphic evolution, we can discover the traces and testimony of these changes.

The aim of this special issue is to therefore identify and analyse these traces, measure their importance and offer a critical-interpretative framework that captures the evolution of the representation of domestic geographies in European children's literature of the second half of the twentieth century. This exploratory work is the result of an original international comparative historical survey entitled, "The construction of the sense of *espace vécu* in the European Children's literature in the second half of the 20th century (1945-2010). An international historical and comparative survey on picturebooks", which took place during 2017 and 2018. A heterogenous collaboration of researchers of children's literature, comparative education and geography from various European countries (Italy – coordinator, Croatia, France, Germany, Norway, Portugal) studied and analysed the evolution of domestic spaces in picturebooks published in Europe in the period 1945-2010, emphasising as the study of domestic landscapes and *espace vécu* represented in picturebooks is a particularly promising investigative field for reading and interpreting, within an original perspective framework, social and cultural changes also occurring in the history of contemporary childhood.

2. The comparative historical analysis of the *espace vécu* in picturebooks in six European countries

The research project, from the point of view of comparative studies, was devised with the aim of applying the classical method of comparative education to a particular subject of study within children's literature: picturebooks. The research hypothesis therefore looked at how representation of the spaces in the home, in a historical period spanning sixty-five years, helps comprehend the development of the idea of childhood:

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it looked at the educational relationships established within domestic environments between adults and children and between peers in order to comprehend the changes in children's lives and how adults view childhood. The perspective of the research was interdisciplinary not only because it combined the historical with the comparative method (Callegari, 2016), but also because it drew on children's literature and human geography in order to obtain further interpretations of the educational condition.

The measuring tools employed were thus designed and constructed with the aim of highlighting significant data and making them comparable within a European framework of study, checking also for any possible *transfer* phenomena (Cowen, 2010) in the future design of domestic spaces suitable for childhood. The data mass collected via the *Word Picturebook Datasheet* and the *Excel Data Matrix*, consisting of four different grids, provided the opportunity for a comparative historical examination of domestic spaces, on their changes and on their incidence in the interactions of the main characters of the stories in various European social environments, therefore in widely-varying contexts. The challenge was to manage to produce data that could on the one hand represent the culture of each country involved, and, on the other hand, trace out a common European route.

The essays presented in this *Special Issue* are the result of research work carried out by each project participant and reflect the general and educational culture of the European countries considered. A common denominator for Italy, Germany, France, Portugal and Croatia was the presence in their political history of a dictatorship that conditioned the daily lives of adults and children and influenced people's lives, sometimes heavily. The first three countries named above were under Nazi-Fascist dictatorship which terminated when the Second World War ended in 1945, for Croatia it was the Communist dictatorship of Tito until 1980 and for Portugal it was the dictatorship established by António de Oliveira Salazar which terminated in 1974. The country that stands out from this point of view is Norway which has never experienced a dictatorial regime, and furthermore in geographical terms also is distinctive in the features of its particular landscape that lead its inhabitants and children especially to spend plenty of time outdoors and to think of the surrounding natural landscape as "home".

The consequences of social evolutions were similar in terms of the presence in homes of domestic environments and spaces dedicated to children and that children experience as

their own, and of furniture, objects and toys which, progressively, began to appear in domestic environments. Educational relationships were also influenced by the material living conditions of families and society, even if their improvement was not always followed by progress in relationships between adults and children. The consumerism that has been recorded in recent decades in certain European countries, including Italy, marks a progressive detachment of adults from children and lack of attention and educational care towards them. In these contexts, the importance of the dynamic between education that takes place at home and education that takes place outside of the home, often in a group or imaginary space emerges.

From the comparison of data carried out to this point, we see how educational relationships tend to conform childhood, in more or less constricting ways, to existing social norms. In recent decades this request from the adult world has found less drastic forms compared to the past, more dependent however on less evident psychological relationships yet equally compelling and perilous for childhood freedom.

The comparative historical method used revealed itself to be useful for the research and offers an incentive to continue research of this nature which may give new impetus to comparative studies in education (Cowen & Kazamias, 2009), in the wake of an updated historical methodology. The comparison, carried out via the classic Bereday (1964) and Hilker (1962) method, allows the peculiarities and singularities of the observations made by the researchers to also emerge. Even if some of them could not be taken into consideration in the comparative phase because they were not encountered in other countries, or because they were the result of the specific consideration of each researcher, it is worthwhile taking the time to note them down because they are an added bonus of the research in historical and literary terms.

The Croatian researcher, Smilijana Narančić Kovač, conducted a thorough and interesting quantitative analysis of the data gathered which could, if extended to other countries too, complete the qualitative analysis carried out. Ana Margarida Ramos, Portuguese researcher, paid particularly close attention to the style of typeface and material structure of picturebooks, important aspects from a literary and editorial point of view which might also lead to interdisciplinary study fields verging on aesthetics. Bettina Kümmerling-Meubauer, German researcher, and Marnie Campagnaro, Italian researcher, performed an in-depth historical analysis linking the idea of childhood to

social, political, cultural and educational development in their respective countries, without overlooking economic, sociological and psychological factors, and closely scrutinising the relationship between image and written text in the picturebooks examined. The French geographer Christophe Meunier managed to produce and utilize a special measuring tool which, tracing the movements of the main characters of the stories, provided a different way of interpreting narrated educational events.

Lastly, Nina Goga, the Norwegian researcher, managed to connect the analysis conducted with several relevant new themes of studies on children's literature like ecocriticism.

These inspiring works may lead to further in-depth research conducted which has had a positive and important effect on the sphere of Italian comparative studies.

Notes

In this introduction, the section *The concept of home and lived-in spaces in history and children's literature* was written by Marnie Campagnaro. The section *The comparative historical analysis of the espace vécu in picturebooks in six European countries* was written by Carla Callegari.

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Carla Callegari is an Associate Professor of History of Education and Comparative Education in the FISPPA Department at the University of Padua. Her main research fields include the history of pedagogy and education, the history of childhood, and historical and comparative methods. Recent publications include *La storia della pedagogia tra ricerca e didattica* (Pensa MultiMedia, Lecce 2012), as well as chapters and articles such as *The diaries and drawings of Jewish children and their affective dimension: a historical-comparative survey* («Pedagogia oggi», 2/2018).

Contact: carla.callegari@unipd.it

Marnie Campagnaro (PhD) is an Assistant Professor of Children's Literature in the FISPPA Department at the University of Padua. Main research fields include: picturebooks, fairy-tales, reader-response theory and Italian children's writers. In 2013, she hosted the 9th International Conference "The Child and the Book" and in 2017 she was appointed to organize the 6th International Conference of the European Network of Picturebook Research. Recent publications: *Il cacciatore di pieghe* [Trends in Contemporary Children's Literature] Pensa MultiMedia, 2017; *La Grande Guerra raccontata ai ragazzi* [Telling Children about the Great War] Donzelli, 2015.

Contact: marnie.campagnaro@unipd.it

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