



Dislocation and Home Space in Shaun Tan's *The Lost Thing*

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Abstract

In this paper, I would deal with the Australian artist and author Shaun Tan's picture book *The Lost Thing* published in 2000. *The Lost Thing* is a story about a 'thing' that is lost in a place where it does not belong. The human – protagonist and the narrator of the story spots the "lost thing" near a beach while enjoying his bottle – cap collection. The narrator feels that the thing is out of place and the entire story is his attempt to find its owner or return it back to the place it has come from. He seeks help from various people, sources and also from government agencies to take it back to its home. He ultimately succeeds in sending it home which happens to be a utopic land for lost things. I aim to interpret *The Lost Thing* from the perspectives of Diasporic Studies and while doing so, I will focus on the themes of dislocation and the concept of 'home' space. As the 'thing' undergoes dislocation, it experiences a plurality in its idea of home, suffers psychological anxieties and most importantly, its identity crises. The text shows how the characters treat the foreign 'thing' with contempt, intolerance and fear. Therefore, in this paper, I would also deal with the problems of belonging and othering, issues of identities, aspects of alienation, and acculturation of a displaced character. Tan's use of words runs parallel to his images yet they are intricately interconnected to each other by another language which remains invisible, unread and unspoken. Set in a steam-punkish world, the references drawn from the various illustrations, print references, painters and famous paintings alludes to the various social, political and the historical contexts of the 1980s in a suburban city of Australia. My aim is to unearth such unexplained, underlying contexts in my paper.

Keywords: Picture books, Diaspora, Dislocation, Home, Belonging, Identity.



The theme of belonging is central to the story *The Lost Thing*ⁱ. The question of where one comes from becomes central to the issue of belongingness. Dislocation is one of the reasons that generate identity crisis in an individual who is haunted by the question of where she/he really belongs. A conflict between whether to relocate to the ‘homeland’ or to stay in the host country that could give him/her security and comfort is prominent throughout the story. The analysis of how majority and minority are constructed in the society builds the notion of ‘otherness.’ This directly depends upon the power structures. Usually, it is considered that identities are innate, something that we are born with. From the sociological point of view, identities are constructed by the society. It is the social identity that reflects the way an individual or a group internalizes the social discourses and social categories, such as their cultural or ethnic identities, gender and class identities and so on. These social categories are, in fact, responsible for shaping our thoughts about ourselves or how we want to be seen by the others, and most importantly, how we belong to a particular group. The ideas of similarity and difference (dissimilarity) are very crucial in building our sense of identities and social belonging. In *Modernity and Ambivalence*ⁱⁱ, Zygmunt Bauman discusses how the idea of ‘otherness’ is fundamental in establishing identity in society. The concept is further clarified by Dr. Zuleyka Zevallosⁱⁱⁱ goes on to argue in her article named “What is Otherness?”^{iv} that identities are set up as dichotomies.

These dichotomies build up the tension in Shaun Tan’s *The Lost Thing* which is “A tale for those who have more important things to pay attention to.” Shaun Tan is an Australian writer and illustrator of a number of picture books like *The Rules of Summer* (2013), *Tales from the Inner City* (2018), *Cicada* (2018), *The Singing Bones* (2015) to name a few. He is the receiver of the Academy award for the Best Animated Short film *The Lost Thing* in 2011 which is the film adaptation of *The Lost Thing* (2000). His interaction of illustrations powerfully reflects the real world as more real than surreal. Tan’s father is Chinese. Tan’s grandparents migrated to Malaysia from China. His mother, on the other hand, is an Australian of English and Irish ancestry. His great-grandfather was sent to Australia as an orphan child with no background records. Belonging to a family which is culturally and racially hybrid, Tan has been able to explore several contemporary issues in his works. The theme of dislocation stands out in most of them. The dislocated characters undergo periods of anxieties and inhabit ambivalent and unstable identities. Such issues of immigration, dislocation and re-rooting are represented in his highly acclaimed



graphic novel *The Arrival* (2006), and many of his picture books, one of them being *The Lost Thing*.

Written in the form of a recount of an incident that occurred one day in the life of the protagonist, it is the story that “happened a few summers ago.”^vIn order to make the narrative more personal and authentic, Shaun Tan employs the use of handwritten text. The protagonist is the symbolic representation of a city dweller that has the curiosity and innocence of a child. In the entire journey of the text, he undergoes a growth which ultimately turns him into a stereotypical city dweller whose inspiration of childhood is lost to the adult pragmatism and cynicism. The narrator–protagonist tells the reader a story of how he spotted a “thing” on the beach, while he was tirelessly working on his bottle-top collection. It was lying there on the beach among dirt and waste. Shaun Tan in his commentary on *The Lost Thing* had described the strange-looking lost thing in the following words, as looking like a strange amalgamation of “a red pebble crab, a small round crustacean with claws that hinge vertically”^{vi} and had a “look of an old-fashioned pot-bellied stove, with a big lid on top instead of a mouth.”^{vii} The protagonist does not ever give it a name or a textual description, but treats it as an object, and ‘dehumanises’ it even though it bears distinct animal features. He is a little surprised at the fact that nobody notices the weird, sad and lost-looking thing in such a populated place. He assumes that may be the people are too busy doing other things on the beach. He was curious about things which just looked “out of place.”^{viii} It obviously did not belong there. They played most of the afternoon but nobody came to take it home, nobody claimed it, nobody even came to rescue it. Nobody seemed to be interested in it. Hence, the protagonist was certain that “it was lost.”^{ix}He took the thing to his friend, Pete, who, after some investigation declares that the thing does not belong to anyone; that it was “just plain lost.”^x Ultimately, the protagonist decides to take it to his home. They did not even notice it initially. Much to his disappointment, he found that even his parents were equally not interested in it. They were more worried about its filthy feet or diseases it might have brought with itself. They demanded it to be taken back to where it came from. The narrator was left with no choice but to hide it in their back shade. He was surprised to find the thing eating Christmas decorations (which is associated with happiness and warmth). The narrator decides to take the thing to the “Departments of Odds and Ends”^{xi} (vide Illustration no.1 in Appendix), an agency that delivers odd things to where they belong; whose motive is “*sweepus underum carpetae*” or “sweeps under the carpet”. On seeing



the pile of obligatory forms (as legal proceedings), the lost thing “made a small, sad noise”^{xii}. The place seemed dark, mysterious and secret in a tall grey building having no windows. At this very juncture, a strange looking creature comes carrying a cleaning mop and a bucket to clean the filth that is being driven away. It then hands over to the narrator “a business card with a kind of sign on it”^{xiii}. The card describes the directions which led to the door to their destination. On pressing a big red buzzer, a large door opens which the lost thing approves of. To the narrator, it seems a happy place, with the sun shining and with many other odd-looking creatures, each looking different from one another, yet seeming happy together (vide Illustration no.2 in Appendix). The narrator, however, thinks about the lost thing whenever he sees something with a weird, sad, lost look. He realises that he sees them “less and less these days. May be there aren’t many lost things around anymore. Or maybe I have stopped noticing them. Too busy doing other stuff, I guess.”^{xiv} He shows similar disinterestedness and passivity towards the strange objects just like the other people do.

In *The Lost Thing*, words and images run parallel, often connected to each other by another language which remains invisible, unread or unspoken. “The real significance of the story lies in the space that the individual reader creates between the interrelation of the visual (illustrations) and the verbal (printed words), which together form the ‘holistic text’ of the book.”^{xv} Tan’s aspiration as an illustrator, presents to his readers, ideas that are essentially silent, unexplained and open to very broad interpretation. Sometimes, Shaun Tan’s graphic delineations are the only reading materials on the page, as he often refrains from explaining his pictorial depictions using words. Accordingly, the different parts of the text, the words and the images, create a synergy; since there is a gap between ‘telling’ and ‘showing’ to the readers. The readers’ imagination, as Tan claims, can complete the circuit, fill in the silent gaps.

Shaun Tan employs miscellaneous illustrations, surreal creatures, paper cut-outs and scientific figures, names and details in collage as a background to the text to impart unfamiliarity to a familiar world that creates another level of strangeness for the readers. Thus, unfamiliarity deepens the strangeness felt by the displaced creature. He also uses famous paintings as allusions to convey the psyche of the lost thing in a relatable manner, thus making the experience universal. The use of both familiar and unfamiliar signifiers creates a tension or a conflict of belonging and un-



belonging which looms large over the psyche of a displaced individual and raises the existential questions. The image in the title page of *The Lost Thing* (vide Illustration no. 3 in Appendix) is an allusion to *Cahill Expressway* (1962), a famous painting by the Australian artist Jeffrey Smart (vide Illustration no.4 in Appendix). In his painting a dislocated man, in a formal suit, seemingly lost stands at a corner of the motorway in inner Sydney. The lost thing, in the title page of Tan's book, stands on the same spot. He too seems to have been lost like the man in Smart's picture. The lifeless city landscape, with the tall concrete buildings at the backdrop, is invaded by a huge, red "thing" that signifies life, hope and possibilities. The "Red Creature" is an adaptation from Max Ernst's *Celebes* (1921) (vide Illustration no.5 and no.6 in Appendix).^{xvi} Shaun Tan draws allusion to other visual artists in the text. He mentions them at the top of the last page of the book. In an inverted small print reference, he draws apologies to Jeffrey Smart, Edward Hopper and John Brack. Tan evokes Brack's infamous *Collin St., 5pm* (1955) (vide Illustration no.7 and no.8 in Appendix) where the protagonist takes the lost thing into the city by a tram. The picture reflects the busy, routine life of the city dwellers walking down the street. No heads are turned, they all look the same. The intelligent use of brown, grey, ochre yellow and dash of black, reflects the grim and monotony of the inner scape of the city. Tan also alludes to American realist Edward Hopper's painting *Office at Night* (1940) (vide Illustration no.9 and no.10 in Appendix) which he recreates in the book at the Federal Department of Odds and Ends (Agency building). He also recreates another of Hopper's painting, *Rooms by the Sea* (1951) (vide Illustration no.11 and no.12 in Appendix) when the "lost thing" ultimately reaches the place where it belongs. Hopper's realist portrayals of the city landscapes often echo in Tan's text.

The Lost Thing is set in the steam punk-ish world of the historical 1980s (later decades of the twentieth century). The action of the story takes place in a suburban city of Australia. The cityscape is littered with factory pipes and steam powered machines rather than advanced technology. We also get a glimpse of the steam-punk vacuum cleaner when the protagonist first notices the lost thing on the beach. The canvas of the entire text is a bricolage of newspaper cuttings, physics and mathematics book pages, with equations and formulas, circuit diagrams, mechanical devices, etc. The main text had been handwritten in paper cut-outs. The mention of the Cathode-Ray television screen in one of the pages, and the tram alludes to the above time period. Tan comments,



Visually, the book is quite dense, which reflects the environment it depicts, having a sense of congestion and compression. There are no empty spaces on the pages, with all the images framed by a collage of text and diagrams cut from old physics and maths textbooks. These were used by my Dad when he was an Engineering student, and largely inspired much of the book's aesthetics; they add some sense of the dry and industrial world presented in the paintings, a sort of meaningless functionality – pointless and amusing also. There is an accidental 'poetry' that often occurs using collage, where a chapter heading in an Engineering manual might pass as an unconventional comment on life. The bottle-top collection, made from many beer bottle-tops (supplied by my house-mate), seems to perfectly sum up the universe in an abstract way – just right for an endpaper design.^{xvii}

The integration of image and text in *The Lost Thing* also takes us back to another significant part of Australia's history of passive intolerance; intolerance towards aliens, the Asian 'others'. The Gold Rush of the 1850s has resulted in the influx of a vast number of free immigrants from across the face of the world, especially Chinese and Asian (Pacific Islanders) immigrants. The Gold Rush has contributed to the overall development of the colonial settlement into a progressive city, ultimately contributing to the burgeoning economy. The number of Chinese immigrants increased so much that it created an alarm among the White settlers, politicians and miners. Many immigrants decided to stay back and integrate into the Australian community.

The Chinese people were particularly industrious, with their techniques that differed widely from the Europeans. This and their physical appearance and fear of the unknown led to them to being persecuted in a racist way that would be regarded as untenable today.^{xviii}

The Lost Thing tells the story of a passive resistance to xenophobia that was still rampant in White Australians in the 1980s. The story questions of "how an individual belongs to a society, balancing freedom and responsibility." The 'lost thing' represents the 'other' who has been physically and culturally displaced from home, just like the Asian immigrants.

Unsurprisingly, the claims that the Chinese introduced diseases and were a threat to women have been contested. Welch (2003) argues that the undesirable practices that were associated with the Chinese were already common on the gold fields. Small pox, for example, existed on the gold fields prior to the arrival of the Chinese, and immorality in the form of prostitution and child abuse was similarly apparent, including in England.^{xix}

The 'lost thing' has always been associated in the story with dirt and filth and diseases. The 'thing' was discovered on a beach amongst rubbles and thrown away objects, suggesting that it as an "accidental by-product of the industrial landscape, a sort of unconscious mutation, appearing on the beach as if 'washed up'."^{xx} The protagonist's mother is concerned more about the dirt and diseases the lost thing might carry with it. The parents are not interested in the lost thing. They are



more engaged in other important things. The displaced thing is marginalised throughout the story or being lost, for being out of place. It is being treated as a burden. Douglas in “Dirt and ‘Otherness’ in *The Lost Thing*” observes that the marginalised people are “somehow left out in the patterning of society... They may be doing nothing morally wrong, but their status is indefinable.”^{xxi} The text also criticises the economic rationalism of Australia after World War II.^{xxii} The text can also be read as an interpretation of

the transition from childhood to adulthood; about the value of whimsy, our obsession with categories and bureaucracy, about alienation, claustrophobia, altruism, disability, entropy and the possibilities of joy in places where this has been extinguished.^{xxiii}

The visual connotations of street signs, maps, newspapers, etc, in the text symbolise obsession for control and perfection. Meanwhile the images of stamps, finger prints, ID cards and various agency related documents in the background which reiterate throughout the text show the nineteenth century’s obsession with authentication. The text tells us how extreme the government regulations and censorship were at that time. Tan parodies them by caricaturing those authentication stamps with the symbol of a pig (reference to George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*). Various government departments like the Federal Department of Information’s stamp reads “*ignotare regulatum*” which suggests that the Federal department excuses no one who ignores rules or regulations run by a state that sponsors the very thought of the day: “Let the market decline;”. Similarly, The Federal Department of Management’s stamp is imprinted with the words “*bureaucritae opacus*” suggesting that the secret / opaque bureaucracy; while, The Federal Department of Economics’ stamp bears the words “*consumer ergo sum*”, meaning that one consumes, therefore one exists. Numerous such examples can be cited, including The Federal Department of Tubes and Pipes’ stamp reading “*plumbiferus ductus*” that produces lead pipes; while, The Federal Department of Odds and Ends reads “*sweepus underum carpetae*” meaning it sweeps under the carpet for anything which one finds unexpectedly disrupting to one’s day to day life, such as an “unclaimed property, object without names, troublesome artefacts of unknown origin, that fills up cabinet leftovers, things that just don’t belong.”^{xxiv} The State’s hatred and repulsion from anything odd or strange looking are expressed in these advertisements. Besides, the beach hoarding says, “Homogeneous Equations” (vide Illustration no.13 in Appendix) which is an indication that things which break the homogeneity in society are not accepted. There is no compassion for strange objects or people. They must be excluded or deported – “No access, path closed.”^{xxv} The cityscape



refers to the time when the process of industrial development began in the city and people began to live in tiny apartments in clusters in the city. They travelled by trams which developed during that time. The compressors that appear at frequent places remind one of the compressors used during the pearl harvesting in Australia by the Japanese and Malay divers. The city is devoid of any trees, or birds, or animals, which signifies the extreme exploitation of the ecosystem caused by industrial growth. The city is covered in smoke that has made it turn grey. The ocean is acidic blue and sewage pipes are open at places. These indicate how city life has degenerated. The surreal object, half organic and half manufactured, is a stark contrast to the lifeless city where it does not fit at all. It is being treated like an alien. But at the end, when the lost thing reaches the desired place where it belongs to, we find that several other objects or creatures which are completely different from one another happily co-exist there. This place, where many cultures co-exist is the utopia that celebrates hybridism. Everyone enjoys being different in this world. This world is far away from humans. “They engage in voiceless conversation. There is no sense of community among the ‘things’ as they show no obvious communication to one another.”^{xxvi} Yet, they all exist in a world seemingly quite happy. The place looked bright and lit up with sunlight in contrast to the gloomy, concrete industrial cityscape. The strange creatures seem to float and swim around like the place that looked like an ocean bed. The place and the creatures seem to be in close proximity with nature that is lit up by sunlight. The protagonist is shown undergoing a transformation. He shows a similar disinterestedness towards strange objects or anything weird like the lost thing. It may be that he has just stopped noticing them altogether or perhaps he is too busy to notice them. He has become part of the general sense of degeneration.

The Lost Thing is a tale of an alien creature that is lost from its supposed homeland. The protagonist notices and decides to take it home and keep it with him until he finds a way to help it go back to where it came from. In the entire duration of its stay, there is an element of belongingness running throughout the story. Attempts to fit into the protagonist’s world and its failure to achieve it, lead to the identity crisis of the creature. This alienation can be comparable to an immigrant’s experience in a foreign land. The story also details the themes of passive intolerance towards the immigrants who are considered and treated as the “other”. The story is reminiscent of the treatment of the white native Australians towards the Chinese gold miners who immigrated there in search of work.



Tan uses the technique of de-familiarising a familiar world using surreal art to create a narrative of myth and land. He masterfully uses images as signifiers to produce a narrative which is historically connected to Australia's history of land and colonization, dislocation and home space. The theme of migration, belonging and strangeness run as undertones. There are deep connections between the words and images and Tan has represented how the world confronts strangeness, things which do not seem familiar to themselves. This reading of *The Lost Thing* gestures towards the way of the lived experience of displaced people, which is often traumatic, accommodates a gradual process of adjustment and resettlement. This process often leads to the reconstitution of self at personal and social levels.

Notes

ⁱ Shaun Tan, *The Lost Thing*, (Australia: Lothian Books, 2000),

ⁱⁱ Zygmunt Bauman. *Modernity and Ambivalence*. (John Wiley and Sons, 2013).

ⁱⁱⁱ Dr. Zevallos is a Peruvian-Australian applied sociologist, residing in Sydney. She had obtained her PhD in Sociology and has 20 years of experience in research, policy and consultancy. For more details:

<https://othersociologist.com/about>

^{iv} Zuleyka Zevallos. "What is Otherness?," *Other Sociologist*, October 14, 2011, accessed May 11, 2019,

<https://othersociologist.com/otherness-resources/>

^v Shaun Tan, *The Lost Thing*, (Australia: Lothian Books, 2000), p.3

^{vi} Shaun Tan, "Comments on *The Lost Thing*," accessed May 11, 2019, <http://www.shauntan.net/books/lost-thing.html>

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Shaun Tan, *The Lost Thing*, (Australia: Lothian Books, 2000),

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} Gary Crew, "The Lost Thing," *Reading Australia*, November 02, 2016, accessed May 05, 2019,

<https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/reading-australia/shaun-tan/the-lost-thing-by-shaun-tan>

^{xvi} The *Celebes* has a big, round elephant-looking structure that Ernst has derived from a Sundanese corn-bin.



^{xvii}Shaun Tan, "Comments on *The Lost Thing*," accessed May 11, 2019, <http://www.shauntan.net/books/lost-thing.html>

^{xviii}"Chinese on the Australian Gold Fields," *The Original Gold Rush Colony*, accessed May 11, 2019, <http://www.goldrushcolony.com.au/australian-gold-history-culture-info/chinese-australian-gold-fields>

^{xix}Georgina Tsolidis, "Historical Narratives of sinophobia-Are These Echoed in Contemporary Australian Debates About Chineseness," *Journal of Citizenship and Globalisation Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 5-6, <https://doi.org/10.2478/jcgs-2018-0004>

^{xx}Shaun Tan, "Comments on *The Lost Thing*," accessed May 1, 2019, <http://www.shauntan.net/books/lost-thing.html>

^{xxi} "Dirt and 'Otherness' in 'The Lost Thing'," *Withered Violets*, March 05, 2011, accessed May 11, 2019, <https://witheredviolets.wordpress.com/2011/03/05/dirt-and-otherness-in-the-lost-thing/>

^{xxii}Shaun Tan, "Picture Books: Who Are They For?," accessed May 11, 2019, <http://www.shauntan.net/essay1.html>

^{xxiii}Ibid.

^{xxiv} Shaun Tan, *The Lost Thing*, (Australia: Lothian Books, 2000),

^{xxv} Ibid.

^{xxvi} "Dirt and 'Otherness' in 'The Lost Thing'," *Withered Violets*

^{xxvi} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVV7kxQd0lY&t=118s> The short film *The Lost Thing* show the entire story in an audio visual medium, giving another dimension to the text.

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Appendix

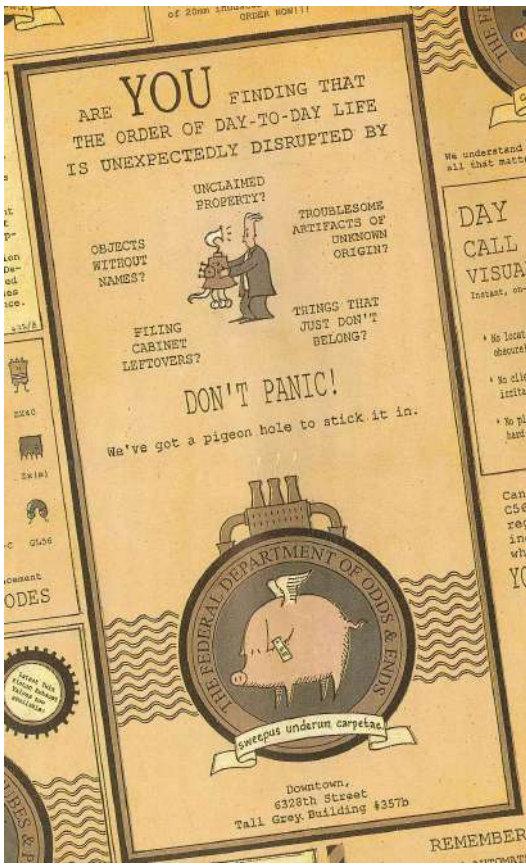


Illustration - 1



Illustration - 2

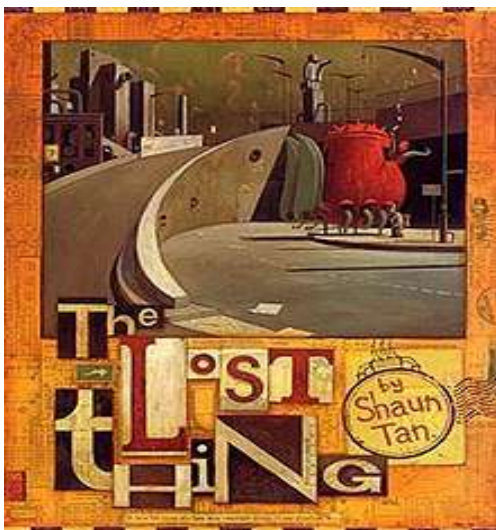


Illustration - 3

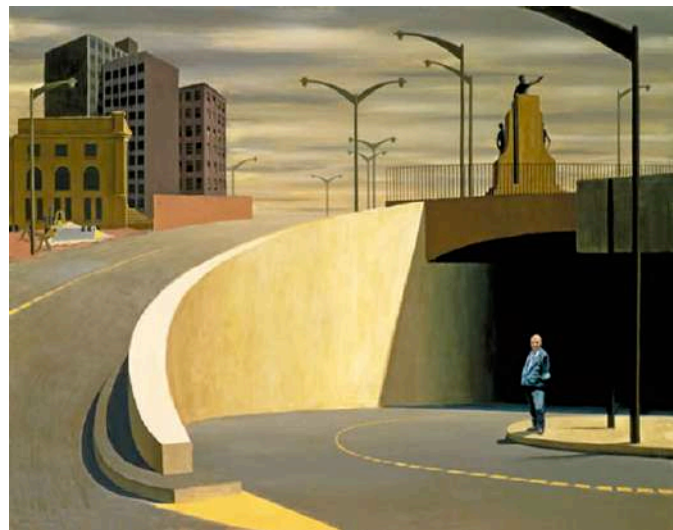


Illustration - 4



Appendix



Illustration - 5



Illustration - 6



Illustration - 7



Illustration - 8



Appendix



Illustration - 9

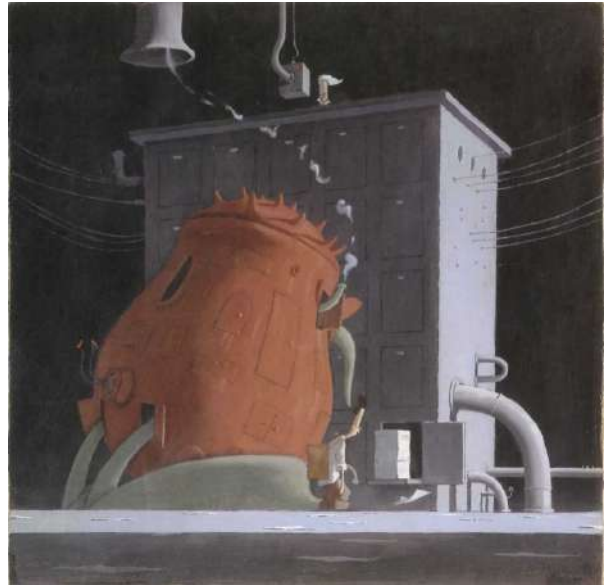


Illustration -10



Illustration - 11

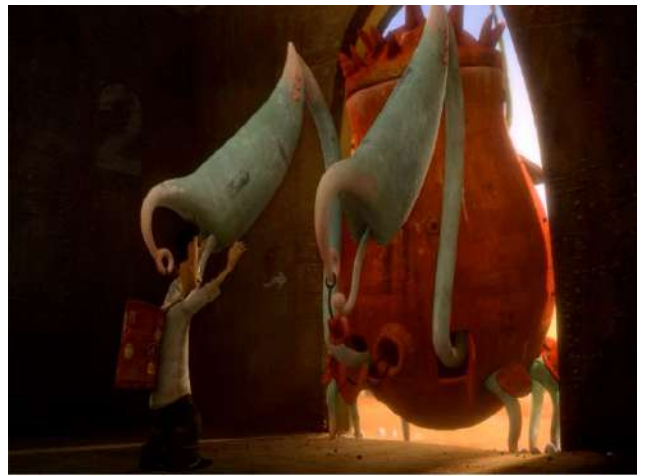


Illustration - 12



Appendix



Illustration - 13