DETECTIVE PICTUREBOOKS AND THE WIMMELBOOK AESTHETIC: RECONFIGURING MYSTERY FOR YOUNG READERS

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Abstract

The popularity of detective narratives in children's literature presents a curious paradox -how can a genre traditionally reliant on complex reasoning and adult notions of crime be effectively adapted for young readers? Even more intriguing is the emergence of detective picturebooks that blend the investigative allure of classic detective fiction with the visual exuberance and layered detail reminiscent of wimmelbooks aesthetics. Despite their growing presence on shelves, these hybrid texts have attracted little scholarly attention. While adult detective fiction is typically subsumed under 'crime literature,' its adaptations for children are often relegated to the broad categories of 'adventure' or 'mystery' stories, thereby obscuring their unique narrative and aesthetic strategies. This paper examines a selection of detective picturebooks, in particular Katerina Gorelik's Detective Samson (2022), Paul Martin's Énigmes à tous les étages T. 1 (2021) and Hiro Kamigaki's and IC4DESIGN's Pierre The Maze Detective: The Curious Case of the Castle in the Sky (2020) to examine how intricate visual arrangements and subtle textual cues converge to create an interactive reading experience. Employing a multimodal analytical framework, we assess the interplay of narrative structure and visual composition, focusing on elements such as the sequencing of events across pages, the use of recurring motifs, narrative pacing, and the distribution of textual and visual prompts that guide reader attention and generate suspense. Our analysis demonstrates that these picturebooks encourage active investigation, foster observational acuity, and support collaborative interpretation by inviting readers to navigate a labyrinth of clues and red herrings. Ultimately, our findings reveal that by intertwining the enigmatic allure of detective storytelling with the immersive quality of wimmelbook aesthetics, these picturebooks offer a promising avenue for cultivating analytical thinking and imaginative exploration in young readers, thereby redefining genre adaptation in children's literature.

Keywords: *detective picturebooks, wimmelbook aesthetics, children's literature, visual storytelling, interactive reading*

1. INTRODUCTION

Detective fiction is among the most prevalent and enduring forms of mystery in children's literature (Routledge 2001, p. 64 [1]), distinguished by its epistemological structure, built on concealed knowledge, distributed clues, misdirection, and deductive resolution, which typically presupposes cognitive abilities like Theory of Mind (ToM), logical inference, and retrospective comprehension (Brooks 1984, pp. 24–25 [2]; Nikolajeva 2014, pp. 1–20 [3]; Zunshine 2006 [4]). Despite these demands, detective stories continue to captivate children, largely because they often lie in their game-like structure, which allow readers to participate in the investigative process on equal footing with the protagonist (Veldhuizen 2023, p. 163 [5]). This disjunction poses a critical question: do detective fictions for young readers dilute narrative complexity, or do they reconfigure it into forms more aligned with children's developmental capacities? This study argues for the latter. It examines a distinctive emergent subgenre: detective picturebooks that integrate wimmelbook aesthetics, which enact rather than narrate detection. In works such as *Detective Samson* (Gorelik 2022 [6]), *Énigmes à tous les étages, T. 1* (Martin 2021 [7]), and *Pierre the Maze Detective: The Curious Case of the Castle in the Sky* (Kamigaki & IC4Design 2020 [8]), visual density becomes investigative apparatus. The narrative unfolds through spatial dispersion of clues and recursive visual analysis rendering detection inseparable from the act of reading itself. Wimmelbooks, celebrated for their rich, visual environments, traditionally foreground exploratory reading (Rémi 2011 [9]). In this new hybrid form, that visual complexity is

cognitive structure and the child reader becomes an investigator, invited to search, infer, backtrack, and synthesize clues in a spatial labyrinth that both conceals and discloses meaning.

Drawing on spatial narrative theory (Ryan 2001 [10]), cognitive narratology (Nikolajeva 2014 [11]), visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006 [12]), recent work on children's detective fiction (Laurindo Da Silva 2021 [13]; Routledge 2010 [14]; Veldhuizen 2023 [15]; Worthington, 2011 [16]) and wimmelbook aesthetics (Papailia 2023 [17]; Papailia & Sidiropoulou 2024a [18]; Papailia & Sidiropoulou 2024b [19]; Rémi 2011 [20]; Rémi 2018 [21]; Rybak 2024 [22]), this article supports that these works reinvent the formula of the detective story. Rather than delivering resolution, they externalize detective cognition: memory, hypothesis testing, pattern recognition, and inference become visible in the structure of the image itself. Before turning to the close analysis of these hybrid detective picturebooks, the discussion begins with an overview of detective fiction in children's literature, tracing its narrative and ideological adaptation from adult crime fiction. This is followed by a conceptual outline of wimmelbooks and their visual storytelling conventions, which inform the aesthetic logic of the case studies. These contextual frames support the subsequent analysis, which unfolds across four interrelated analytical axes, each addressing a key dimension of how the above-mentioned detective picturebooks, incorporating wimmelbook aesthetics, construct investigative narratives and engage the child reader: (1) *Visual Mazes and Investigative Reading***,** which explores spatial density and visual search; (2) *Narrative Structuring and Puzzle Logic***,** which examines spatial sequencing and clue distribution; (3) *Recurring Motifs and Suspense Techniques,* which analyses repetition and retrospective inference and (4) *Reader Participation and Cognitive Engagement,* which focuses on the child's active interpretive role within multimodal reading environments.

2. DETECTIVE FICTION

Detective fiction first appeared in adult literature in the 19th century, Edgar Allan Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841) and Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* stories (beginning 1887) established the intellectual puzzle and "fair play" conventions later central to children's detective fiction (Veldhuizen 2023, pp. 162–163 [23]). For decades, Erich Kästner's *Emil und die Detektive* (1929) was cited (Lange 2005, p. 531 [24]; Stenzel 2016, p. 353 [25]) as a seminal starting point in children's detective fiction. Recent scholarship, however, reveals deeper roots. Heather Worthington (2011, p. 99 [26]) documents that, by the 1890s and into the Edwardian era, short-form detective tales featuring "*juvenile heroes*" appeared regularly in boys' weeklies and girls' magazines, establishing "*detection as a staple ingredient of youth fiction*" long before Emil's novel-length treatment. In the United States, the Stratemeyer Syndicate launched *The Hardy Boys* in 1927 and Nancy Drew in 1930, series whose teenage protagonists solved thefts, kidnappings, and industrial conspiracies in highly formulaic narratives (Laurindo Da Silva 2021, p. 40 [27]). In Britain, Sylvia Silence headlined her own detective adventures from 1922 onward, underscoring that the juvenile sleuth had already entered popular culture well before formal critical recognition (Laurindo Da Silva 2021, p. 37 [28]). Prototypical adult and adventure texts also foreshadowed children's detective conventions. Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) incorporates investigative strands in its pursuit of Fagin's gang (Hasubek 1974, p. 26 [29]), Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) hinges on deciphering pirate maps and motives (Hasubek 1974, p. 29 [30]), and even Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*, *Detective* (1896) casts its schoolboy hero as an amateur sleuth (Laurindo Da Silva 2021, pp. 37-38 [31]; Routledge 2010, p. 324 [32]; Worthington 2011, p. 98 [33]).

By the mid-20th century, detective fiction for children truly blossomed as a distinct and recognizable genre. The influence of the adventure story remained strong, as seen in series like Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* (published 1942–1963) and *Secret Seven* (1949–1963). These books typically feature a group of children stumbling upon a mystery (often while on school holidays in the countryside) and then bravely unraveling a criminal plot -a formula that blends the ethos of Blyton's outdoor adventures with detective-story structure. Notably, Blyton's protagonists were always on vacation and free from direct adult supervision, a setup that allowed them to assume the agency of detectives (Rudd 2000, pp. 88-108 [34]). In fact, the trope of the child detective team was already present in Kästner's *Emil und die Detektive*, which organized a band of Berlin children into a coordinated investigative unit. Emil's influence can be felt in later group-detective stories from Blyton's cohorts of British schoolchildren to

American creations like *The Three Investigators* (a U.S. series begun in 1964 by Robert Arthur, famously popular in German translation). The enduring popularity of the child detective ensemble is evident from the proliferation of series in various languages: for example, the German series *TKKG* (1979 onward, over 200 stories) and *Ein Fall für dich und das Tiger-Team* (Tiger-Team, 50+ books since 1995) both center on teams of kids solving cases (Veldhuizen 2023, p. 168 [35]). From the 1970s onward, as concepts of youth culture and adolescence evolved, children's detective fiction also diversified in tone and target readership. The emergence of the teenager as a distinct demographic -culturally and commercially- shifted the boundaries of juvenile fiction. As Worthington notes, many early detective series were originally written for pre-teen audiences but were later revised to retain their appeal as the notion of "*the teenager*" took hold in the mid-twentieth century (Worthington 2011, p. 100 [36]).

2.1. Genre Conventions and Narrative Structures in Children's Detective Fiction

Children's detective fiction adapts the epistemological structure of classic crime narratives to meet the cognitive, emotional, and moral needs of young readers. It both inherits and transforms adult conventions, offering mystery-based plots that invite deductive engagement while upholding the educational and ideological priorities of children's literature. The genre, as Worthington (2011, p. 97 [37]) emphasizes, has always served a dual purpose: to entertain and to educate, with crime fiction and children's literature sharing a disciplinary imperative to instruct readers against crime in the former, and towards proper social behavior in the latter.

While contemporary children's detective stories borrow key tropes from the adult genre -such as clues, red herrings, puzzles, and resolutions- they recalibrate these devices around age- appropriate content and developmental scaffolding. Many adopt the formula of the classic "*whodunit"*, yet the crimes are typically scaled down: most juvenile mysteries avoid violent or irreparable offences, instead focusing on missing objects, secret messages, or unexplained events. As Worthington (2011, p. 98 [38]) notes, "*real crime and violence remain in the adult realm*", while children's books often feature petty crimes or mysteries that are "*rectified or justified*", with endings that ensure moral and narrative closure. This alignment with the restorative arc of traditional crime fiction reinforces the idea that order -both social and narrative- can be re-established.

A consistent feature across early and contemporary children's detective narratives is the age and agency of the protagonists. Whether in Blyton's *Famous Five*, or in more modern examples such as Caroline Lawrence's *Roman Mysteries*, child detectives are typically pre-teens who act independently but are often drawn into adult worlds of wrongdoing (Worthington 2011, pp. 100–101 [39]). As Worthington (2011, p. 98 [40]) points out, children's investigative role emerged early in popular periodical fiction, such as *The Boy Detective* (1866), where child protagonists functioned within an "*ameliorated*" framework of crime designed to support moral instruction.

Furthermore, the shift toward more active reader participation coincides with increasingly self-aware narrative structures. Veldhuizen (2023, p. 163 [41]) argues that modern children's mystery stories often embody a logic of "*fair play*", where readers have equal access to clues and can test hypotheses alongside the protagonist. This structure closely resembles the adult whodunit form, not in the severity of its crimes, but in its epistemic logic: the reader is cast as co-investigator, engaged in a process of deduction and verification. As Veldhuizen (2023, p. 163 [42]) shows, these stories rarely aim for shock or suspense alone; instead, they prioritize a form of satisfaction in which the act of solving becomes more important than the crime itself. Children's detective fiction retains the classic formula -an infraction, a non-professional detective, and a return to harmony- but repurposes it around lower-stakes crimes and emotionally protected outcomes (Veldhuizen 2023, p. 165 [43]). Crimes such as theft or property damage replace murder, enabling the reader to engage with mystery without confronting trauma. Visual strategies, including humor, dense illustrations, or narrative misdirection, further soften tension while maintaining cognitive intrigue (Nicodème 2004, p. 71 [44]). The resulting narrative structure supports what Veldhuizen (2023, p. 166 [45]) terms the "*requirement for an uncomplicated happy ending*", a feature deeply embedded in the didactic tradition of children's literature. Such endings provide narrative resolution and emotional reassurance, reinforcing ideals of justice and social coherence. Even as more recent examples introduce moral ambiguity and reflect increasingly complex

societal dynamics (Veldhuizen 2023, p. 167 [46]), the genre continues to rely on a structure that values comprehension, control, and closure, elements that shape the child reader's interpretive experience and emotional engagement with fiction.

3. ORIGINS AND DEFINITION OF WIMMELBOOKS

A wimmelbook (from the German *Wimmelbilderbuch*, literally "teeming picturebook") is a type of large-format picturebook distinguished by densely detailed, full-spread illustrations that are typically wordless (Papailia 2023 [47]; Papailia & Sidiropoulou 2024a [48]; Papailia & Sidiropoulou 2024b [49]; Rémi 2011 [50]; Rémi 2018 [51]; Rodosthenous-Balafa, Chatzianastasi & Stylianou-Georgiou, 2021 [52]; Rybak 2024 [53])). Each page presents a panoramic scene *"richly populated by dozens of characters… engaged in simultaneous interactions and often subtly connected to each other"* (Rémi 2018, p.158 [54]). In essence, a wimmelbook offers "*a certain degree of disorder and chaos*" (Rémi 2011, p.117 [55]) within its images, inviting readers to explore and discover myriad small narratives embedded in a bustling visual world. The format is generally aimed at young children, though its intricate art often appeals to adults as well, and it is nearly always presented without an explicit text narrative, relying instead on the illustrations' abundance of detail to convey meaning.

Modern wimmelbooks first emerged in the decades following World War II, with Germany recognized as the cradle of the form. German illustrator Ali Mitgutsch is widely celebrated as the father of the genre. He published his first wimmelbilderbuch *Rundherum in meiner Stadt* (*All Around My City*) in 1968, depicting everyday urban scenes of a busy town in rich, cartoonish detail. The book was a success, and it won Germany's *Jugendbuchpreis* in 1969 and in 2018 he received the *Verdienstkreuz am Bande der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* for introducing a new genre.

While Mitgutsch popularized the wimmelbook form in postwar Germany, he drew upon a range of earlier influences. Scholars have pointed to the densely populated paintings of Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1516) and Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525–1569) as visual antecedents of the wimmelbook aesthetic. These Renaissance artists filled their canvases with dozens of tiny figures, animals, and surreal details, each enacting its own story within a complex, panoramic whole. Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* and Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs* are classic examples of this narrative abundance: scenes in which micro-narratives unfold simultaneously, inviting viewers to scan, interpret, and make connections across the image. While their work was not intended for children, nor designed as narrative games in the modern sense, these paintings offer a historical model of visual storytelling through densely layered, interconnected tableaux that resonate with the structure and visual logic of contemporary wimmelbooks.

From the late 20th century onward, the wimmelbook form spread internationally and diversified in approach. In the United States, Richard Scarry's *Busytown* books (1960s onward) offered richly detailed scenes populated by anthropomorphic animals engaged in everyday routines. Though accompanied by labels and brief captions, Scarry's spreads encourage young readers to observe, identify, and trace visual motifs across bustling panoramas, echoing the exploratory logic of wimmelbooks. In the UK, Martin Handford's *Where's Wally?* (1987; *Where's Waldo?* in North America) achieved global popularity with its seek-and-find challenge. Though the series is often excluded from wimmelbook typologies due to its goal-directed structure. This exclusion, as proposed in Rémi's influential theorization of the genre, is grounded in the view that wimmelbooks must avoid explicit prompts or directions to preserve their openness to interpretation. Although, the imaginative appeal of teeming compositions often stems not from their lack of instruction, but from the richness of their internal structure, which invites readers to explore, connect, and construct meaning through the act of looking. This broader understanding of openness is reflected in the work of artists who have expanded the form beyond its German roots. In Japan, Mitsumasa Anno's 1970s travelogues presented wordless visual landscapes layered with intertextual references, inviting readers into acts of cultural decoding and spatial exploration. Meanwhile, German artist Rotraut Susanne Berner's Wimmelbuch series chronicled seasonal life in a fictional town, with characters and micro-stories recurring across sequential spreads. From its postwar German origins, the wimmelbook has evolved into a transnational genre defined less by the absence of

textual cues or explicit instructions than by its ability to elicit complex cognitive and narrative engagement through visual excess.

3.1. Key Visual and Narrative Characteristics of Wimmelbooks

3.1.1. Visual Density and Abundance

The most immediately striking feature of wimmelbooks is their visual density. Every page is brimming with detail: dozens (sometimes hundreds) of human and animal figures, vehicles, buildings, and objects crowd the scene. There is a 'horror vacui' at play, which results in a visual surplus: virtually no empty space is left unfilled, and every corner of the illustration offers something to notice. For the child reader, the dense imagery is captivating: each viewing can turn up new elements that were previously overlooked, giving the books a high replay value. Indeed, as Krzysztof Rybak (2024, p. 174 [56]) mentions "*Visual literacy is also stimulated by the abundance of images that children may study in detail, the connection of multiple elements, and the decoding of meanings*". The image, in this context, functions as a narrative vehicle with its own semiotic grammar, training children in practices of interpretation beyond alphabetic literacy. The dense, layered structure of the image offers multiple entry points for interpretation and encourages recursive reading habits -children return to pages to re-examine, re-navigate, and re-narrate. This compositional complexity supports attentional control and perceptual discrimination, as readers are required to distinguish between foreground and background actions, identify recurring characters, and follow micro-narratives embedded in the spatial organization. As Papailia and Sidiropoulou (2024a, p. 139 [57]) argue, wimmelbooks serve as valuable pedagogical tools for developing critical visual literacy in early childhood, strengthening children's ability to observe, infer, and construct narratives through images. As a result, process of selective looking strengthens inferential reasoning, hypothesis testing, and memory recall, all of which contribute not only to narrative competence but also to broader cognitive development.

3.1.2. Simultaneity of Actions and Narrative Openness

Unlike traditional picturebooks that often present a single storyline in a linear sequence, wimmelbooks typically portray multiple events unfolding simultaneously within one expansive scene. Each double-page spread functions as a microcosm of activity: dozens of characters may be doing different things at the same moment, without a prescribed reading order. The reader's eye can roam freely across the page, and there is no single correct sequence -narrative time in a wimmelbook spread is effectively suspended, or rather distributed among many parallel mini-stories. This simultaneity of action means that wimmelbook narratives are inherently open-ended. Cornelia Rémi (2011, p. 115 [58]) observes that each wimmelbook spread is "*a series of panoramas teeming with an immense number of characters and details*" and because numerous elements might interact in any order, the overall narrative possibilities are remarkably open. In other words, the narrative is decentralized, there is no single protagonist or storyline always demanding the reader's focus.

The freedom to construct narrative from simultaneous happenings in wimmelbooks aligns with broader insights from narrative theory. As Rybak (2024, p. 175 [59]) notes, the wimmelbook constitutes a "*hybrid*" form, both narrative and non-narrative in nature. On the one hand, each double-page spread operates as a self-contained tableau, a static representation of a specific space and time filled with disparate yet thematically or spatially related elements. In this respect, by itself doesn't dictate a plot. This is like a nonnarrative or descriptive picture that simply presents a scene. On the other hand, when characters or motifs reappear across successive spreads, as in the seasonal shifts of Berner's Wimmelbuch series -where attentive readers can follow recurring figures through Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter, discovering small narrative arcs (a lost item that gets found, a romance that blooms, etc.)- a narrative sequence begins to emerge. The reader is thus invited to infer causality, construct temporal links, and mentally animate the depicted actions. Rybak (2024, p. 175 [60]) suggests that the above dynamic interplay between the descriptive and the sequential makes wimmelbooks particularly suited to be analyzed through semiotic frameworks that account for both narrative and non-narrative picturebooks.

3.1.3. Reader Interactivity and Exploratory Reading

Wimmelbooks transform the act of reading into an active, playful exploration. Without a written narrative to guide the journey, the reader -or, better, the reader/viewer- must become a kind of storyteller and detective, interacting with the book in a unique way. This high level of reader interactivity is often noted in reception theory and studies of wordless picturebooks (Papailia, 2023 [61]). The reader is not passive; on the contrary, the child actively constructs the story by choosing where to look and what sequences to follow. In effect, the reader's attention creates the narrative: one child might focus on the funny mishaps happening in a corner of the page, while another might trace the path of a specific character across the scene, each thereby formulating a different story from the same image.

One important mode of reader interaction with wimmelbooks is dialogic reading, especially for pre-literate children. Because these books are usually shared by an adult and child together, they naturally invite a dialogue: the child might point to a figure and ask, *"What is he doing?"*, or the adult might prompt the child with questions like *"Can you find the cat?"* or *"What do you think will happen next?"*. This aligns with reception theory in that meaning is co-created in the interaction between text (or image, in this case) and reader; the *"gaps"* in the narrative are filled by the reader's imagination and input (Iser, 1978 [62]). This kind of exploratory reading is highly engaging for children and can strengthen early narrative skills. The process is akin to *"reading as playing"* to borrow Rémi's (2011 [63]) phrase.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, multimodal narratological approach drawing from on spatial narrative theory (Ryan 2001 [64]), cognitive narratology (Nikolajeva 2014 [65]), visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006 [66]), recent studies on children's detective fiction (Laurindo Da Silva 2021 [67]; Routledge 2010 [68]; Veldhuizen 2023 [69]; Worthington 2011 [70]), and scholarship on wimmelbook aesthetics (Papailia 2023 [71]; Papailia & Sidiropoulou 2024a [72]; Papailia & Sidiropoulou 2024b [73]; Rémi 2011 [74], Rémi 2018 [75]; Rybak 2024 [76]), to analyze the convergence of detective narrative structures with wimmelbook aesthetics in contemporary detective picturebooks.

4.1. Corpus Description

The present study examines a corpus of three internationally produced picturebooks that exemplify the hybridization of detective fiction with wimmelbook aesthetics, each representing a distinct yet complementary approach to integrating investigative narrative structures within densely illustrated visual environments. These works were selected based on three principal criteria: (a) the presence of a detective or mystery-driven narrative framework; (b) visual compositions informed by wimmelbook aesthetics, including visual density, simultaneity of action, and the presence of multiple micro-narratives within a single spread; and (c) the active positioning of the child reader as detective, requiring visual exploration and clue identification as integral to narrative progression. In particular:

A) Published in 2021, *Énigmes à tous les étages, T. 1* (Martin 2021 [77]) is a puzzle picturebook composed of a series of self-contained visual mysteries. While many spreads are structured around vertical cutaways of multi-storey buildings, others depict public venues, ships, or thematic interiors. Each mystery begins with a concise textual prompt that introduces the enigma -typically involving a theft, disappearance, or unusual occurrence- yet provides no linear plot progression. Instead, clues are embedded within the image itself, dispersed spatially rather than sequentially. Readers must carefully scan the environment, compare details across zones or levels, and infer causal relationships to reconstruct the underlying narrative.

B) *Pierre the Maze Detective: The Curious Case of the Castle in the Sky* (Kamigaki & IC4Design, 2020 [78]) integrates maze book structures with detective fiction conventions. The narrative follows the protagonist Pierre and his companion Carmen as they pursue the Iron Mask duo through a succession of maze-like cityscapes. Each double-page spread functions simultaneously as a literal labyrinth and as a narrative environment populated with numerous characters and micro-events. The reader must navigate the maze to advance spatially while also detecting visual clues and incidental storylines hidden within the images.

C) Finally, in *Detective Samson* (Gorelik, 2022 [79]), the canine detective Samson investigates a sequence of theft cases presented within panoramas populated by anthropomorphized animals. The story begins with brief, diegetic dialogues between Samson and his clients, in which victims describe the items stolen from them. These conversations frame the reader's investigative task, as the subsequent double-page spreads conceals the missing objects within the densely illustrated cityscape.

Together, these three works constitute a representative corpus for analyzing the intersection of detective fiction with wimmelbook aesthetics. Each reconfigures the visual field of the picturebook into a narrative puzzle-space, wherein investigative reading is enacted through spatial navigation, visual detection, and the active construction of narrative coherence by the child reader.

4.2. Analytical Framework

The analysis is structured around four interrelated axes designed to investigate how detective picturebooks incorporating wimmelbook aesthetics construct investigative narratives and position the child reader as an active participant.

The first axis, *Visual Mazes and Investigative Reading***,** examines how each work employs visual density, spatial complexity, and intricate compositional design to simulate investigative processes. Focus is placed on how readers are positioned within maze visual environments, navigating densely populated illustrations in search of narrative clues. Attention is given to the spatial organization of the page, gaze direction, and recursive visual engagement, treating the picturebook spread as a narrative field where detection occurs primarily through visual exploration.

The second axis, *Narrative Structuring and Puzzle Logic*, explores how narrative progression is textually and visually orchestrated across the corpus. This includes analysis of how clues, red herrings, and critical visual details are distributed spatially rather than sequentially, guiding the reader's deductive process. The role of mystery statements, dialogues, and other framing devices in structuring investigative tasks is also considered. This axis addresses how visual sequencing substitutes for conventional narrative linearity, transforming spatial navigation into narrative progression.

The third axis, *Recurring Motifs and Suspense Techniques*, focuses on the narrative function of visual repetition. The analysis considers how recurring characters, objects, and motifs operate as narrative anchors, guiding the reader's inference process and sustaining suspense. Emphasis is placed on how the reappearance of visual elements supports retrospective comprehension, prompting the reader to reinterpret earlier observations considering new discoveries.

Finally, the axis of *Reader Participation and Cognitive Engagement* examines how each book positions the child reader as an active co-detective. This includes analysis of interactive reading strategies such as visual searching, hypothesis generation, and clue synthesis. The study considers how spatial layouts, motif distributions, and minimal verbal framing coalesce to construct the reader's interpretive agency, making investigative participation not optional but integral to narrative resolution.

In sum, these four analytical axes provide a framework for examining how wimmelbook-inspired detective picturebooks externalize investigative reading processes within visual, spatial, and multimodal narrative structures.

4.3. Analytical Procedure

Each work is subjected to a qualitative close-reading process, examining both micro-structural features (clue placement, motif recurrence, page composition) and macro-structural narrative strategies (investigative framing, spatial sequencing). Visual elements are analyzed for their narratological function: how they act as clues, red herrings, or narrative cues within the investigative structure. While attention is given to multimodal orchestration, analysis prioritizes the visual field as the primary narrative mode. Pacing, sequencing, and reader navigation are treated as spatial phenomena. Illustrative examples are drawn from representative spreads to support comparative analysis across the corpus. Quantitative coding is not employed; instead, interpretative analysis focuses on readerly experience and cognitive engagement.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Visual Mazes and Investigative Reading

Hybrid detective-themed wimmelbooks transform the act of reading into a spatial investigation. In this framework, reading becomes less about temporal progression and more about embodied orientation within a visually encoded environment. Unlike metaphorical labyrinths that imply cyclical motion and symbolic entrapment, mazes are structurally designed to challenge directional reasoning. The structure of the visual field in these books foregrounds spatial mazes, architectural or environmental configurations that deliberately complicate the act of looking. In *Pierre the Maze Detective,* for example, the canal city is rendered as a multi-level vertical space reminiscent of Piranesi's imaginary prisons or Escher's recursive staircases. The eye is invited to ascend and descend, to loop through mechanical chambers, market squares, and aerial passages, each dense with incidental action and potential clues. The Iron Masked Duo's trajectory is dispersed across the spread, and the mystery can only be resolved through spatial tracking and visual comparison. This investigative gaze is both immersive and effortful: the reader must hold fragments of information across pages, detect visual anomalies, and construct narrative continuity through situated observation. To locate the characters (Pierre, Carmen, Members of the World Maze Disorder, etc.) and follow their evasive trajectory, the child must treat the page as a navigable puzzle, engaging in recursive scanning, spatial memory, and narrative inference.

This mode of narrative organization closely aligns with Marie-Laure Ryan's (2001, pp. 251–252 [80]) conceptualization of the maze as a foundational structure in interactive narratives and adventure games, wherein spatial navigation supplants linear progression and narrative meaning arises through the reader's traversal of complex paths. Ryan identifies this experiential structure as oscillating between "*aporia"* -moments of impasse, misreading, or visual saturation- and "*epiphany"* -sudden insights that resolve ambiguity and enable advancement. In hybrid detective wimmelbooks, such as those analyzed here, the young reader undergoes a comparable process: becoming disoriented within the visual field ("aporia"), only to achieve cognitive breakthrough through the recognition of patterns, anomalies, or concealed trajectories ("epiphany"). The maze introduces affective dimensions. Disorientation -getting lost, misreading paths, or being overwhelmed by visual density- becomes a productive part of the experience. Confusion cultivates patience, endurance, and resilience in the presence of ambiguity. These affective capacities mirror the epistemic demands of detection, where uncertainty initiates a process of perceptual reorientation, where meaning arises through sustained attention and interpretive adjustment. When the reader resolves the enigma by decoding inconsistencies or tracing dispersed movements, satisfaction arises not only from narrative closure, but from mastering the book's internal spatial logic.

In *Énigmes à tous les étages* the principle of spatial inference is refined through architecturally dynamic cross-sections that transform the book into a three-dimensional puzzle. Each double-page spread presents, in most cases, a multi-storey building, such as an apartment complex, a restaurant, a library, or even a cruise ship, cut open like a dollhouse to reveal up even to eight distinct interior scenes. Crucially, the reader is invited to unfold the flaps on the left and right sides of each spread, which depict the building's exterior. This physical manipulation offers a dual perspective, allowing the simultaneous observation of internal activity and external context. Such spatial layering enhances the investigative process, enabling the reader to cross-reference behaviors, spatial inconsistencies, and environmental cues across thresholds of visibility. So, solving the mystery depends on comparing what occurs inside with what is happening outside. For example, in one case, the theft of a rock star's earnings demands close tracking of comings and goings throughout the hotel; in another, the sudden disappearance of Santa Claus can only be solved by scanning the final chimney he visited for subtle inconsistencies. The child reader must then examine the dense illustration to verify, falsify, or refine these hypotheses through detailed visual scrutiny.

The reader is asked to solve the mystery of a missing object or a concealed lie by scrutinizing visual clues distributed across rooms, levels, and character postures through verbal framing plus visual deduction. Crucially, the answers are never found in isolation but must be synthesized through comparison and pattern recognition. In the case of "*L'enlèvement au théâtre*" (The Abduction at the Theatre), the scene of the crime is a theatre during rehearsal. Upon unfolding the illustration, the internal space reveals an empty stage: no characters are present inside. The only narrative activity is depicted on

the building's exterior, where stagehands are shown carrying an ornate Egyptian sarcophagus into a side door. The key to solving the case lies in linking this isolated exterior action to the interior emptiness. The abducted actress is not visible anywhere inside, yet the sarcophagus -clearly marked as a theatrical prop- appears out of place and suspicious. The deduction required is spatial and temporal: the reader must infer that the kidnapping took place backstage while the rehearsal was ongoing, and that the actress has been hidden inside the sarcophagus now being smuggled out.

Crucially, the reader must compare zones across the building's front and cross-section, recognizing the absence of suspects and simultaneously identifying movement across thresholds. This mode of visual reasoning demands topographic awareness, the ability to track action across disconnected spaces, and inference based on spatial asymmetry. The mystery is thus solved through alignment of visual layers: inside versus outside, presence versus absence, and surface clues versus hidden implications. Such design exemplifies how hybrid detective wimmelbooks transform architectural space into narrative logic, prompting the child reader to construct meaning through spatial synthesis.

Whereas *Énigmes à tous les étages* stages detection within architecturally bounded spaces, *Detective Samson* expands the maze into panoramic environments that stretch across diverse terrains. Across its densely illustrated spreads, the eponymous dog-detective traverses a fluidly shifting topography -from bustling city streets and layered apartment complexes to coastal beaches, underwater realms, subterranean sewers, and winding mountain trails- in pursuit of stolen objects and elusive culprits. Each double-page functions as an autonomous visual maze, populated by dozens of characters and subplots, yet interlinked through subtle narrative continuities. The primary act of detection remains in the hands of the child-reader, who must scan, decode, and connect visual cues scattered across a spatially and narratively fragmented cityscape. Clues are not highlighted or indexed but embedded in peripheral activity, requiring visual attention and inferential thinking.

These books also deploy the visual maze as an affective structure. The experience of temporary disorientation, of losing track of a character or failing to resolve a clue, is not punitive but productive. It cultivates endurance, metacognitive awareness, and tolerance for ambiguity. The reader learns to accept detours and backtracking as intrinsic to knowledge acquisition. Furthermore, the visual rhetoric of these books often promotes architectural transparency: walls are removed, ceilings sliced away, and buildings opened up into plan views or section diagrams. This stylistic choice simulates omniscient perception, enabling the child to access all relevant spaces and trace movement with precision. Yet total visibility does not equate to immediate legibility. The visual maze remains cognitively opaque, its challenge lies in interpreting, not merely seeing. The reader must become an active decoder of spatial narrative: a detective not only of who-did-what, but of how and where the story takes shape. Urban environments, frequently the setting of these texts, reinforce the thematic convergence between maze and mystery. Cities are inherently maze-like, layered, networked, filled with overlapping functions and hidden interactions. By embedding mystery within the architecture of the city, these books draw upon a long literary tradition that aligns urban space with epistemological opacity and narrative suspense. The reader, in turn, is positioned as both a flâneur and an investigator, someone who must make sense of visual density and narrative dispersion.

As theorized by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006 [81]), meaning in visual design is shaped by structures such as gaze paths (the direction and expectation of the viewer's look), salience (the visual weight of elements), framing (the separation or connection between elements), and vectors (lines that indicate action or lead the eye). In hybrid detective wimmelbooks, these compositional features act as covert guides -directing attention, encoding narrative progression, and scaffolding inferential pathways. A character's pointing hand, the tilt of a head, or the diagonal layout of a staircase may function as a vector, subtly cueing the reader's eye towards an embedded clue. At the same time, the salience of certain colors, gestures, or expressions may elevate peripheral details into focal points of narrative importance. The reader's gaze becomes both guided and exploratory, navigating the image not at random but according to semiotic affordances.

These semiotic resources are strategically employed across the three books under discussion. In *Pierre the Maze Detective* vectors are created through diagonal bridges, inclined ladders, or the trajectory of airborne vehicles, all of which guide the child's gaze toward hidden agents or overlooked pathways.

Salience is frequently achieved through colour contrast -villains are often rendered in bolder hues or exhibit exaggerated postures that draw attention despite their small scale. In *Énigmes à tous les étages,* gaze paths and framing are central: characters look across rooms, through stairwells, or out of windows, directing the reader to adjacent narrative zones. The unfolding flaps alter framing structures, allowing the reader to juxtapose inside/outside and foreground/background actions. In *Detective Samson* compositional layering generate visual vectors that lead toward micro-narratives or suspicious activity. These formal cues assist navigation by following lines of sight, noting emphasis, isolating anomalies, and assembling narrative logic from dispersed visual information.

5.2. Narrative Structuring and Puzzle Logic

If hybrid detective wimmelbooks reimagine visual space as a maze structure for investigative reading, they also reconfigure narrative itself as an assemblage of visual puzzles, clues, and decoys. The books analyzed here eschew traditional narrative progression in favor of narrative logic rooted in spatial discovery, visual and minimal textual retrieval, and deductive synthesis. Despite their heavy reliance on image, hybrid detective wimmelbooks do not abandon text altogether. First of all, across the corpus, two of the books, in particular *Énigmes à tous les étages* and *Pierre the Maze Detective* employ guidelines that orient the reader's investigative engagement before the narrative even begins. These instructions articulate a ludic contract between the book and its reader. In *Énigmes à tous les étages*, the opening spread provides formalized reading instructions under the heading "*How to play?*" presenting a structured method for puzzle resolution. The five-step guide instructs readers to first read the enigma on the right-hand page, then examine the building's interior (revealed by unfolding flaps) for clues embedded in suspects' and witnesses' statements, cross-reference with visual details, and consult additional hints before checking the solution at the end. These mechanisms enact a recursive logic, where the enigma unfolds through physical manipulation of the page, alternating between interior and exterior views. The child-reader becomes an architect of detection, building interpretive hypotheses across both verbal and visual layers. In Barthes's terms (1974, p. 47 [82]), the interactive rhythm of delay, misdirection, and partial revelation constitutes an "*hermeneutic code*", essential to the epistemological structure of narrative. As Todorov (1977, p. 41 [83]) notes, the detective story unfolds through the interplay of two narrative strands: the hidden story of the crime and the visible story of the investigation, whose function is to reconstruct the former through gradual accumulation and verification of detail.

The textual prompts in *Énigmes à tous les étages* enact this dynamic by directing the reader to identify what is missing or inexplicable, thereby staging the interpretive problem. From this point forward, meaning must be assembled through visual inference, as clues, motives, and resolutions are embedded within a single, dense composition. In *Pierre the Maze Detective*, the framing is equally explicit but follows a game-based logic. A map at the endpapers of the book introduces the geography of the floating "*City of Canals*", identifying all major locations to be visited and visually positioning the reader within the topography of the story-world. The subsequent "*How to Play*" page lists four gameplay principles: tracing a continuous path from entrance to exit, solving subsidiary puzzles, locating hidden objects (stars, trophies, treasure chests), and applying spatial rules (e.g., navigating around people or animals, using stairs or bridges). These rules frame not only the reader's task but also the structure of the book: deduction emerges through spatial logic and pattern recognition. Each maze-spread includes a short textual introduction describing the current location and outlining specific missions, often through fictional documents, warnings, or character requests. Although narratively minimal, these texts guide attention and provide motivational cues, reconfiguring the labyrinth as both story-space and puzzle-structure. Importantly, the reader's traversal of the maze literalizes the act of deduction: meaning must be constructed by moving through space. Furthermore, inside the narrative, the textual component is external to each maze-spread. A brief introductory page outlines the overarching premise: a magical artefact -the Maze Stone- has been stolen, threatening to plunge the city into chaos. This frame provides the motivation for Pierre's and Carmen's pursuit, establishing narrative stakes and positioning the reader within a quest. Each subsequent double-page maze scene is introduced through a short paragraph placed at the bottom of the image, describing the location and current events within the scene. These summaries accompany supplementary textual fragments: mysterious letters, newspaper clippings from "*The Canal Times*", warnings from anonymous sources, or requests from city inhabitants. While brief, such inserts

offer mission statements that list objects to find, anomalies to notice, or characters to locate, aligning the reader's task with investigative inquiry. However, the mystery itself is spatialized, and the investigative structure unfolds mainly through the maze: clues are dispersed across the scene, and narrative progression depends on the reader's successful visual traversal. Deduction is literalized as movement -navigation through alleyways, bridges, rooftops, and towers-transforming the child's cognitive pathfinding into a semiotic mode of storytelling. In *Detective Samson*, textual framing is more minimal. The story opens with an invitation to collect clues dividing the book into six cases of unsolved theft. Each case is introduced through a short, embedded dialogue, uttered by anthropomorphized animal characters, naming the stolen objects: ten flowers, ten kittens, ten eggs, ten boots, ten mechanical parts, and ten pieces of jewelry. These brief utterances function as inciting prompts for the reader's visual investigation. As Samson begins his journey, the landscape unfolds as a vibrant, non-linear maze encompassing city streets, apartment buildings, beaches, underwater tunnels, mountain trails, or subterranean sewer systems. Each double-page spread introduces new environments and potential narrative threads, through spatial repositioning and gradual task accumulation. Crucially, the unfolding of each mystery is guided by cumulative depiction: the six sets of ten missing items are distributed across the next ten double-page spreads, with approximately six items discoverable per spread. The child-reader must remember or revisiting the page with the missing items, visually scan and rescan each environment to trace Samson's path, locate clues, and reconstruct the story through spatial progression. Textual cues are sparsely embedded within the illustrations, and, often, initiate mini-missions. These narratives are nested in the image itself, functioning as site-specific triggers. For example, underwater, Samson encounters a crying mermaid princess who pleads for help finding her lost pet clownfish. Only if he succeeds, she will reveal where he should look next. This type of verbal-visual framing guides the reader's task without interrupting the flow of the visual narrative. It reinforces the integration of speech, space, and goal orientation, aligning the protagonist's quest with the reader's own unfolding detection.

A defining feature of puzzle logic in all three works is the recursive structure of detection. Unlike traditional prose mysteries that unfold through temporal revelation, these picturebooks encode their logic through spatial simultaneity and cyclical return. The reader must return to earlier scenes, hold visual information in working memory, and reframe hypotheses considering new details. Red herrings and repeated motifs -such as the recurring villains in *Pierre*, or the peripheral figures in *Samson*, for example the tourists, who later become central, require the child-reader to revise, not just progress. Importantly, puzzle logic functions differently in each book. In *Énigmes à tous les étages*, the mystery is stable, there is a fixed answer, discoverable through careful observation and logical elimination. The reader is a witness and detective, parsing visual contradictions and matching statements to depictions. The genre conventions -clue, suspect, motive- are preserved, but their articulation is visual rather than verbal. In *Detective Samson*, by contrast, the investigative task is fluid. There is no single mystery per page, but a sequence of interlocking searches, detours, and subplots. The dog-detective acts as narrative anchor, but the reader constructs coherence through associative logic: connecting visual threads, tracking repetitions, and piecing together who stole what and when. In *Pierre the Maze Detective*, the logic is gamified. The maze itself is both story and structure, embedding mystery within movement. The reader's interpretive labor lies not only in finding objects but in navigating space, to trace a line is to build a narrative.

As Ryan (2001, pp. 261–263 [84]) observes, the spatial immersion of hypertext narratives disrupts traditional narrative progression, replacing temporal succession with a navigational logic rooted in exploration, redirection, and spatial memory. This model is especially relevant to the books examined, where narrative coherence emerges not from linear unfolding but from the reader's recursive traversal through visual fields, guided by inference, hypothesis, and spatial attention. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's contrast between striated and smooth space, Ryan (2001, p. 262 [85]) shows how interactive narratives privilege movement over destination -what she terms "*an accumulation of proximities*" rather than fixed points. The reader's experience is shaped by a tension between disorientation and control: a constant switching between attentional focus, ambiguity, and resolution.

One of the most striking aspects of puzzle logic in these books is their use of repetition with variation. Each case in *Énigmes à tous les étages* follows a similar structure: a setting, a mystery, a suspect list. Yet no two visual layouts are identical, and the nature of the enigma shifts from logical contradiction to

visual anomaly to improbable coincidence. This forces the reader to adapt strategies, reconfigure their expectations, and remain cognitively flexible. In *Detective Samson*, the repetition of the search-for-ten-items pattern is constantly disrupted by new narrative tasks, making the investigative journey nonlinear and contingent. Reader cannot solve the mystery by formula; they must remain alert to visual shifts and micro-narratives. In *Pierre the Maze Detective*, the repetition of maze-traversal is broken by thematic changes in environment and the increasing difficulty of embedded puzzles.

Framing devices also play a crucial role in scaffolding the investigative experience. In *Énigmes à tous les étages*, the right-hand page typically contains the case's synopsis and clues, while the left-hand double spread contains the visual mystery. This juxtaposition invites a reading pattern from text to image, hypothesis to testing, echoing the deductive method. In *Detective Samson*, textual fragments are embedded within the image itself, blurring the line between diegetic dialogue and narrative function. The captain who requests the rudder, or the rat who seeks a button, speak from within the image, compelling the reader to integrate verbal cues with visual exploration. This integration makes the reader's role active, bridging linguistic and spatial modalities. In *Pierre the Maze Detective*, the text is always extradiegetic -printed in margins or instruction boxes- reinforcing the separation between narrative frame and maze content. The reader must oscillate between the two, holding the task in mind while navigating the illustrated space.

5.3. Recurring Motifs and Suspense Techniques

Suspense, a defining feature of detective fiction, is traditionally generated through narrative delay, red herrings, and temporal misdirection. In detective picturebooks that merge wimmelbook aesthetics with investigative logic, however, suspense is not primarily orchestrated through time but through space. These books mobilize spatial complexity and visual recurrence to generate interpretive tension, inviting the reader to scan, return, and reconfigure meaning through spatial navigation. Central to this process is the strategic recurrence of key protagonists who function as visual anchors. Their iterative presence on each spread signals narrative continuity and shapes reading paths, directs attention, and scaffolds the epistemological work of detection.

In *Detective Samson* the eponymous dog detective appears on every double-page scene, his positioning varying across rooftops, interiors, etc. His bodily orientation and gaze act as a visual compass, directing the reader toward significant zones -windows left ajar, discarded objects, or suspicious characters. Samson's constancy becomes a stabilizing element in a compositionally dense field: as a salient figure (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006 [86]), he punctuates the visual terrain and invites the reader to infer links between disparate visual clues. Similarly, *Pierre the Maze Detective* depends on the repeated appearance of Pierre and his companion Carmen, whose trajectories through intricate urban mazes are central to the reader's investigative experience. Their attire and poses make them easily identifiable within crowded compositions, while their spatial progression -climbing ladders, crossing bridges, investigating corners- echoes the reader's own path through the book. The reader is prompted to track their movement across spreads, mapping progress while simultaneously searching for the elusive villain. Suspense is thus sustained through an iterative rhythm of search, partial recognition, and delayed resolution. As Ryan (2001, p. 309 [87]) notes, "*the pleasure of modern games is as much a matter of 'being there' as a matter of 'doing things*'"; this dual pleasure of presence and activity equally characterizes the reading experience in detective wimmelbooks, where following characters becomes both an immersive and participatory act.

In detective wimmelbooks, repetition of visual motifs serves dual functions: aiding memory and pattern recognition, and maintaining narrative tension. Unlike conventional detective stories that build suspense through temporal delay and narrative misdirection, these books externalize the detective's reasoning process through their visual fabric. These motifs, occasionally, are initially perceived as incidental details amid the chaos of densely populated illustrations. However, repeated appearances gradually transform them into visual signposts, clues that encourage the child to connect disparate scenes. This recurrence acts as a mnemonic device, facilitating retrospective interpretation. When the same object or character reappears in different contexts, it prompts the reader to revisit earlier visual cues, fostering a layered understanding of the unfolding mystery. For instance, in *Detective Samson*, a wanted poster of a wolf character appears later in the narrative- a motif that, although visible on earlier pages, was never

introduced as an active case. By the end, however, we see Samson with a box of 30 doughnuts, the precise reward mentioned in the poster, implying that this case has been solved silently. The child, by noticing this pattern, begins to anticipate its role in the story, thus creating a sense of suspense rooted in pattern recognition rather than explicit narration.

Moreover, the repetition of motifs supports the internal logic of the narrative. The dense visual environment resembles the real-world detective's process of assembling clues from scattered evidence. The child's active engagement, tracking motifs across scenes, mirrors the detective's cognitive work, reinforcing the interactive nature of the reading experience. A distinctive feature of the books under examination is their reliance on retrospective inference, where understanding of motifs and their significance develops gradually through re-examination of the visual environment. This process echoes real-world detective work, where clues are pieced together over time, often only revealing their full significance after multiple observations. In this context, the closing pages of the books play a crucial role in consolidating the reader's interpretive process.

In *Énigmes à tous les étages* each mystery concludes on a single spread, and the reader can consult a brief textual answer at the end of the book. These solutions function as external confirmations and are entirely verbal; there are no visual recaps or colour-coded pages. Once the case is read and solved, it is closed. The book does not provide any material structure that encourages rereading, backtracking, or visual re-analysis. Its design supports one-directional problem-solving rather than recursive engagement. In contrast, the two other books conclude differently. In *Pierre the Maze Detective*, the final page takes the form of a fictional newspaper, structured into multiple columns that blend narrative summary, congratulatory remarks, and direct address to the reader. One column, titled with a prompt akin to "*Did you miss something?*", invites the reader to undertake further investigations beyond the main storyline. These include locating a red ninja, identifying floor tiles marked with the letter "P" and solving eleven riddle-like questions, each referring back to visual details embedded in earlier spreads. This epilogue transforms the book's closure into a springboard for recursive engagement. The reader is encouraged to re-navigate previously seen scenes with a sharpened investigative lens, shifting from resolution to expansion. By layering these extra tasks onto the already completed journey, the book blurs the boundary between solution and continuation, positioning the reader not only as solver but as re-reader, detective, and player in a space where meaning is co-constructed across multiple passes. In *Detective Samson*, the narrative initially appears to reach closure with the resolution of the main cases. However, this sense of conclusion is immediately unsettled in the following double-page spread, where Samson is depicted reclining in a bathtub, receiving phone calls. Around him, a series of animals appear in dialogue bubbles, each presenting a new request or a new mystery, a set of fresh cases that the reader now realizes were silently embedded in the preceding pages. These speech bubbles retroactively alter the reader's perception of what has already occurred. Rather than ending the story, this scene reopens it entirely: the reader is now encouraged to return to earlier spreads, scan them anew, and locate the visual traces of these newly introduced cases. The conclusion thus transforms into a framework for recursive investigation. Suspense in *Samson* is therefore not resolved with the final case but multiplied, as the closing image renders the book itself re-readable. The story does not continue beyond the book's last page, but folds back into itself, demanding renewed attention and interpretive labor from the reader.

Both *Pierre the Maze Detective* and *Detective Samson* conclude with sets of miniature black-and-white reproductions of each main spread, onto which the solutions are colour-marked. These annotated miniatures serve as the primary resolution mechanism for the narrative, allowing readers to verify each investigative task while encouraging retrospective engagement with the visual text. In *Pierre*, each spread is revisited in monochrome, with red lines tracing the full maze route, blue symbols (circles and Xs) highlighting additional side challenges, red circles for hidden objects and purple circles corresponding to items referenced in a final quiz presented within a fictional newspaper. *Detective Samson* ends in a similar fashion, offering black-and-white miniatures annotated in red (for the initial client requests), blue (for mid-narrative tasks), and yellow (for late-emerging cases introduced on the final spread). These closing visuals provide definitive solutions to each case while simultaneously inviting the reader to return and re-examine the earlier scenes through a more informed lens. Thus, while they deliver narrative closure, they do so through visual synthesis and retrospective inference, reinforcing the recursive, cognitively active nature of detection in these hybrid picturebooks.

5.4. Reader Participation and Cognitive Engagement

Hybrid detective wimmelbooks such as previous examined reconfigure reading as an active, investigative endeavor, transforming the child from a narrative recipient into a participant-detective. Their densely detailed compositions, sparse textual framing, and recursive puzzle structures entrust young readers with interpretive agency, requiring them to navigate visual fields, track recurring figures, and infer causal links across fragmented episodes. This active engagement closely mirrors the mental operations of real-world detectives -scanning for clues, forming hypotheses, and synthesizing scattered details- thus aligning narrative immersion with core dimensions of cognitive development and narrative learning.

The active participation demanded by these hybrid detective wimmelbooks aligns strongly with contemporary cognitive and developmental theories about literacy and learning. Maria Nikolajeva's (2013, p. 25 [88]) cognitive criticism emphasizes that meaningful engagement with fiction is a dynamic process: "*cognitive engagement with fiction is a two-way process - life-to-text and text-to-life*". In the context of these books, that means children draw on their real-world knowledge and logical reasoning to interpret clues in the story ("life-to-text"), and conversely, the problem-solving experience in the text may bolster real-life cognitive skills ("text-to-life"). The acts of scanning for clues, remembering details across pages, and deducing outcomes exercise core cognitive faculties. Research on wimmelbook reading has noted that when children are "*confronted with the overabundance*" of detail in wimmelbooks, "*they need to filter and structure its mass of information, to memorize selected observations and to combine them, which requires a basic understanding of causal relations*" (Remi, 2011, p. 129 [89]). These demands closely mirror the executive functions and inferential thinking skills that are key to cognitive development in middle childhood. It is therefore not surprising that survey studies of wimmelbook use have found that the skills children exercise and potentially enhance through such reading "*do not differ fundamentally from these requirements*": young readers practice "*perceptivity and patience, attention and concentration; hermeneutic competence, language and communications skills*" (Remi, 2011, p. 129 [90]).

Nikolajeva's (2014 [91]) work also highlights how literature can develop narrative competence and even social cognition. She argues that engaging with narratives, especially complex ones, helps foster empathy and Theory of Mind- the ability to understand others' beliefs and perspectives. Hybrid detective wimmelbooks, while primarily visual puzzles, also contribute to this aspect of development. Solving a mystery often entails considering different characters' viewpoints and motivations: the child might ask, "*Why would this character lie?"* or "*What would each suspect stand to gain?*". Even in simple form, this is practice in perspective-taking. A young reader in effect, put themselves in the shoes of both detective and culprit, imagining possible scenarios, a cognitive and imaginative leap that builds narrative competence. Moreover, the collaborative aspect of reading these books (often an adult and child will solve the puzzles together) creates a social reading experience where dialogue about the story can further extend cognitive engagement. Shared problem-solving invites the child to articulate their reasoning ("*I think the thief is the cook because...*") and hear alternative interpretations, an exercise in both communication and flexible thinking.

From a reader-response theoretical angle, hybrid detective wimmelbooks epitomize the active reader that theorists like Iser (1974 [92]) describe, a reader who co-produces meaning by filling in gaps. The texts are deliberately open and indeterminate until the reader's intellect completes them. Indeed, Rémi (2011, p. 115 [93]) characterizes wimmelbooks as a "*narrative threshold genre*" that accompanies children along the path to literacy by introducing them to strategies of "*coping with the world and telling stories*"(Rémi, p. 115 [94]). They are threshold texts because they require readers to cross from mere viewing into active meaning-making. The child's role oscillates between reader and player; and the highly active response to these books can be described as a form of playing (Remi, 2011 [95]). This playful, game-like engagement is intrinsically motivating and cognitively enriching. The format inherently encourages recursive exploration -each reread might reveal a new subplot or hidden gag in the illustrations, supporting re-reading for deeper comprehension. This not only keeps the cognitive engagement high but also reinforces learning; the child refines their inferential skills with each reading. Over time, successfully deciphering these visual mysteries can build narrative confidence. Children

learn that they can decode complex story systems, thereby strengthening what Nikolajeva (2014, p. 227 [96]) and others refer to as literary competence. They become, in a sense, more sophisticated readers who expect to be challenged and to participate in constructing meaning, rather than passively receiving a story.

Lastly, the cognitive demands embedded in these detective-themed wimmelbooks are resonant with the developmental profile of middle childhood. Children between the ages of seven and ten -often described by developmental theorists such as Jean Piaget (1972) as entering "*the stage of concrete operational thinking*", display a marked shift toward logical reasoning, rule-governed behavior, and a heightened interest in puzzles, classification, and causal inference. These cognitive dispositions align seamlessly with the mechanics of hybrid detective wimmelbooks, which structure narrative as an interactive system of visual clues, hidden patterns, and deductive pathways. Framed as ludic challenges, these books transform reading into an act of epistemic inquiry: the child must scan, compare, hypothesize, and revise -skills that mirror the very operations cultivated in educational contexts. The design of these texts situates readers within Lev Semionovich Vygotsky's "*zone of proximal development*", scaffolding progressively complex interpretive tasks within a motivating and self-directed activity. Each small discovery -tracing a character's path through a maze, identifying an anomaly in a scene, eliminating a suspect- functions as both cognitive reward and narrative propulsion. This recursive interplay of play and reasoning fosters ludic literacy, a mode of reading that blends curiosity, exploration, and rule-based challenge. Rooted in the Latin "*ludus"* (game), ludic reading transforms the act of interpretation into an active, playful pursuit. Readers engage as both solvers and storytellers, navigating puzzles, uncovering clues, and constructing meaning through iterative attempts. By positioning the child as an active co-detective, these works train the minds of their readers, inviting them to think, to play and to read -like detectives, with curiosity, tenacity, and insight.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Detective picturebooks shaped by wimmelbook aesthetics create narrative spaces structured around investigation, interpretation, and visual reasoning. Within these richly detailed environments, the logic of detection unfolds through spatial exploration rather than linear narration. Clues are embedded across the visual field, inviting the child to search, compare, hypothesize, and assemble connections through attentive engagement. This mode of storytelling aligns closely with the cognitive architecture of the detective genre. It highlights processes such as inference, memory, pattern recognition, and causal thinking, all of which correspond to key aspects of narrative competence and developing literacy. The reader constructs meaning through recursive acts of looking, returning to earlier pages, refining assumptions, and gradually forming narrative coherence. Each page offers a space where intellectual curiosity and perceptual sensitivity guide the story's progression. The hybrid format reinforces this dynamic, combining narrative play with sustained attention. Tasks such as tracking characters, resolving visual contradictions, or decoding hidden elements support not only comprehension but also metacognitive awareness. The child monitors strategies, tests possibilities, and reflects on interpretive choices. Within this structure, the figure of the child-as-detective reflects a deeper understanding of reading itself, as a form of inquiry grounded in effort, discovery and reasoning. These books offer a compelling interplay between narrative and cognition, image and idea. Through their investigative form, they foster the habits of close observation and narrative construction, affirming reading as an act of thinking, perceiving, and meaning-making within an intricately crafted visual world.

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