Immigrant song: nostalgic tensions in Shaun Tan's The Arrival

Abstract

Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* is a wordless surrealistic tale of a migrant coming to a new and unfamiliar land, drawn in sepia tones and showing a rich retro-futuristic imaginary.

It is therefore a very interesting and peculiar example of a migration graphic narrative, which enjoyed a large critical and commercial success. Comments on the work notably praised the nostalgic allure of its pencil drawings, the author's vivid imagination and the self-proclaimed 'universal' appeal of the tale recounted.

By investigating the book following three directions (referring to the style, structure and motifs present in the text), this essay will discuss the visual and (inter)textual strategies Tan's text adopts to prompt in its reader a nostalgia based on the migration theme; it will reflect on the symbolic value of Tan's visual imaginary; finally, it will question the purported universality of Tan's story.

Keywords

Article

The Arrival (2006, from now on referred as *TA*) begins with a man parting from his wife and daughter, leaving his homeland - haunted by an obscure menace – in order to emigrate to a foreign place, where his family will eventually join him. After a journey by train and by boat, he will get there, struggling at first to communicate, missing his family and his motherland in every single moment of his life there, but ultimately finding a job and adjusting to his new reality. Having finally managed to settle in, he will at last reunite with his family, that will reach him in their new homeplace. The story ends with the man's daughter having grown so accustomed to her new reality to be able to give information to a newly arrived young woman, as disoriented as the man was at the beginning of the book.

By investigating the book following three directions (referring to the style, structure and motifs present in the text), this essay will discuss the visual and (inter)textual strategies Tan's text adopts to prompt in its reader a nostalgia based on the migration theme; it will

reflect on the symbolic value of Tan's visual imaginary; finally, it will question the purported universality of Tan's story.

Shaun Tan purportedly wanted to tell "a universal tale that is both real and abstract" (Tan 2010, 6) about migration, and to do so he wrote a wordless narrative entirely drawn in pencils, whose surrealist world is adorned with an unintelligible written language that put its protagonist and reader at the same level, that is, being incapable to fully grasp the new and strange reality they are facing. The story is set in an unidentified place and time, and none of the characters has a name (that we know of). Furthermore, Tan clothes his protagonist in a Western attire, thus shifting "the locus of difference" from his figure to the surroundings, "from the perspective of the insider or the native in the new country, to that of the immigrant himself, to whom often the everyday objects of life in the new country can appear 'different' and alienating" (Banerjee 2016a, 55).

The tale of the protagonist is mirrored in several micronarratives of other migrants he meets in the new land, told in flashbacks interwoven to the main story; everybody seems sad to have left their own homeland, but everybody was escaping from some miserable or dangerous situation. This follows Tannock's idea of nostalgia as a 'rhetoric' divided in three tropes: a prelapsarian world or golden age; a lapse, fall or catastrophe; and a postlapsarian world (that is, the present) (1995, 454). Although we are never shown the world they inhabited before tragedy struck, all the migrants seem to miss their homeland with such a fervent feeling that we cannot help but share their deep affection towards their birthplace, and indeed picture in our head a somehow idyllic place where those people used to live happily.

Now, what is nostalgia, if not "a bittersweet longing for former times and spaces" (Niemeyer 2014: 1), a "composite feeling of loss, lack and longing" that can be at the same time "melancholic and utopian" (Pickering and Keightley 2006: 921)?

This is not only a rhetorical question, for, as Sprengler notes, in the Eighteen century, when the nostalgic feeling was booming, it mainly acted as a coping mechanism able to make modernity inhabitable: "it relieved the anxieties generated by progress, the swift loss of a way of life and traditional ways of interacting with the world" (2009: 15).

It is perhaps necessary to add an explanation and a consideration: first, that the fact that a growing number of people were in a particular moment of history experiencing the same

feeling was in partly due to the fact that that feeling didn't properly exist before. Nostalgia, in fact, had not always been a thing; it started to be diagnosed as a medical condition with very physical symptoms in the late 17th century and only completed its switch from psychological disease to bittersweet emotion in the course of the 20th century[1]. Of course, as anyone familiar with the debate over the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis knows, the absence of the concept of nostalgia does not imply the absolute lack of the correspondent feeling, but its presence in the collective discourse inevitably multiplied the number of those who perceived it.

More interestingly for our analysis, what follows from Sprengler's words is the function of nostalgia as a copying mechanism against the loss of one's traditional way of interacting with the world – that is, exactly the kind of disorienting condition that migrants face.

Now, when a narrative aims to convey a nostalgic feeling into its reader/viewer, it has several ways to do so. It may rely on thematic elements, staging the spatio-temporal displacement of its character(s) (exactly what happens in *TA*) and/or recurring to several motifs that resonate on the idea of longing for the past; it may opt for stylistic choices that help convey a feeling of pastness and yearning for a bygone time; and it may use structural features that reinforce the nostalgic elements[2].

Of course, not every one of these features has to be present, and if so, to be at its maximum degree, in order to obtain a nostalgic effect on the reader; it is rather the holistic outcome of a combination of some of those factors. For example, one can already object from what we said until now that the absence of dialogues – thus, of a verbal narrator who may be able to steer the unfolding of the events towards a nostalgic emplotment - should in theory weaken the nostalgic potential of the story; yet, as I will try to show, the book manages

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[1] For a brief, but detailed, history of nostalgia, see Starobinski (1966).
[2] For an analysis that exemplifies how graphic novels may act out these narrative strategies, see Busi Rizzi (2018).

nonetheless to prompt a bittersweet longing in the reader in reason of its other features.
<mark>Let us, then, consider the specific characteristics of Tan's work.</mark>

Style 1: a surrealist family photo album

As an object, *TA* has a very distinctive design, reminding of a worn leather cover of a photo album dedicated to the immigrant's journey. The 'photograph' on the cover depicts the protagonist (which looks significantly similar, if not identical, to Tan himself) with his most distinguishing features: he wears his hat, carries his suitcase (I will return on these objects in the course of this analysis) and has a puzzled look. He is looking at what will become his companion animal, one of the weird figures that populate the new world he is going to live in. The perspective of the image, the moment it depicts, though, are far different from the ones a picture would have if it was taken by somebody; on the contrary, they declare the fictional status of the story we are about to read by staging a ubiquitous observer on a supposedly intimate moment of the immigrant's life.

Fig. 1. The sixty "photographs" in the inside cover (© Lothian Children's Books, an imprint of Hachette Australia, 2006)

On the contrary, the inside front and back covers realistically depict the same series of sixty different faces, looking straight to the viewer (one is tempted to say, 'to the camera')

in a disposition strongly reminiscent of a collection of passport photos. The people portrayed have different age, gender and ethnicity; some of the 'photos' look more worn out than others. All the drawings are based on photographs of migrants on their arrival at Ellis Island (Tan 2010, 12), except one, which is a sketch of a passport photo of Tan's father when he was younger and moved to Australia (Nabizadeh 2014b, 369). This way (and all throughout the graphic novel), Tan roots its narrative in real history and "transplants themes and images from post-World War I narratives of migration to the United States" in order to "re-historicise those narratives into new and de-familiarising relations with one another" (Nabizadeh 2014b, 370). Furthermore, Dony holds that through this double page Tan highlights the relation between personal and familial/collective, mixing the personal with the historical and "his (post)memory with that of other people" (2012b, 253).

Therefore, the pages introduce both the theme of multiculturalism and that of immigration. Bradford observes on this matter that the subjects depicted

> look out of the page seriously, tentatively, even fearfully. None of them smiles; the very formality of the page's arrangement emphasizes the ways in which individuals' narratives, emotions and sufferings are afforded no space in bureaucratic systems where migrants and refugees must pass the tests of documentation and scrutiny before they are admitted into the ranks of citizens. (2011a, 29)

Fig. 2. The stained, yellowed "documents" with stamps and seals(© Lothian Children's Books, an imprint of Hachette Australia, 2006)

This sense of the importance of the bureaucracy is reinforced by the title page, which looks like a yellowed, stained document, showing some kinds of stamp and seal, written in the same obscure language that will return in the course of the book. The pages bear the signs of time as they show "faux defects, foxing, stains, rips, creases and partial erasure" (Nabizadeh 2014b, 369), what looks like a stamp and a forged inspection card dated 23 March 1912. This is, very significantly, the only chronological indication in the whole book, subtly hidden in the very first pages; yet it is enough to establish a firmer connection to reality, via a classic literary device - that is, the resort to the authenticity value of the stained immigration documents, remindful of "all that stand between individuals and the oblivion and despair of refugee camps or prisons" (Bradford 2011a, 29).

The theme of unfamiliarity and estrangement and that of the passing of time are very evident as well, establishing a dialectic between past/present and familiar/unfamiliar that reminds of what Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer call 'points of memory', able to link "past and present, memory and postmemory, individual remembrance and collective

recall" (2006, 237). If the documents suggest the pole of unfamiliarity, the family album format may be read as a 'trope of familiality' (Dony 2012a, 90), which "anchors, individualizes, and reembodies the free-floating disconnected and disorganized feelings of loss and nostalgia" (Hirsch 2008, 120).

Style 2: lines, colours, and framings

On the stylistic level, what strikes most of *TA*'s pages is the use of soft graphite pencil – chosen "because it allows for such editing, erasure and re-drawing" (Tan 2010, 42) – and the colour scheme that derives, borrowing both from the aesthetic of old movies and photographic albums (Nabizadeh 2014b, 368). "The use of sepia", observes Nabizadeh, "evokes a nostalgic register that complicates the relation between past and present" (2014b, 368), reminding of the melancholic recollection the migrant operates on her own past. It must be observed that the colour palette is not as stable as it may seem, acquiring more sombre tones in the (accordingly darker) secondary storylines, whose intericonic spaces vary from white to grey to black, and opting for warmer or colder hues following the distress of the protagonist, with the result that the last pages are both warmer and lighter than those preceding.

For what concerns the choices of framing and perspective, the generally high level of iconicity (almost photo-realistic) is modulated by the surrealistic elements that populate the world of *TA*. This dialectic between lack of referents and abundance of details is one of the keys that prompts the reader to re-read *TA*, focusing on details that may have been missed at a first glance. This is reinforced by the use of sequencing techniques that "mimic the cinematic mode, including the use of establishing shots, zooms and wide-focus pans" (Nabizadeh 2014b, 368). The clearest example of this strategy happens twice, during the boat sequence and just after the man has settled in his new house, and it's a gradual zoom out from him to the larger picture, meaning that the protagonist is part of a bigger network of people in a similar situation[3].

This message works together with the invitation to browse the narrative through several re-readings and with the action of narrative gaps that enhance the reader's involvement,

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[3] Hateley rightfully comments that "the man's continued connection with his family and the reader's connection with him is both challenged and reinforced by these scales of space and of isolation" (2015, 76).

resulting in her projection of her personal and familiar experience, of her own nostalgic drive, into the story.

Structure 1: estrangement, focalization, adjustment

The story starts with the departure of the protagonist from his family home, towards the new country he goes to live in. There, both him and the reader will experience a strong sense of estrangement that Tan realizes through a particular form of what Shklovsky called defamiliarization, having to confront with an imaginary language that is alien and undecipherable. Nabizadeh observes in this sense that "the pictographic language engenders a point of narrative frisson between the text and reader, as the reader's encounter with this unknown alphabet rehearses dilemmas that migrants face in negotiating a new system of signification" (2014b, 367). One should notice in this sense how *TA*'s wordless narrative is in fact "quite noisy", more aptly just "semi-silent", for there are "many signs, advertisements and notes pervading the landscapes of the Nameless Land" (Dony 2012a, 97). The dialectic between this abundance of signs and the absence of dialogues manages, thus, to reinforce the themes of "melancholic loss" and "ontological disorientation" (Nabizadeh 2014b, 366).

Not only the language, though, but the animals, the food, the objects of the new land are strange and unfamiliar. Tan hence inverts "the paradigms of familiarity and difference", putting the reader's perspective close to that "the immigrant to whom the new city appears strange, alienating and even fantastical" (Banerjee 2016a, 53), so that she shares the protagonist's puzzlement. The narrative is (cognitively) focalized on the main character so that we know what he knows and ignore what he ignores, and only at a second reading we can orient ourselves in advance. In this way, as Tan affirms, "*we* are the new arrival, only able to decipher meaning and value from visual images, object relationships and human gestures, and then only by making creative associations. Imagination here is more useful than any knowledge" (Tan 2010, 31).

Tan purportedly intended this interactive function to take place thanks to the gaps that characterize comics narrative. As he affirms,

> The last part of drawing often involves simplifying an image, so that such feelings are quite clear and uncomplicated. This usually involves erasing extraneous details, allowing more 'gaps' and 'gutters', reinstating a certain mystery, and that will allow

another reader to conjure and invest some personal memories of their own. The absent spaces in a work allow it to be more adaptable that way. The reader has many opportunities to breathe their own life back into it. (Tan in Nabizadeh 2014a, 363-64)

In an interview with the author, Nabizadeh observes that this kind of structure reproduces the gappy workings of the process of remembering and forgetting, and Tan comments that "a lot of fiction seems to me an attempt to combat the fading of memory, or at least it tries to identify and strengthen those remembered experiences that seem important" (in Nabizadeh 2014a, 363).

This is probably one of the reasons why the book is so effective in depicting a "universal tale that is both real and abstract", and why so many immigrants have shown a high level of identification with the events depicted. The shadows of a monstrous tentacle, some giants drawing in people from the streets[4], child labour and war are abstract but transcultural metaphors of a condition of misery and sufferance, maybe easier to identify with than a most specific and detailed story. Tan comments in this sense that

> I know from emails, letters and comments that readers who are migrants often see their own story as very present within the pages of the book […] [T]hat might be due to the fact that my images of a fictional world are quite non-specific, both strange and a little metaphorical. […] So, for instance, when my character encounters a strange object, the main feeling is the strangeness, the object itself is not important […] similar feelings from other contexts, and memories are triggered […] my book is very much a kind of empty vessel, without much story or detail, so it invites the readers to fill a lot of empty spaces with their own thoughts and memories. [It] adds a sense of narrative coherence to memories of real experience (in Bjartveit and Panayotidis 2014, 249-50)

In the course of the graphic novel, the protagonist manages to adjust to his new reality, and we do the same. In fact, if the disorienting effect of the text "reminds the reader of their dependence on the written word for security and authority when it comes to

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[4] Tan affirms on this purpose that the scene elicits "a feeling of weird horror, not unlike a 1950s science fiction story" (2010, 40). While commenting the realization stages, he states that he started by taking a picture of himself over a cardboard city, then "edited my photographs digitally, replaced the cardboard city with images of Florentine architecture, printed this out and began drawing over the top of it. After several redrafts, and in spite of its initial absurdity, the image developed some semblance of a 'real' event, reminiscent of Nazi book burning and industrialised genocide" (2010, 40).

meaning" (Tan 2010, 10), the multimodality functioning of comics gradually naturalizes the obstacle, encouraging a re-reading that through the visual features will cast a different, more familiar light on the same events and contexts, while allowing the reader to better appreciate the rich details of the image. This healing function of images over words is staged *en abyme* in a self-reflexive move by the two times when the protagonist lacks the words to make himself understood, and resorts instead to drawing his needs (food and a bed), embodying the transformative, remedial power of art. Tan observes on this behalf that

> When other communications fail, my character resorts to sketching objects in a notebook that he carries everywhere: drawings of a room, a loaf of bread, even an abbreviation of his homeland in simple outlines. It's no coincidence that the main character in *The Arrival* looks like me: I used myself as a reference model out of convenience, but there's also a self-reflexive comment here on the role of an illustrator as storyteller, where some ideas can only be expressed through a silent language of images." (2010, 31)

Fig. 3. Braiding: the first page of (respectively) the first and the sixth chapter of the story (© Lothian Children's Books, an imprint of Hachette Australia, 2006)

The adjustment of the protagonist to his new reality is shown by making resort to braiding and iconic solidarity (Groensteen 2007), that is, to inter-panel relations of visual resemblance.

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The book opens to a series of domestics images connoting "safety and security" (Banerjee 2016a, 55): a bird origami (the figure will return throughout all the book, and I will discuss it soon); a clock, symbolizing the passing of time; a hung hat as a referent for the protagonist; a pot, a teapot and a cup, as metaphors for domesticity; a child drawing and a family portrait; and an open suitcase, full of stuff, to signify the impending leaving. These objects will be "contrasted in the rest of the novel with images of the unfamiliar, the mechanistic and the fantastical" (Banerjee 2016a, 53), and will be treasured by the protagonist of the story as the embodiment of his lost home. Nonetheless, towards the end of the book, we will find another page with nine panels, occupied by the new world's version of the first scene's objects[5], only now naturalised to the eyes of the protagonist and the reader. This disposition signifies the acquired familiarity of the protagonist and his relatives to the new reality, and is reinforced by the following page, that reproduces with a difference the scene of the main character at the dining table. Here, the different lighting of the panel, the presence of the whole family joint together (in the first image the daughter was absent) and the house animal, the smiling faces, all stands to prove that the new reality is not hostile anymore, and the life they went out looking for paid out as being happier than the one they had.

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[5] Duyvendak reminds us that "when they establish homes away from home, immigrants often recreate places that look and smell, at least to a certain extent, like the places they left behind" (2011a, 31). Khailova adds that the result of that repetition with a difference is to convey "a fractured, polyvalent self, with the portrayed subject taking on an identity characterised by multiplicity and blending" (2015, 12).

Fig. 4. Braiding: family scene at the table (© Lothian Children's Books, an imprint of Hachette Australia, 2006)

Structure 2: inspirations and intertextual references

Being a second-generation immigrant (his father, who is of Chinese ancestry, arrived in Australia from the native Malaysia), Tan stands "at a 'point of juncture or maybe disjuncture' between the cultural heritage of his parents, their double consciousness and his own interstitial space for identity reinvention beyond national definitions" (Dony 2012a, 88)[6].

He infuses *TA* with this feeling, and it is not a case that most of his research was done on migration: in several occasions, included an "Artist's Note" at the end of *TA*, Tan mentioned his inspirations and sources, that range from "old museum photographs of migrants stepping from ships" pinned to his wall (Tan, in Earle 2016, 11) to documents of immigrants arriving to New York from 1892 to 1954, many of which pertain to the

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[6] Asian Australian writers in particular, Ommundsen notes, often draw their inspiration from the personal histories she labels 'boat stories', meaning "the frequently traumatic experience of upheaval, conflict, and hardship which accompany the prelude to migration, the migrant passage, and the difficult process of integrating in a new and different environment" (2011, 507).

collection of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum; from "anecdotal stories told by migrants of many different countries and historical periods" (Tan 2006) to the books *The Immigrants* by Wendy Lowenstein and Morag Loh (1977) and *Tales from a Suitcase* by Will Davies and Andrea Dal Bosco (2001); from T.A.G. Hungerford's (1997) short story *Wong Chu and the Queen's Letterbox* to the wordless picture book classic *The Snowman* by Raymond Briggs (1978).

Now, the act of quoting other works, especially in the form of pastiche, is one of the main strategies to prompt a nostalgic feeling in the reader. It works especially well, of course, when the reader is aware of the work that is being mentioned, but it manages nonetheless to more subtly infuse a sense of pastness into the way an image is built.

Tan continuously resorts to this kind of strategy in the course of the book. He mentions as an inspiration for the mood of his work Vittorio De Sica's film *The Bicycle Thief* (1948) (but one is also reminded of Chaplin's *Modern Times*, 1936) and on the visual level *Los Caprichos* by *Goya* (1799) (Tan 2010, 16), "the surrealist collages of Max Ernst" (Tan 2010, 5), Gustave Dore's engraving *Over London by Rail* (circa 1870) (Tan 2006), "a 1912 photograph of a newsboy announcing the Titanic sinking, picture postcards of New York from the turn of the century, photographs of-street scenes from post-war Europe" (Tan 2006) - and we may add for example Alfred Stieglitz' iconic photo *The Steerage* (1907). As for the composition of the images, he affirms of having borrowed "some stylistic elements found in religious paintings of the Italia Renaissance: certain kinds of lighting, character gestures and fixed-point perspective. My own drawings also observe something of the symbolism found in these paintings, as they are often full of allegorical objects" (Tan 2010, 42).

Most of all, thought, this visual strategy is evident in two quotes-via-pastiche. The first one refers to Tom Roberts' *Coming South* (1886, erroneously quoted in *TA* as *Going South*), which is reverted from its original depiction of "middle-class passengers travel[ling] from Europe to Australia" (Bradford 2011a, 29) in which people are "fashionably dressed and relaxed" (Ommundsen 2011, 505) to a typical picture of the uneasiness of migration travels, where the migrants "cover themselves in shawls and huddle against hostile elements" (Ommundsen 2011, 505). Here the protagonist sits,

isolated, on the deck of the ship, next to his luggage, a position that "speaks of the absence of those he loves, his wife and daughter" (Bradford 2011a, 30).
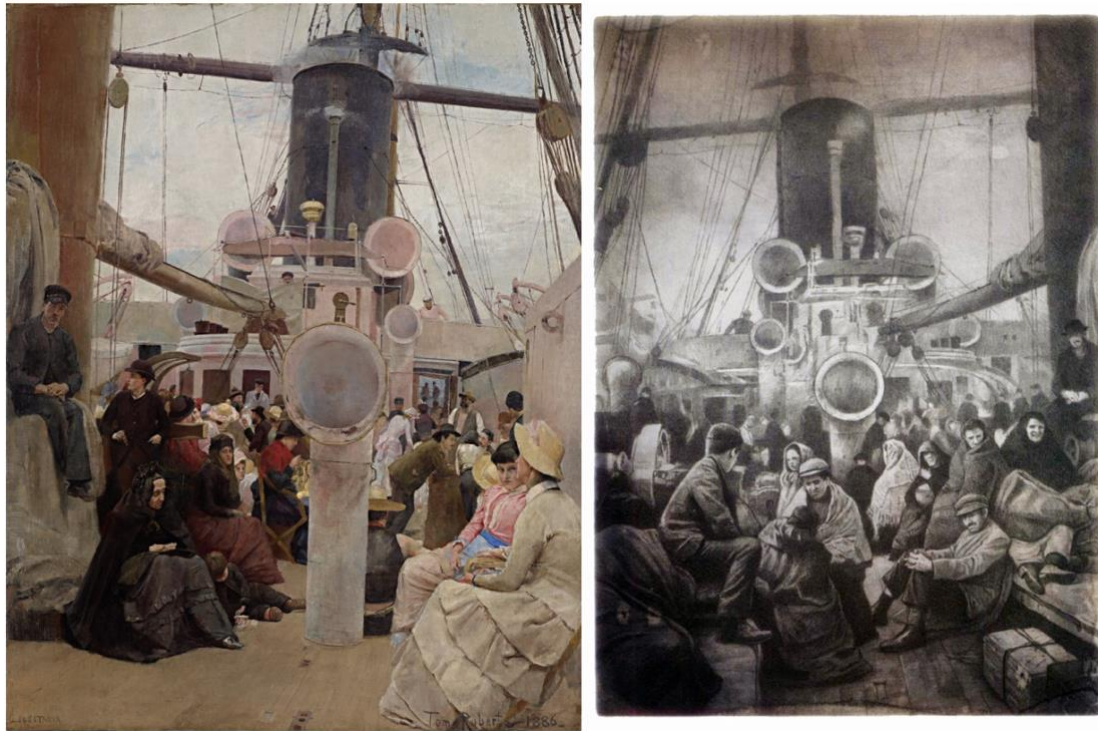
Fig. 5. Pastiche: Tom Roberts' *Coming South* (1886) and Tan's panel (© Lothian Children's Books, an imprint of Hachette Australia, 2006)

The second one comes from the repository of photographs held at Ellis Island in New York. Preceded in the book by the image of a harbour with two gigantic statues greeting each other (clearly reminiscing of the Statue of Liberty), it shows the Registry Room (or 'Great Hall') of Ellis Island as it was captured in an iconic photograph taken some time between 1907 and 1912, itself transfigured into the surrealist design that connotes Tan's imaginative setting.

Motifs: boats, birds, photos, suitcases

Moreover, as Dony observes, Tan's narrative develops a whole thematic vocabulary hinting to spatial and temporal displacement (2012a, 86). This is realized on the one hand by making the protagonist meet people who were themselves migrants to that land and

who consequently share his sense of loss[7], and on the other by staging a world which has no exact time referent, but whose absence of technology from the second half of the 20th century returns a clear nostalgic allure. All the vehicles in the story, every technological tool, share a *passé*, quasi-steampunk imaginary which make them at the same time aged, timeless (for none of them actually existed) and retrofuturistic, enabling readers to "recognise turn-of-the-century locomotives, steamships, and rustic kitchens" (Khailova 2015, 5) yet projecting those items, in Nabizadeh's words, to "a spatio-temporal realm that is not 'over', or indeed may never have happened" (2014b, 369). This encapsulates in the exploration of the past a movement towards another dimension – elsewhere, maybe in the future – a tension which is consubstantial to Svetlana Boym's idea of the 'future-past' of nostalgia, where nostalgia aims to "the unrealized dreams of the past and visions of the future that became obsolete" (2001, xvi).

Several visual motifs reinforce the theme of time passing as well, bonding it with that of migration and the collective experience it entails[8].

The recurrent use of the boat imagery, for example, has the function of "bearing witness to the pasts of other migrants", functioning "as a fluid spatio-temporal signifier engaging with a variety of dislocated people from different historical periods" (Dony 2012a, 93).
In general, Tan frequently moves from the personal to the collective dimension (a dialectic which is structurally consubstantial to nostalgia), as when the journey of the ship to the new land is taken on symbolically by the splash page of a cloud that is re-proposed, in the following double page, in sixty different panels depicting (in an intentionally cryptic way) sixty different perspectives of the same cloud, or sixty different clouds, or sixty different forms assumed by the same cloud. Be as it may, this layout is also most significantly consonant with that of the sixty portraits of migrants in the cover-flaps; this suggests that braiding here "works towards a polyphonic understanding of diasporic fiction and conveys a chorus of migrants' memories", engaging a reference to "other

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[7] Nabizadeh affirms that this shows how "communities can be alternatively constituted through discourses of social vulnerability" (2014b, 367).
[8] To the motifs I will describe here, all connected with the theme of time passing and nostalgia, one may add the snake-like shaped forms, initially "linked to oppressive threat, disaster and death" (Khailova 2015, 7). See Khailova (2015, 7-8) for an acute discussion of their meaning and use.

migrants' histories, pasts, and (re)locations" (Dony 2012b, 252-53). This is stressed by the absence of the focalizer in the panels, whereas usually Tan includes his characters in the scenes they are perceiving.

Analogously, Nabizadeh underlines the role of birds as "product of the migrant's melancholic grip on the past", exploring "the social, familial and political losses of the migrant's journey" (2014b, 371, 370). If, on one side, that of the bird is a well-established metaphor for migration (2014b, 374), on the other the sequence that sees the bird making its nest in a pot in the bedroom of the protagonist and later feeding its baby birds is juxtaposed with the whole sequence of the man adjusting to his new reality and finally reuniting with his family, underlining the familial motif of the narrative (Banerjee 2016b, 411). Moreover, the bird is also an established symbol of hope, and this resonates in the role of the origami bird the man makes for his daughter, folding the letter he writes to his family in the same shape and receiving a response in a similar form[9].

Two objects, though, carry on most of the symbolical weight of the motifs in the story: the recurring photos and the ubiquitous suitcase(s).
Tan's protagonist carries with him in his new home the family portrait we saw in the first page, after having packed it with care. It shows the three of them looking directly at the camera in what is probably a studio. As it is common with pictures from the first half of the Twentieth century, it is a staged photo, not "capturing a fleeting moment of interaction" but instead showing a "very formal, contrived and posed" posture (Banerjee 2016a, 57). The photo also embodies a whole set of values of the narrative, for as Mikkonen observes not only the image draws the attention of the reader to the characters (who gaze directly at her), but the whole scene is seen "through the father's eyes":

> The subjective aspect of the viewpoint is revealed by the father's hand, which we see taking the picture from the shelf and packing it in his luggage. Besides the subjectivity of the gaze, the introduction of the portrait reveals the emotional intensity that accompanies all the later viewings of the image. (Mikkonen 2017, 162)

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[9] Tan also reflects that the avian theme explains the "drawing egg-like objects (including the white balloon), and other suggestions of flight and fertility" (2010, 24).

Hirsch affirms that photography is the election medium of postmemory, connecting individual to collective memory through a vocabulary of 'affiliation' (2008, 115). In *TA*, this portrait "functions as a stand-in for the family during the protagonist's immigrant experience" (Banerjee 2016a, 57)[10]. When the man finds a place, one of the first things he does is to hang the picture on the wall "and look at it longingly as he remembers his wife and daughter" (2016a, 59).

Photographs and drawings are also used as thresholds for the embedded stories of the secondary characters, that start by zooming in or out into a picture and are characterized by a darker tone than the sepia of the rest of the story. Photos thus act as connecting devices to their memory-stories, depicted "in a series of distinct meta-panels" (Nabizadeh 2014b, 374). They also underline and reinforce "the sense in which all the panel images in Tan's book more or less resemble old black-and-white photographs" (Mikkonen 2017, 162), further drawing our attention to the pastness of the pages we are looking at and their affinity with a photo album.

The other key object in the story is the suitcase the man brings with him. Banerjee signals that for some time *TA* has even been available in a "deluxe limited collector's edition in the form of a suitcase, complete with leather handle and luggage tag" (2016a, 59). She further comments that

> Much has been written about suitcases as both material and metaphorical objects and their connection to trajectories of migration. Suitcases […] have a cartographic function of connecting places – where the migrant is from and where he is headed or has arrived. As suggested by Schlör, it signifies a lost home but also carries objects laden with the possibility of new homemaking. (2016a, 59).

The opening pages of *TA* see its protagonist packing his suitcase and parting from his wife and child, an act connected at the same time with one's own past and her future. Banerjee remarks that the suitcase carries with it "all the connotations of migration, intimacy, in-betweenness, portability, loss of home and rootlessness" (2016a, 59), working "as a memory container" (2016a, 59). This is also evident when the man unpacks

[10] Besides, as Hoskins observes, "the use of an icon, a concrete vehicle for our thoughts, is […] common across the divide of cultural differences" (1998, 190).

the suitcase and we see his mental projection of his family having dinner without him: here the suitcase most evidently embodies his home and the nostalgia the man feels for his relatives.

Towards the end of the book, after having reunited, the family's suitcase finally disappears, implying that their journey is over and their condition is finally stable. However, in another move from the singular to the collective, the novel closes on the image of the child giving indications to a new immigrant with her own suitcase, indicating the continuity and universality of the migration process.

Conclusion – a universal nostalgic tale?

Since its beginning, *TA* stages a double nostalgia. The first one is a thematic, diegetic one, felt by his protagonist towards his wife and child, that he had to leave momentarily in the place he escaped from, and that he is waiting to reunite to. At the same time, *TA* operates at the structural and stylistic levels in order to prompt and enhance a nostalgic reaction on the behalf of its reader. The self-proclaimed universality of its story, the weary look of the pages, the sepia colouring and the retro visual imagination concur in eliciting a nostalgic response from the reader.

Of course, that same universality may be questioned. First of all, because Tan occupies an unusual position in the cultural production about (post)memory and migration, as he counterposes a healing process to the more traumatic one of most historically attested immigration waves, and stages a utopian, ecumenic solidarity between migrants, well represented by the daughter of the protagonist helping a newly immigrated woman at the end of the book. This points to "a multicultural ideal which relies on deep interpersonal engagement between people of different cultures and languages rather than focusing on superficial aspects of cultural difference" (Bradford 2011b, 165). It may be read as an example of the changing potential implicit in nostalgia, despite distancing from many real-life accounts of migration. Banerjee nonetheless notices how this could also be interpreted as a weak spot of Tan's narrative, for

> all the suffering is rooted firmly in the pasts of these characters and in another time
> and space. The space of the adopted country is a welcoming and safe space, albeit
> full of the unfamiliar. Thus, it is possible to interpret Tan's novel as a naive

representation of an idealised multicultural society in which people of vastly different races, experiences and backgrounds live harmoniously together united by what they all have in common – deep and painful suffering in the past. (Banerjee 2016a, 54)

The second point concerns more closely the supposed universal character of the story, which Tan emphasises whenever he has the occasion. If true to a certain extent, it is evident how this is also a strategy that aims to counterbalance the aspects of Tan's story which are not universal at all: migrant stories do not always have happy endings, and many children of migrants never succeed in finding their place in their new homes.

Thirdly, Tan chooses as a protagonist a white male, suggesting "privileging a Western readership" and creating "a representation of immigrants that exists in stark contrast to multiracial, multiethnic immigrants of recent immigration trends"[11] (Boatright 2010, 471).

The question that remains open, then, is if in the rosy glow of *TA*'s nostalgia the consolatory, escapist appeal wins over the healing, projecting potential. Tan's work stands in a delicate balance between the two forces, and this ambiguity is maybe part of its large appeal.

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[11] Quite on the contrary, Khailova praises the way Tan's story "promotes the nomadic subject as defined by Rosi Braidotti —a fractured, polyvalent form of self not tied to a specific nation, place or ideology" (2015, 1). See Oppolzer (2016) for a detailed discussion of the two perspectives.

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