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Illustration from *Mundus subterraneus* | 1665 | [Athanasius Kircher](#) (Wikimedia Commons)

THE SEEMING GIANT: FROM REWRITING RACISM TO THE ART OF POST-MEMORY

Felipe Cammaert



One of the figures that most fascinates me in children's literature is that of the Seeming Giant. Mr. Tur Tur – as he's called – is a character created by the German writer Michael Ende (the famous author of children's bestsellers like *The Never-ending Story* and *Momo*). He appears for the first time in the book *Jim Button and Luke the Engine Driver*, published in 1960. Several years ago, when I read the story of Jim Button to my daughter, she listened with astonishment and curiosity to Ende's tale, and the Seeming Giant was one of the figures that most piqued her curiosity.

I will not go into the details of the adventures of Jim, the child, and Luke, the adult, who leave the small, narrow island of Lummerland on a train trip to China to free a princess, who is kept prisoner in the City of Dragons. I just want to briefly highlight some of the book's context and then to focus on the character of the Seeming Giant. This character seems to me to be a brilliant metaphor that can help illustrate some issues related to post-memory.

Critics have recounted that in creating the character of Jim Button, Ende (1929-1995) was inspired by an indigenous child named Orundellico, originally from the Yámana tribe of Tierra del Fuego. This fourteen-year-old boy was captured, in 1830, along with three other young indigenous people, by the captain of the ship HMS Beagle in retaliation for the theft of an English boat. Orundellico's family would have received, in return for the kidnapping of the child, a mother-of-pearl button. That is why the child was named "Jeremy Button" on the boat that took him to England. The indigenous boy stayed in Europe for a year, when he was taken back to his homeland in the same boat. On his return, Button traveled in the company of the young Charles Darwin, who was on his first scientific exploration, and had the opportunity to talk to the young Yámana.

In an article published in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 2008 (1), journalist Julia Voss established a connection between certain aspects of Ende's book and histories of English colonialism, particularly in regard to the commercial exploitation of the colonies. The author proposes links between episodes in the history of Jim Button and Luke the Engine Driver and the life of Michael Ende. Voss writes that many elements of Ende's book associated with the authoritarianism of the "villains" are indirect references to Nazi ideology, of which Ende, who grew up during the Third Reich, was a victim.



Whereas Jeremy Button / Orundellico was a South American indigenous child brought to Europe to be, according to the criteria of the time, “civilized”, Ende’s Jim Button (Jim Knopf) is, in the novel, a black boy who arrives on the island in the post and is adopted by a Lummerland family. Among other things, Voss argues that Ende is trying to dissociate, in post-World War II Germany, Darwin’s theory of the evolution of species from its appropriation by National Socialism, and to present an anti-racist view of the human being (2). Jim Button is a black boy who, without having attended school (that is, without being a victim of the Nazi school regime in which Ende grew up), travels the world in the company of an engine driver (in the German version there is a pun here on ‘Lokomotivführer’). He releases captive children from the city of Kummerland (the city of sorrow, in German) where “pure-blood dragons” are forbidden, and (in the second volume of the story) Button becomes king of a submerged world that, like Atlantis, emerges from the ocean depths.

But let’s return to the Seeming Giant (*Scheinriese*), the fantastic character that Jim and Luke find living completely alone in a desert called ‘The End of the World’. Mr Tur Tur is a very unique colossus. His largeness is only noticeable from a distance, when he is far from his observer. While when he approaches the protagonists, Mr. Tur Tur seems “normal” – he is a similar size to any other human being.

What makes this character unique is simply the reversal of the laws of optics. Here is how Mr. Tur Tur explains his condition:

– Look, friends: if one of you got up now and walked away, you would get smaller and smaller and on reaching the horizon you would be nothing more than a point. If you came back, you would get bigger and bigger and when you arrived in front of us you would be your true size. But of course in reality you would have always been the same. You would only seem to get smaller and smaller when you move away and bigger and bigger when you get closer. [...] The opposite happens with me. That’s all. The further away I am the bigger I look, and the closer I get, the more you see my true size. [...] Indeed, other people could be called seeming-dwarves, because from a distance they seem to be dwarves, but in reality they are not.

Michael Ende imagines this character in a universe made for children. It emerges from a very simple premise, which seems to run through the whole tale of Jim Button: sometimes, things are not as most people see them at any given moment. The question of perspective is at the centre of the allegory of the Seeming Giant.



In *Jim Button and Luke the Engine Driver*, before the Seeming Giant reveals to his visitors the origin of his particularity, he had uttered these words:

There are men who present certain characteristic peculiarities. For example, Mr. Button here has black skin. It is like that by nature and there is nothing strange about it, is there? But unfortunately, most people don't think that way. If you, for example, are white, you are convinced that only your colour is good and you feel something against those who are black. Men are often very unreasonable.

Through this character and his reflections, Ende questions the racist prejudices on which Nazi ideology tried, in German schools, to impose the idea of a "pure race". Ende's book attempts to reappropriate a traumatic past, in order to pass on a different conception of humanity to a new generation (his young and adult readers).

The metaphor of the Seeming Giant is, in a way, well suited to the field of post-memory, and, in particular (to take up [António Pinto Ribeiro's](#) terminology), to "the work of art in the condition of post-memory", which the MEMOIRS project has studied. Following Michael Ende's propositions, what emerges from this children's character is the fact that distance (in this case, spatial) creates the impression that the Seeming Giant changes size. In works of art of post-memory, a similar phenomenon occurs through the artist's temporal distance from the traumatic past that is being reappropriated. When second generation artists (who typically have a familial connection with European colonial history) recover a distant legacy in their work, they integrate it into their own biographical experience, in their present condition as the inheritor of a colonial past. That is, the artist (whether from the field of literature, the arts, cinema or music) approaches the Seeming Giant, which in the distance seems so immeasurably large, but, when seen up close, has its true dimensions.

We could see the collective memory of European colonialism as reflecting a similar view to that of regular people who, by virtue of the laws of perspective, when they observe something from a distance see it as small, and becoming bigger and bigger as it approaches. The further away the memory of colonial traumas are, the smaller they seem. But, faced with the Seeming Giant, the error becomes clear. If the giant were to approach these people, they would think it was even bigger than it really is. This is why most contemporary European societies fear confronting the giant of that past. They prefer to keep it at a distance.



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On the contrary, the artist of post-memory adopts the point of view of the Seeming Giant. They are aware that the dimensions are always the same, whether near or far, and that the variation in size is just a matter of where it is seen from. Thus, approaching a distant temporal reality does not change its nature, just the position of the observer. From this perspective, works of art of the post-memory of European colonialism invert the perspective on the past: they overcome the distance that separates traumatic memories from those who inherit them. In so doing, they present the stories transmitted between generations as facts whose importance, and dimensions, must be considered from up close, and not speculated on from a distance.

At the end of Ende's tale, Jim and Luke invite the Seeming Giant to live with them on Lummerland, and give him a special mission. Thanks to his special qualities, Mr. Tur Tur becomes the "living lighthouse" of the tiny island, which lacks a beacon to alert sailors to their proximity to the mainland. In European post-colonial history, works of art in the condition of post-memory can be the guidepost that, when future generations approach, they can see that the memory of colonialism is, after all, a Seeming Giant that deserves to be seen up close.

Translated by Archie Davies

(1) The original text can be consulted [here](#), or in Spanish [here](#).

(2) There are, however, some who [argue](#) that the reproduction of clichés in Ende's characterization of Jim as a black boy is racist.

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