

Foreword

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This project originated in a seminar entitled “Text and Image in Children’s Literature” that the three of us convened in Galway, Ireland, on August 22-26, 2016, on the occasion of the 13th ESSE (European Society for the Study of English) conference. The seminar, with its 18 scheduled presentations and large attendance over three half days, was an exciting and stimulating event. Prolonging it with a selected publication was an obvious outcome, and we are very happy to have achieved this goal.

We wish to thank the participants to the seminar, as well as the contributors to these two volumes, whether they presented in 2016 or joined us later on, as did Valentina Abbatelli and Catherine Delyfer. We are most grateful to Anne Chassagnol, Virginie Douglas, and Jean-Jacques Lecerle for accepting our invitation to be part of this special issue. Finally, we wish to extend our warmest thanks to *Image and Narrative* and its chief editor Jan Baetens for making this project possible.

Introduction

The purpose of images in children’s literature, their influence on the child reader and the degree of collaborative osmosis between text and image in picture books have been the subjects of long-standing debates ever since 1697, when the first acknowledged picture book – John Amos Comenius’s *Orbis Pictus* – was published. Long-ago controversies have alerted the general public to the fragile alliance between text and image. Whereas Comenius’s book relied on the strong association between the pictorial element and the thing it illustrated, his detractors feared that the former might prove too enticing, too powerful, and betray the book’s main purpose: to educate the child. By connecting the individual images within the larger picture, they argued, the child was liable to develop not a healthy reverence for syntax and grammar, but a tendency to err on the side of imaginary world-building. That the first article in our series, Virginie Douglas’s study of illustrations as simulacra of a child’s drawing, shows them to be an opening into the child’s imaginary and their difficulties in dealing with their emotions, attests to the persistence of this theme. The difference, of course, is that the child’s imaginary is now within the pale, valued and thematized even as it is left unmediated by the adult narrative voice.

Yet the questions elicited by Comenius’s inventive book have persisted too. Can the illustration be trusted to fulfil its explanatory calling? *Should* the image outlast, revise, or even subvert the didactic scope of the picture book so as to usher the child into a different realm of experience? Or could it be that the vitality of children’s literature, both as a literary genre, a (less and less marginal) field of academic studies and as a concrete,

marketable phenomenon, depends upon its capacity to expand and renegotiate the reciprocal contribution of text and image from book to book? The answer, it seems, lies in the increasing number of essays devoted to intermediality – a (relatively) recent concept applied to art forms combining verbal and visual media – in children’s books since the late 1990s. To quote Maria Nikolajeva in *Postmodern Picturebooks*, intermediality, “also expressed as counterpoint, synergy or polysystemy”, has allowed children’s book scholars out of a binary approach in which either the textual or visual component was ignored. It has contributed to the elaboration of a picture book-specific theory while highlighting new paths of interpretation for their contents.¹

The papers gathered in these two volumes both exemplify and further these paths. For purposes of clarity, they have been distributed among two main topics. The relationship between text and image in children’s literature is first broached in terms of its didactic – or antididactic – dimension. A traditional expectation when it comes to the genre, it branches out into a more subtle cat’s-cradle pattern of allegiance, subjugation and empowerment in the case of picture books. In our postmodern age, the books themselves have drawn a certain degree of contemporary suspicion upon themselves as vehicles for representations which, in turn, may endorse systemic values. Perry Nodelman’s 1999 reading of an apparently ingenuous tale, *Mr. Gumpy’s Outing*, is a brilliant if slightly daunting demonstration that a book’s structural elements – its lines, shapes, colours, textures, and formats – can all serve a persuasive perspective. Beyond the visual delight provided by the picture lies an intent to denote and define, one that may come with an ideological agenda. Both Shona Kallestrup’s essay on the tales of Queen Marie of Romania and Valentina Abbatelli’s study of the varying captions accompanying the pictures in two Italian editions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* provide telling examples of this. They also reflect on another pattern of authority, that of the text over the picture meant to illustrate it. In Marie’s case, the ancillary function of the image was retained, as the illustrators modelled their aesthetic choices upon the Queen’s hierarchy of values (monarchy as a virtuous, uniting force). The changing captions in the Italian editions of Beecher Stowe’s novel, published in the early 1940s, also evidence a form of takeover, as the new captions redefine both the focus of each image and its underlying message from a Fascist perspective. The “pivotal role” of captions, and the power that comes from their role as mediator between text and image, is thus brought forward.

But what happens when the image becomes emancipated, the site of playful or powerful effects that no longer serve the didactic purpose – real or assumed – of the text? As printing techniques became more diversified, images came to fill more space and use a wider range of media, and, as a result, grew more autonomous. No longer relegated to the top or bottom of the page, their osmosis with the text became more forceful and interactive, as in the case of the “hieroglyphic Bibles”, printed in the mid-nineteenth century to provide family entertainment. Later on, the image actually undermined the moral or political message carried by the text: one oft-quoted example is Heinrich Hoffmann’s *Struwwelpeter* (1845), a suite of cautionary tales imbued with a traumatic violence that is aptly defused by the burlesque tone of its accompanying illustrations. In Hoffmann’s case, the subversion serves an irenic purpose. In contemporary children’s books, however, the image can trigger a sense of the uncanny (a trope skilfully exploited in the recent horror film *The Babadook*²) while forfeiting its irenic purpose. This radical assumption is examined by Katarzyna Smyczyńska. When the pictures in the book leave no room for an empathetic reading, or sabotage their own pretence at showing a

1 Maria Nikolajeva, “Play and Playfulness in Postmodern Picturebooks”, in *Postmodern Picturebooks: Play, Parody and Self-Referentiality*, ed. Lawrence R. Sipes and Silva Pantaleo (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), p. 56.

2 A psychological horror film, *The Babadook* was written and directed in 2014 by Australian filmmaker Jennifer Kent. It features

happy ending, the ethical purpose of the book itself becomes open to investigation. The fascination which it yields has much to do with the effects spurred by its representations (e.g. the violence and rage connoted by the colour red), but it makes it less easy to appraise the nature and intensity of the experience it provides.

The transmissive function of the image has thus – partly at last – been separated from its traditional explanatory role. The image can no longer be seen merely as a “visual coding” of a textual unit – a letter, as in the primer, a word, as in Comenius’s lexicon, or an entire episode. This makes more complex the issue approached in our second volume, which envisages children’s literature in terms of meaning. What meaning is transmitted to the child reader, and to what extent has it been framed or predicted by the text? Whereas, as Jean-Jacques Lecercle reminds us, the traditional order gives precedence to the text (« l’image doit s’adapter au texte, et non l’inverse »), the history of modern children’s books, from the mid-nineteenth century, shows a number of exceptions to the rules. Reading the cautionary tale of Little Pauline in the *Struwwelpeter*, the child may pass over the instructive message (Don’t play with matches!) to pause on the last illustration – the heroine’s two cats, now cast as her chief mourners and pouring a stream of tears over her pretty little slippers, the only part of her left unconsumed by the flames. Why didn’t the slippers burn? Can cats cry? What makes the slippers so special? The quaint *punctum* of the image, the tear-baptized slippers, has successfully decoyed its more banal, though educational, *studium*. Lecercle’s own examples, from Lear’s famous limericks to the lesser-known but captivating *Atlante di zoologia profetica*, unfolds a three-stage process in which the illustration is centre stage, its visual force of communication unhampered by normative criteria, clinical, aesthetic or educational. Such a “creative pulsion” finds its counterpart in the poised, reflective and obliquely emotional pictures devised by Jessie Marion King for Oscar Wilde’s tale “The Young Prince”, and analyzed by Catherine Delyfer. Here, the repressed subtext conveyed by the image is attuned to that of the text, contrary to some of the examples studied by Lecercle; its strength, however, lies in its capacity to make visible what has to remain implicit in the tale – in particular, the return of a repressed femininity both in its landscape and its male hero. Through the image, Wilde’s mindscape becomes legible, as does Lear’s apprehension regarding the fate of his eccentric protagonists.

While these works still postulate a relationship between text and image, however tense or flexible, the corpus showcased by Isabelle Gras and H el ene Gaillard in their respective studies displays new tensions between the two. Isabelle Gras’s oneiric corpus, in particular Shaun Taun’s *Rules of Summer*, stresses the discrepancy not only between text and image, but within (a) the text itself, tensed between “benign lexical meaning” and “negative clause structures”, and (b) the image, juxtaposing familiar and unfamiliar elements in a process reminiscent of Freud’s dream logic. The resulting loss of direction in a universe ironically framed by rules and vetoes may free, however, rather than daunt, the child reader: contrary to the disquieting tales of violence examined in the first volume, Shaun Taun’s imagery is pervaded by a touch of humour that enables the viewer to navigate between the two perspectives at play, rational and irrational, without excessive anxiety. Likewise, the retellings of the Three Little Pigs analyzed by H el ene Gaillard exploit the playful dimension of postmodernism even as they reinscribe its challenges – the disruption of narrative conventions and reversal of

a widowed mother and her only child who find themselves increasingly haunted by one of the boy’s books and its protagonist, a featureless figure named Mr Babadook. The book itself, which is shown twice being browsed by the mother, provides a dark pastiche of various trends in children’s literature: books of monsters, pop-up storybooks, nursery rhymes, charcoal drawings and a faux-naive style. Its visual effect was so compelling that a limited number of copies were actually made and sold to the enthusiastic (adult) viewers.

values – at the core of the dynamics between text and image. Even when the image contradicts the narrative, causes its textual layout to implode or darkens its comic resolution, it does so in a way that remains playful – through a visual pun or a contextual allusion that may be picked up by adult readers, conscious of the social history in which they are immersed, while sparing the child’s requirement for a more epiphanic structure.

The dynamic between text and image ultimately remains thus ever-changing, even as it takes into account an awareness of violence, resurfacing in the texture and format of these illustrations. What these volumes adumbrate, echoing contemporary studies of the genre, is a double trend of faith and debunking. Participants in the creation and reception of children’s books rely on the image to reveal what has been silenced in or around the text. And yet, in parallel, the image has remained a way to celebrate the text, as evidenced by the final link in our chain of evidence: Anne Chassagnol’s innovative exploration of literary tattoos inspired by, or based upon, British children’s books. Originally a transgressive practice, the tattoo now joins the various ritual practices – prize-giving, dressing-up, even the masque staged during the Olympic Games’ opening ceremony – that feed a collective nostalgia for childhood. While the “lit tat” comes with a risk of reducing children’s literature to a gallery of stereotypes, it does more than just “provide an exhibition of bookish tastes” (Chassagnol). It deconstructs the canon so as to reconstruct a parallel body of live texts, grafted onto the skin of the bearer so as to match and enrich each individual story. And these tattoos, along with others, promote a new corpus of stories where “illustrated characters” escape silencing by means of the images imprinted on their flesh.

That the image, transient as it is, gives birth to a meaning illustrated by a text brings our dynamics full circle in a very Carrollian way. Ultimately, the image authorizes wordplay, while the sometimes unsteady, untrustworthy, yet unlimited resources of today’s children’s books, in turn, inspire playful representations. The articles contained within these two volumes attest to this vital reciprocity.

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