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POSTMODERNISM IN CONTEMPORARY GERMAN PICTURE BOOKS. AN OUTLINE OF THE BOOKS BY HANS MAGNUS ENZENSBERGER/MICHAEL SOWA, JÖRG STEINER/JÖRG MÜLLER AND QUINT BUCHHOLZ

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Resumen

Los libros ilustrados constituyen realmente un objeto difícil para la investigación en Literatura Infantil debido a que opera en dos niveles, con el lenguaje y las imágenes. A causa de este carácter híbrido, la crítica literaria trata a este tipo de literatura como si fuese de menor importancia, como si no perteneciese en concreto a ninguna de las dos disciplinas, arte o literatura. Hay muchos prejuicios que proceden del punto de vista pedagógico: el uso de imágenes parece a primera vista una simplificación y tiene que utilizarse para elementos ajenos a la literatura. De esta manera el libro de imágenes es considerado como una herramienta para la educación preescolar, de hecho este ha sido su cometido durante unos 150 años. Existen demasiadas connotaciones negativas que alejan a estos textos de un lector adulto y más sofisticado. Con este trabajo se intenta mostrar cómo la narración se beneficia con la combinación de elementos verbales y visuales y se abren muchas posibilidades creativas nuevas para el desarrollo de la literatura.

Palabras clave: libros ilustrados, postmodernismo, narración e ilustración, deconstrucción.

Abstract

The picture book is truly a difficult object of children's literature research because it operates different codes, with language as well as the image, and each one requires the competence of another specialty. Because of its hybrid character literary criticism treats the picture book as a topic of minor importance and scholars in fine arts use to ignore it because it takes images in prison by words. It seems that the picture book does not really belong to the one or the other discipline. As a matter of fact there is a prejudice that arises from the pedagogical point of view: the use of pictures itself is at first glance a simplification and has to be used for an illiterate recipient. In this case the picture book is solely regarded as a tool for pre-school education. Actually this has been the main function of this medium for over 150 years. In fact the evaluation of a text as "like a picture book" or even "like a comic" is associated with negative criticism implying that these texts are not suited for an adult respectively sophisticated reader. Nevertheless I think, that this approach overlooks the fact that the narration definitely profits from the combination of verbal and visual elements and that it opens up many creative possibilities for the development of literature.

Key words: picture books, postmodernism, narration and illustration, deconstruction.



The growing importance of pictures in modern technological environments, in electronic media and in digital spaces has led to a growing acceptance of picture worlds and it seems that also the old fashioned picture book can benefit from this development. Primarily starting in the eighties a new generation of authors have sought the challenge of a transformed environment and tried to express this change in concepts that are strongly influenced by contemporary movements in literature and the arts. *The picture book comes of age* is the title of a study with broad international acclaim published in 1991 by the Israeli researchers Joseph and Chava Schwarcz which acknowledged that picture books had matured. I want to follow this path of thought and prove that picture books have a lot to offer for young as well as for adult readers. And not in an only nostalgic or strict pedagogical sense but for the underlying ambiguity in a vast number of picture books. At the surface the books usually address a young reader but they also contain many com-

plex associations that can only be interpreted by the adult reader. Besides - this also renders them interesting for use in university classes and for foreign language teaching (cf. O'Sullivan/ Rösler 2001).

Michael Sowa: *Esterhazy*

I begin with the book *Esterhazy*, written by Hans-Magnus Enzensberger and Irene Dische and with an artwork by the satiric painter Michael Sowa. The story is about the adventures of a small anthropomorphic rabbit that moves between the German speaking countries of Austria and Germany. The neat animal leaves its protected childhood in a Viennese (rabbit-) aristocratic society for a trip to the strange and dangerous Berlin. He is the youngest male descendent of the Esterhazys which is not only the name of a rather delicious Austrian chocolate cake but also the name of a noble Austrian clan of Hungarian origin. He is assigned to find a suitable bride who will bring good gene material into the decadent aristocratic clan of his home country. But the search for a wife leads to a series of misunderstandings and mishaps. One of these is that the promised rabbit paradise is next to the Berlin wall which is, as we know, doomed to fall. When this idyllic paradise is destroyed by humans in the course of mystery events, that rabbits do not understand, he has to flee with his beloved Mimi to a place outside of Berlin. The story finishes with the sentence:

And if they lived happily ever after, the Esterhazys would still be alive, without the wall, but with many beautiful large brown-white speckled rabbit children, somewhere at the edge of a forest where there are no cars, no shopping centres and no restaurants in which they use to eat rabbits. (Enzensberger/ Dische/ Sowa 1993, - not paginated -)

[Image 1: "Esterhazy": First Love]

Not only the characteristic end of the story or the talking animals about whom nobody is surprised show a strong affinity to the fairy tales of The Brothers Grimm. The story line with the expedition of the youngest prince at the beginning and the three tests at the culmination of the story are also taken from this genre. Furthermore, the anthropomorphic animal characters are reminiscent of picture books in the tradition of the idyllic 'little worlds' of the 20s and 30s in German chil-

Image 1: "Esterhazy": First Love



dren's literature (Dolle-Weinkauff 1995) in which the Easter Bunny became a very popular figure. It can be seen quite near to the British tradition represented by Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* and its followers. Apart from the references to the historic Austrian nobility the name Esterhazy is here a play with words, it is also in use by Enzensberger as a distortion of German: "Osterhase" (Easter Bunny). A further association in reference to the tradition of German children literature is the popular classic *Häschenschule* (School of Rabbits) by Albert Sixtus and Fritz Koch-Gotha from 1924. With regards to the comical ideas as well as to language and verbal effects the authors refer to typical traits of German children's fantasy of the post war period, as it appears for example in the introduction of the hero:

Der jüngste aller Esterhazys hieß mit vollem Namen: Seine Erlaucht Michael Paul Anton Maria Prinz Esterhazy der 12.792. von Salatina, gefürsteter Graf zu Karottenstetten, Graf von Endivienstein, Herr auf Petersilienburg, Lauchingen und Rübhofen. Aber so nannte ihn natürlich kein Mensch und erst recht kein Hase, denn erstens kann niemand einen so langen Namen hersagen, und zweitens werden Hasen immer bei ihren Familiennamen genannt

These sentences as many others in *Esterhazy* - are written in the style of German children's literature of the 50s and 60s, so by authors like Otfried Preußler, Max Kruse and the early Michael Ende. It is easy to recognize not only in the tone of comical portrayal of aristocracy but also in the idiosyncratic logic of the narrator and the metaphorical names which remind of *König Alfons der Viertel-Vor-Zwölfte* and the droll community of "Lummerland" from Ende's *Jim Knopf und Lukas, der Lokomotivführer* (1960). Further examples of similarities like these could be added.

All these elements are pieces of an intertextual game: An ironic network of different topics from traditional children's books is spread out over text and images and it focuses finally on contemporary Berlin right before 1989, when the Wall fell. It is a bizarre kaleidoscope of fragments, motives, quotations and styles of different origins that can be discovered behind the familiar format of the picture book. This eclectic compilation finds its final expression in the illustrations by Michael Sowa.

The technique of Michael Sowa (see Sauer 1999), that has been described as a characteristic “old master’s style”, creates on the visual plane a familiarity which corresponds in the text with the fairy tale elements and the quaint animal figures which are modelled after the picture books of the 19th Century. The concrete realism of the figures and locations evokes a fictional world that appears to be quite familiar and simple. The observer of Sowa’s illustrations gets the impression of an old painting with the varnish on the canvas: the brush stroke and the paint layers can clearly be perceived and the execution of the illustrations show a high craftsmanship. But this pastiche art is not only based on technique. It also contains many obvious and hidden citations: The scenery of the last page of the book with its gloomy but not menacing dark clouds over the green rabbit meadows is not by accident achieved in the style of the great romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1844).

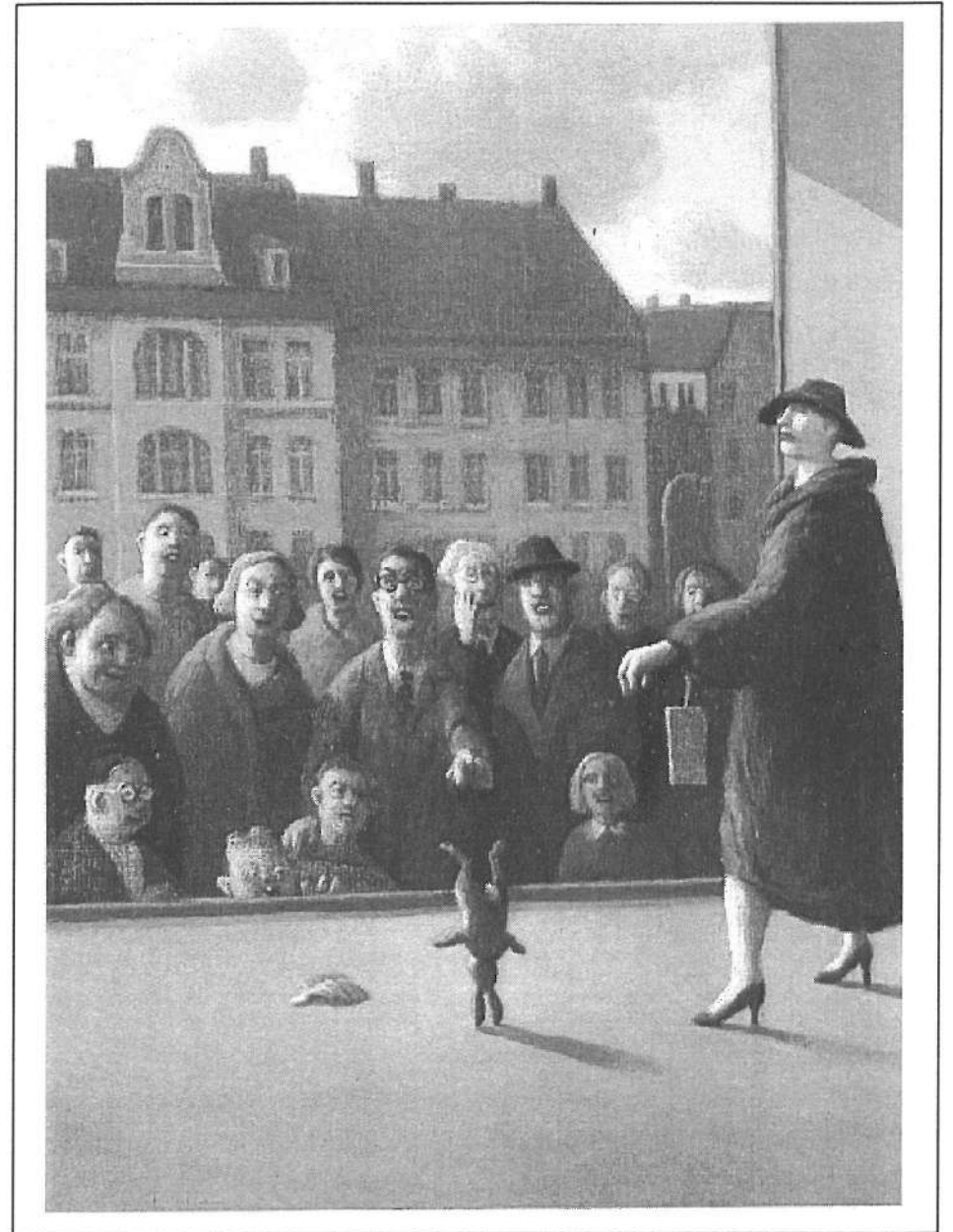
[Image 2: Esterhazy at the “Wertlos” store]

But, at this point the facade seems to show cracks that irritate and finally disillusion the recipient.

Strange but so familiar and very classic. So round, warm and cozy, like in the museum of the old masters, before the horses were blue. But at a second and third glance one realizes that one has been fooled in the most wonderful way. (Sack, 1995, 1)

Sowa’s illustrations, as much as they may appear to be realistic, contain under the surface a surrealistic touch. This is expressed in *Esterhazy* by the extremely bare rooms stripped of any detail, in which the figures seem to disappear. The impression of artificiality is increased by a shimmery green dim light in which the pictures are immersed. Last but not least the practically faceless figures appear to be paralysed and intensify the dreamlike surreal scenes. Within the of the picture book there is not a single rabbit physiognomy that expresses feelings. This is also hardly possible because the faces are turned half away, hidden by shadows or out of focus. The human faces on the whole, if visible, occur with waxen and distorted features like masks.

Image 2: Esterhazy at the “Wertlos” store



Sowa sometimes emphasizes dramatic developments of absurd situations: for example the episode in which Esterhazy hops around in the display window of the department store "Wertlos" (the German word means: valueless, it is a play of words with the real existing "Wertheim" store in Berlin). The surreal situation of a rabbit balancing on the point of its ears converges with the caricature of the crowd craving for sensation. These figures could have jumped out of the sarcastic cartoons by the Austrian satirists Manfred Deix or Gerhard Haderer. Moreover some of the illustrations do not really correspond with the text these pictures are independent additions to the narration and contradict the intentionally naive voice of the narrator.

Jörg Müller/Jörg Steiner: *Aufstand der Tiere*

Aufstand der Tiere (Rebellion of the animals) by Jörg Müller and Jörg Steiner is also obviously rooted in the fairy tale. However the subtitle *Die neuen Stadtmusikanten* (The new town musicians) indicates that the authors attempt to retell a well known German fairy tale. The Swiss authors of this picture book follow the basic idea and the order of the episodes but they present a total revision of the story, substitute the characters, locations and the plot with creations from the world of the late 20th century. The quartet of donkey, dog, cat and rooster, which in the tale of the Brothers Grimm would have been discarded domestic farm animals are turned into a group of rebels against the slavery in the modern consumer world: The owl that reminds of the label for a well-known German glue advertises for glasses, the penguin which vouches for high quality refrigerators, the obvious *Lacoste* crocodile and the panda of the World Wildlife Foundation. The basic situation is determined by a significant change: the dispensable animals in the economics of an agrarian society of the fairy tale escape because they fear that they will be killed, because they can't do their jobs any longer. The new town musicians are threatened by the reverse because they escape from the prospect of having to do their jobs in marketing campaigns until eternity.

The break-out is planned quickly, because the animals have found a fairy tale book by the Brothers Grimm and believe that this will be the perfect travel guide for their trip. But after leaving the graphic-design office, that hitherto had been their home, they get lost in the city jungle and do not even attract attention.

Image 3: "The new town musicians": lost in the city jungle



Here in the middle of the city were more crowds than they had expected. The cars drove by in ceaseless lines and the pedestrians stood either together in groups or rushed by the refugees. Nobody seemed to notice them. There was no need for astonishment or surprise as everybody seemed to know the owl, the crocodile, the penguin and the panda from the commercials and newspaper ads. Some even wore their pictures on their sweaters, on their sunglasses or on car stickers (Steiner/ Müller 1989 - unpaginated -).

The scene changes from the city to a rundown industrial zone which replaces the sinister forest of the fairy tale. The inviting house with the lights in the

windows which accomodates the robbers of the Brothers Grimm is in this post-modern version a gigantic media temple: a television studio. The appearance of the animals as a pyramid - which we know from the fairy tale - causes amazement and hilarity but neither can they scare nor drive away anyone. Finally they desperately disrupt a live show in a desperate attempt to cause havoc in the studio. Their action achieves the contrary - and in fact considering their intentions it is a disastrous defeat: they are immediately engaged for a TV series. It is only the panda who refuses and departs.

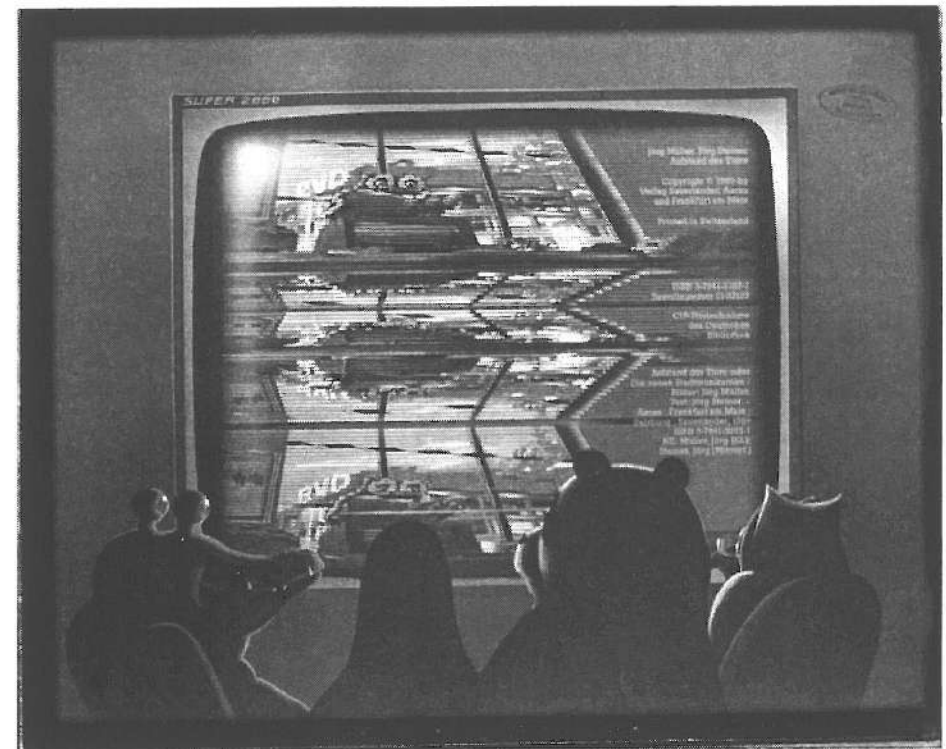
Jörg Müllers pictures in airbrush technique with its large bare spaces surrounded by postmodern elements of architecture and art as well as the constantly changing perspectives convey an atmosphere of artificiality that obliterates the line between fictional reality and the fantastic. The illustrations are designed to create this atmosphere which is developed further in the narrative: The deconstruction of fictional reality and the constant reproduction of such in the audiovisual media. One significant way of showing this is the attempt to simulate TV-technical elements in the text and paratext of the book by Müller and Steiner: Cover, bookend papers, preliminaries and imprint emit visual signals that generate a frame narrative.

For instance every single page contains a black frame, which suggests that every page is a screen shot. Furthermore the endpapers at the beginning and at the end of the volume are in the characteristic grey pattern of a TV-screen which you receive before and after viewing a video. Book title and author are presented in the style of an opening credits for a movie. In front of the screen, the heroes of the story can be seen sitting like a TV audience with their backs turned towards the reader. The imprint finally is blurred as if like at the beginning of a video when the electronic picture has not yet focussed.

The authors annoy the reader again at the end. Müller plays a game, a mise-en-abyme (see Nikolajeva/ Scott 2001, 224pp; Wolf 2004, 68pp) in which the credibility of the complete plot is challenged. The panda standing in front of the shop window for entertainment electronics, in which the story of the picture book can be seen on three screens simultaneously is one example for latter. This could be the outset for a fall into an infinite loop of never-ending re-narrations - that is what "mise en abyme" means - but this impression is abruptly broken off by

the empty screen of the gray bookend papers of the cover jacket. In this way the story has an open end. The reader is left with the choice of switching off "mentally" or developing a satisfying end.

Image 4: "The new town musicians": The picture book simulating a TV-screen

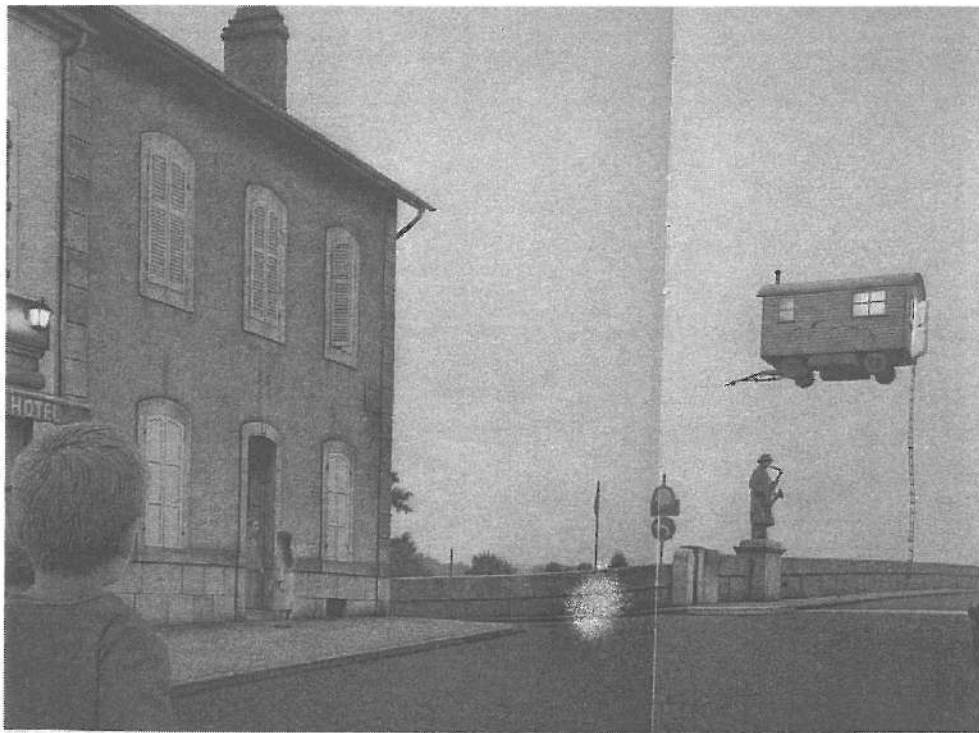


Quint Buchholz: *Sammler der Augenblicke*

In *Sammler der Augenblicke* (The collector of instants) by Quint Buchholz a first-person narrator who is apparently a boy recounts his encounter with a peculiar painter. This man calls himself Max and is staying for a while in the house of the boy's parents on an island in the North Sea with the intention of working on some paintings. The boy whom the painter calls "professor" visits the studio as often as possible and is tolerated. While Max is working on his paintings the "professor" does his homework, draws, daydreams, plays chess against himself or usually plays on the violin. He is allowed to do nearly anything he wants during the visits

except for one thing: He is not permitted to see Max's finished paintings which are hung on the wall with their backside showing. This is all narrated in an introductory text completely without illustrations.

Image 5: "The collector of instants": hyperrealistic objects in surrealistic scenes



The larger part of the book however consists of a series of double-page pictures with a puzzling content, because – with the exception of the last one – they do not accompany or illustrate the words of the text. They are autonomous entities of their own right. The characters of the story do not appear on them and the motives and scenes don't show any recognizable reference to the narrative of the introductory text. These highly enigmatic depictions are full of realistic details but they evoke pretty strange scenarios, often with a magical aura. So the strange illustrations contrast with the rather straight-forward narrative. In addition, there is no narrative reference among the pictures themselves. But anyone who is familiar with Quint Buchholz's oeuvre will recognize his typical style in each one

of the images characterized by fotorealism, neo-impressionism and magic realism as well as elements and motives from other books of the artist. For example the clown, the goose and circus wagon from the picture book *Die Sara, die zum Zirkus will*, published in 1991, with a text by Gudrun Mebs or the penguins in *Am Südpol, denkt man, ist es heiß* from the year 1998, the black cat from *Nero Corleone* (1995), the latter two both with words by Elke Heidenreich. Many details recur from *BuchBilderBuch* (1997), which contains texts by more than a dozen renowned authors written to accompany illustrations made by Quint Buchholz.

Actually the value of this book lies in each illustration with diverse associations which it evokes and this is basically the intention of the author. He is not interested in telling a conclusive story. Buchholz often claims himself: "I don't need to understand what I paint" (Bochow 2000). Moreover, this sentence is a clear indication that the artwork primarily addressed to the artist himself. In *Sammler der Augenblicke* he, the artist, is also the subject of the book. The selfquotations in the Illustrations with permanent references to other pictures and motives of his own art have already been mentioned.

The two single protagonists of the story, the painter Max and the boy called "professor" represent different self-portraits of the author which are strongly related to each other. The two figures turn out to be compatible. This is exemplified by the names: the professional painter is addressed by the childlike name "Max" whereas his alter ego represented by the musically talented boy is called "professor". So the innocence of youth is paired with the wisdom of age and music forms a synopsis with the art of painting. Buchholz demonstrates his artistic credo through the example of the interchangeable relationship between teacher and student. Each can see himself in the other. The painter is the collector of moments who does not see the need to explain his creations: "He [Max, the painter] once told me something which I did not understand at that time: 'Every picture has to hide its secret. Also from me. Maybe others can discover more in my paintings than I can myself.'" (Buchholz 1997, - unpaginated-). These are statements which can also be found with exactly the same wording in interviews with the author (cf. Schäfer 1995; Selchow 1995; Bochow 2000).

Conclusions

What can be judged as postmodern traits in these picture books? The aspects of selfreference and selfreflection obviously are the basic postmodern elements in *Sammler der Augenblicke* by Quint Buchholz. The object of the book is the author and his beliefs or his artistic confession. It is evident that the two characters of the narration act as metaphors of different parts of the of the author: they enable the development and display of the basic ideas in a dialogue. Buchholz follows in this case a certain movement in the tradition of the picture book that is called the 'artist picture book', which appeared around the turn of the 19th to 20th century in connection with art déco and Jugendstil. As concerning the structure and the casual link between narrative and illustration *Sammler der Augenblicke* is also evocative of popular picture galleries for young people in the form of books which were popular especially during the 18th and 19th centuries. These were reproductions and numerous replications of wood cuts, lithographs and etchings that could repeatedly appear in different books and in always different narrative contexts - or even without these. The same happens to the illustrations of Quint Buchholz, whose magical-realistic motives recur afresh in a lot of different publications. Here an there the verbal narration does not indicate an advanced literary style, it is more or less the by-product of a compilation in which the image is the centre of attraction.

In the epilogue of his famous *The name of the rose* Umberto Eco writes: "The postmodern answer to the modern lies in the realization that as history cannot be destroyed it has to be regarded in a new way: with irony, without innocence" (Eco 1994, 76). These sentences could well apply to the picture book *Esterhazy*. Enzensberger, Dische and Sowa have emancipated themselves from the avant-gard-idea of breaking the fairy tale's magic spell or abolishing such cute figures of the children books like the rabbit that ever since Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* is a standard classic of this genre. Instead they play ironically with the conventions of the genre, whereby the interaction and contrast between the words and the images are of essential importance. Michael Sowa's illustrations steal the innocence of the quaint anthropomorphic cosmos and visually emphasize the ironic associations. So *Esterhazy* is a good example for a moderate postmodern tendency of picture book art as described in David Lewis' study from 2001, *Reading contemporary picture books*.

In a certain sense *Aufstand der Tiere* by Jörg Steiner and Jörg Müller belongs to the same category, although considering the form and the content it seems to be more radical. This in part is due to the fact that the Swiss authors come from a different tradition of the picture book, we can call it influenced by enlightenment, which is pedagogically motivated and in its modern appearance critical of society and of the media. In *Aufstand der Tiere* the intertextual references are accompanied by aberrations from the conventional form of narration using metafictional elements and narrative ambiguities. In *Aufstand der Tiere* several sometimes contradictory stories are presented, wherein the use of paratextual elements is of eminent importance for the content. However it is not intended to destroy any narrative order, but to deconstruct conventional story-telling that would lead to the one and only logical plot that remains conclusive. "This book appears to contain a number of stories that do not occur at the same time" is what David Macaulay wrote on the cover of his picture book *Black and White* (1990) - a description which could just as well appear on the cover of *Aufstand der Tiere*.

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