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BA illustration

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How does a character's design and style create a certain perception that leads us to view a character a certain way?

“Human beings are attracted to things that look visually appealing” (Tillman, B, p.103)

When we think of the word ‘Character’ we are drawn to question the narrative that drives its purpose. A character’s design attracts a specific audience and communicates its intention through its style and visual signs that we as an audience use to dissect and makes us want to find out more. “The main reason we become engaged with a character is that we generally want to know as much as possible about a person” (Tillman, B p.27).

Looking at different character designs and their intended purpose, we can communicate storytelling through the character’s visual design. Characters are formed and developed through styles that target a specific audience and purpose that can create a certain perception. The style plays a key role in the context and narrative, looking at the anthropomorphic style; how is this applied to a younger audience, creating friendly, childlike characters whilst creating perceptions of scary, frightening characters that challenge the targeted younger audience. The Anthropomorphic style is used in a lot of characters through storytelling, looking at how Maurice Sendak’s ‘Where the wild things are’ and Mark Raymond’s illustrations present childlike qualities through anthropomorphic illustration. Character development is a key quality to retelling old

myths and stories when there are many ways to perceive one character type. In a lot of children's stories, Witches are perceived as evil, nasty characters that eat the children, whereas there are many different perceptions and ideologies of different kinds of witches.

When thinking of a character targeted to a specific audience, we identify a certain style we consider appropriate for that audience, looking at different styles artists and illustrators use to develop a character style to fit their intended audience.



(Sendek, M. (1963)

Maurice Sendak's 'Where the wild things are' is a children's illustrated book featuring a boy that runs away to find friendly monster like character's. Sendak's anthropomorphic style attracts younger audiences through the friendly facial expressions the way the characters are illustrated to act around the boy, creating human like perceptions that adds playfulness to the characters. "We are drawn instinctively to images of faces and instantly recognise their expressions" (Ingledew, J, 2011, p. 100). Applying human like features and facial expressions to an animal character creates a safe, friendly image for young viewers to find comfort and connect to. While the characters in the book can be perceived quite terrifying, the softness in the faces and empathetic expressions towards

the boy create a welcoming perception to a younger audience. When looking at a character, we are immediately drawn to the face and facial expression that will build our perception.

“The face is the first thing we know, our mother’s faces are the first landscape we learn and images of the face work brilliantly at any scale” (Ingledew, J, 2011, p.100).

While initially targeting a younger audience, children’s picture books can also be perceived to appeal to older audiences through they’re unique illustration style. They create a distinctive style that both younger and older audiences can connect with. “The best picture book are universal, appealing to adults, as well as children.” (Brazell, D. and Davie, J, 2011, p. 115). This can be applied to Sendek’s unique style in Where the wild things are through these perceptions of the characters.



From the film adaptation for ‘Where the wild things are’

During the production of the film adaptation of the book, a “test audience pronounced the film too dark and scary for children.” (Nicholson, A, 2009.). The film adaptation of Sendek’s ‘Where the wild things are’ allows perceptions of these characters in a slightly different light. While the same friendliness of these characters is applied, we are also introduced to a more unsettling take on the instinctive actions of the monster-like characters. At times the character’s become a lot more aggressive than our initial perceptions from the book. The characters are introduced in a more realistic tone of an animal’s instinct, while we are later introduced to the softer, caring side we are familiar with. This causes audiences to question these perceptions, how they can be ‘too scary’ for younger audiences in contrast from the connotations of the illustrations in the book. Whilst the adaptation can be perceived to show more aggressiveness in these characters, Sendek’s style is consistent with the same unique personalities through the facial expressions. “The simplest representation of eyes and a mouth can create a face with individual personality”. (Ingledew, J, 2011, p.100). Although we are presented with a different tone in the adaptation, we as an audience are able to recognise these characters through their identifiable expressions.



From Mark Ryden's 'Anima Animals' (Ryden, M, 2020)

Like Maurice Sendek, Mark Ryden's character illustrations follow an anthropomorphic style. Maurice Sendek's work directly targets a younger audience, while Ryden's work is inspired by childhood, his work does not directly reflect it and has more significance to connecting his work to a spiritual connection of worlds. In an artist's statement for his book 'Anima animals', Ryden reveals that his work was inspired by a children's toy "when my eyes fell upon a scruffy old stuffed rabbit with a rubber face" (Ryden. M, 2020). Although his general focus of his illustration highlights spirituality, the youthfulness of the toy comes across through his characters, allowing perceptions of youth and childhood in his audience. We are able to connect this through the colours he uses and the distinctive rubber face of the toy, which again allows the audience to make these childlike perceptions from the face. "The arrangement of the elements that make the face create a character who speaks to the viewer" (Ingledew, J, 2011, p.105).

Through the face of a character, we can use signs that connect to a certain expression and personality of a character. “A code is a system of letters, numbers or symbols into which language can be converted to allow information to be communicated in secrecy” (Ingledew, J, p.44). In Ryden’s work, we can form a perception of his characters through the distinctive doll-like face inspired by an old children’s toy. In an essay discussing Ryden’s ‘anima animals’ Linda Tesner explains how “Ryden’s cheerful creatures, with their doe eyes and gossamer fur, seem more like pictures of toys than devotional objects” (Tesner, L,2020) but argues “Ryden’s source material is tapped from the realm of creative chaos” (Tesner, L,2020) demonstrating how we may perceive something differently to it’s appearance and it’s intended context.



‘Olga Adriyenko’s ‘Baba Yaga’ found in ‘A Field Guide to Witches’ (3dtotal Publishing, 2022, p.29).

Looking at characters in mythology, the common perception of witches is often an evil, greedy, character that are often given the narrative of 'eating children' in storytelling. In mythology, witches are perceived to have many different roles that have distinctive qualities.

The book 'A field guide to witches' explores research into different witches of mythology and how different illustrators have visualised them.

"Some witches are guardians, helpers, and mother figures, while some are monstrous, cruel, and violent. Sometimes a witch can be all these things, depending on who is telling the story" (3dtotal publishing, p. 10)

Looking at Olga Andriyenko's perception of the 'Baba Yaga', she portrays a kind, gentle approach too her design. While she is known to be feared, where "Children are told scary stories of this dangerous witch, who is told to hunt, steal, and cook them."

(3dtotal publishing, p. 20) Andriyenko explores how she can also be a "wise guardian to those in need" (3dtotal publishing, p. 20). The perceptions we are given in children's storytelling often only looks at the relationship towards children or human characters, but when looking deeper into the actions towards other creatures, the Baba Yaga is also known as "a fearsome foe, and a kindly friend to animals and nature" (3dtotal publishing, p. 26). Andriyenko's perception of this witch in her illustration follows a gentle style, perhaps something we would find aimed at children's picture books but considers how "This witch has lived for eternity and there are many stories giving different impressions of her" (3dtotal publishing, p. 240). Whilst her design contradicts our typical 'perception' of an evil witch, Andriyenko focuses less on this witch's relation

to humans, but more on the kindness to animals. The “Baba Yaga can also be gentle, but very rarely toward humans.” (3dtotal publishing, p.26).

“Over time the ‘greatness of illustration’ as a means of conveying emotion, accessing experience, sharing knowledge and communicating ideas” (Brazell, D. and Davies, J, 2011, p.127)

The way we perceive a character reflects on the design. The character is formed through a unique style that builds the intended perception to the audience. The way we perceive a character often forms from the face and the style. In children’s illustration, the facial features are a lot softer and communicate a welcoming character that allows a younger audience to connect to. Anthropomorphic characters are commonly used to appeal to the younger audience, “humanizing these characters makes them more relatable, expressive, and capable of conveying a wide range of emotions and actions.” (Rycroft, N, 2023). Certain styles allow a younger audience to decode the expression in a character through anthropomorphism, facial expression and the playfulness of style to perceive the character.

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