

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE PHILIPPINES AT A TIME OF CIVIL UNREST: DUTERTE'S WAR ON DRUGS AS COMMUNICATED IN THE VISUAL RHETORIC AND NARRATIVE FIDELITY OF THE CHILDREN'S STORY "SI KIAN"

Christine Joy A. Magpayo | University of the Philippines Diliman | camagpayo@up.edu.ph

BACKGROUND

Children's literature plays a crucial role in civilizing the youth as it exposes them to social realities and helps them construct their value system (Chamber, 1965). Narrative traditions are shaped and transformed by the ideologies of a certain period (Griffin, 2018). In this sense, children's literature may be used as a rhetorical device to forward an agenda, inevitably making the material political.

Since stories are culture-bound, they reflect the pervading social conditions that exist at the time of writing. Consequentially, children's stories aid in developing the moral and ethical worldview of the child reader. While politically charged children's literature remains to be challenged by censorship for tackling dark themes and controversial issues, progressive scholars and writers believe that taboo topics in children's stories are a good starting point for a conversation that can expand the child readers' horizon and cultivate their maturity and empathy (Jenkins, 2008).

The illustrated children's story "Si Kian" features the life and death of 17-year old Kian Loyd Delos Santos— an innocent victim of the Philippine administration's war on drugs— who was brutally murdered by three police officers. This was the first project funded by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) Project for Innovation in Storytelling, which was launched in August 2017 to encourage collaborations between artists and journalists in the experimental storytelling of the news. "Si Kian" is a story written in Filipino by Weng Cahiles, translated into English by Ramon Sunico, and illustrated by Aldy Aguirre based on the research of Kimberly Dela Cruz which involved interviewing 30 people and obtaining documents from the police and the Public Attorney's Office.

The study aims to examine how President Duterte's War on Drugs was communicated in the visual rhetoric and narrative fidelity of the children's story "Si Kian." Using rhetorical frameworks as theoretical grounding of the analyses, the study hopes to address questions of fact, relevance, consequence, consistency, and transcendent issue surrounding the text and illustration.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES, THEORIES, AND METHODS

Progressive and political children's picture books are sites of verbal and visual discourse that communicate values in explicit and implicit ways. For Fisher (1984), narratives are truths about the human condition birthed by conversations going on in history, which constitute the fabric of social reality. He further argues that narratives are more efficacious than technical arguments since it captures lived experience by appealing to both intellect and imagination, reason and emotion, and by doing so promotes audience identification (Fisher, 1989). For Foss (2005), visual imagery are communicative artifacts that solicit a rhetorical response from viewers who interpret signs and symbols based on their belief systems and habitus. Given the subjective nature of analyzing signification, Moriarty (2005) suggests a process of examining chains and shifts to arrive at a possible "preferred reading" of a material despite denotative and connotative nuances.

The picture book "Si Kian" is a nonfiction piece for children that dramatizes the experience of childhood in the Philippines at a time when even the innocent can be victims of extrajudicial killings. Through text and images, the story paints and juxtaposes the past, present, and future of Filipino youth in impoverished communities. Given the sensitive nature of the piece as well as its intended readers, the points for analyses were anchored in the principle of visual ethics, which refers to "how images and imaging affect the ways we think, feel, behave, and create, use, and interpret meaning, for good or for bad" (Newton, 2005, p. 433). More specifically, the study aimed to identify visual cues used in the picture book pertinent to the central theme of the narrative. The three dimensions of an image— nature, function, evaluation— were explicated in relation to the logic of good reasons which entail seeking answers to the following questions: (1) Question of Fact: What are the explicit and implicit values embedded in a message? (2) Question of Relevance: Are the values appropriate to the nature of the decision the message bears upon? (3) Question of Consequence: What would be the effects of adhering to the values on the self, relationship, and society? (4) Question of Consistency: Are these values confirmed and/or validated in one's field of experience? (5) Question of Transcendent Issue: Are the values presented constituting ideal basis for human conduct?

FINDINGS AND ANALYSES

Beyond aesthetic: Colors as symbols

The story presented in the children's book "Si Kian" is accompanied by watercolor illustrations that are whimsical despite the use of dark hues. While gray tones dominate most of the pages, which set a rather ominous mood for the narrative, it is worth emphasizing that repeating colors include yellow, blue, and red, which are same ones used in the Philippine national flag. Further, there is at least one image where each of the aforementioned colors is used to paint at least half of an entire page. These may be considered sites of visual discourse.

On page 3, Kian is shown doing a salute inside a classroom with **yellow** walls. The text focuses on his mischiefs and cheerful disposition in school where he was elected Peace Officer. It suggests a bright future for Kian who dreams of becoming a policeman.

On page 4, Kian is shown writing the words "serve and protect" in **blue** ink while he imagines himself as a police officer holding a badge. The text focuses on his dream of rounding up drug addicts in their neighborhood. It communicates Kian's hope for his future which involves living up to the motto of the Philippine National Police, which is to serve and protect the people.

On page 10, Kian's is nowhere in the frame but his blood in vibrant splashes of **red** filled the page. The text focused on his last words before he was shot dead. It presents a picture of violence, danger, and anger.

On page 13, a **black** ribbon with the note "Justice for Kian" is shown along with the image of people wearing black while holding a banner with the lines "Stop the killings." The text focused on the testaments of Kian's family and friends who are all shouting for justice.

Visual behaviors: Scenes as arguments

The narrative— as communicated in both text and images— surfaces themes of poverty, politics, and power. The main argument integrating the three is: The poor suffers the most because of rotten political systems and power dynamics among social classes.

Poverty

- On page 1, Kian was shown being the only student from his class who had to walk home because he could not yet afford to own a bike and helmet.
- On page 7, Kian sold his clothes and silver necklace so he could buy the favorite fruits of his friend who was hospitalized after an accident.
- On page 12, Kian's mother sits near the casket where her son lies wearing a *barang* that the neighbors chipped in to buy.

Politics

- On page 5, the barangay where Kian lived was pictured as a place with narrow and crowded alleys, electric cables in tangled coils, and clotheslines blocking the windows of houses that are too close to each other. High above the people was a poster of a candidate resembling the current Philippine president. The visual suggests he is watching everyone and they are all under him.

Power

- On page 9, Kian was dragged by two policemen out of uniform as he begged them for mercy.
- On page 11, Kian's mother cried and almost kissed the feet of her employer in a foreign land to let her return to the Philippines and see her son Kian for the last time.
- On page 13, Kian's family and friends showed collective effort in searching justice for Kian's death. They were depicted as small people with big voices.

REFERENCES

- Cahiles, W. & Aguirre A. (Illustrator). (2017). Si Kian. Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) Project for Innovation in Storytelling. <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/specials/content/25/si-kian-the-pcij-story-project/>
- Chambers, D. W. (1965). An Exploratory Study Of Social Values In Children's Literature (Order No. 6601228). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (302174379). Accessed from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/302174379?accountid=47253>
- dela Cruz, K. (2017, September 25). The making of a book on Kian Delos Santos. The PCIJ Story Project. <https://pcijstoryproject.org/the-making-of-a-book-6b1c08806b2c>
- Dowell, S. (2003). Uncovering the storytelling power of communication: Applying Walter Fisher's narrative theory to three presidential crisis speeches. (Thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha) <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1449&context=studentwork>
- Fisher, W. R. (1984). Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument. *Communication Monographs*, 51(1), 1–22. doi:10.1080/03637758409390180
- Fisher, W. R. (1989). *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*. South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press.
- Foss, S. (2005). Theory of visual rhetoric. In K. Smith, S. Moriarty, G. Barbatsis, & K. Kenney (Eds.), *Handbook of visual communication: Theory, methods, and media* (pp. 141-152). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Griffin, M. (2018). Once upon a genre: Distant reading, the Newbery medal, and the affordances of interdisciplinary paradigms for understanding children's literature (Order No. 10751036). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (2048262902). Accessed from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2048262902?accountid=47253>
- Gubar, M. (2011). On not defining children's literature. *PMLA*, 126(1), 209-216. Accessed from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41414094>
- Jenkins, C. (2008). Book challenges, challenging books, and young readers: The Research Picture. *Language Arts*, 85(3), 228-236 Accessed from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40091697>
- Moriarty, S. (2005). Visual semiotics theory. In K. Smith, S. Moriarty, G. Barbatsis, & K. Kenney (Eds.), *Handbook of visual communication: Theory, methods, and media* (pp. 227-242). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Newton, J. (2005). Visual ethics theory. In K. Smith, S. Moriarty, G. Barbatsis, & K. Kenney (Eds.), *Handbook of visual communication: Theory, methods, and media* (pp. 429-444). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Nodelman, P. (1980). Defining children's literature. *Children's Literature* 8, 184-190. Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1353/chl.0.0028>
- Warnick, W. (1987) The narrative paradigm: Another story, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 73:2, 172-182, doi: 10.1080/00335638709383801