Reading the Visual

An Introduction to Teaching Multimodal Literacy

(2014)

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TEACHERS COLLEGE PRESS

Teachers College, Columbia University
New York and London

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Picturebooks and Picturebook Theories

> Picturebooks are one of the few quiet places left where a child can go to be alone, and to travel worlds past, present, and future.
>
> —Dilys Evans (2008)

Long before children can read words, they are exposed to the visual images and stories contained in picturebooks. In fact, most children's first encounter with written narrative comes in picturebook form. Young children delight in the images contained in a picturebook as someone reads the words to them and performs the stories they cannot yet read for themselves. Often, young children's experiences with picturebooks are their first exposure to the world of literature.

Each page and illustration in a picturebook can be returned to, reflected upon, and studied at a pace that is not dictated by technology (Salisbury, 2007). In modern times, when it seems that everything students do is prescribed by advancing technologies, the act of reading and viewing picturebooks provides a space where students can determine their own pace and stop to explore the visual images and design elements in these multimodal ensembles as they see fit.

Picturebooks tell stories in a visual language that is rich and multileveled. Understanding the visual and design elements, codes, and literary and artistic devices that have influenced the production and interpretation of picturebooks enhances students' ability to appreciate and comprehend the subtleties of these multimodal ensembles. As students become immersed in these forms of visual art, each experience with picturebooks enhances all the experiences that have come before and changes the expectations for their experiences in the future. The more students experience these texts, the more they learn to appreciate the systems of meanings used in their creation.

Because the systems of representation used in picturebooks offer a variety of visual and textual resources for constructing and expressing meanings, teachers need to familiarize themselves with various approaches for analyzing and understanding visual images and design elements, in addition to the strategies they utilize for comprehending written language. Sipe (1998a) suggests, "when it comes to the visual aspects of picture books, many teachers may feel they lack the artistic

exigency

and aesthetic training necessary to talk with children and to guide their understanding" (p. 66). If teachers are going to be able to help students make sense of the visual images, design elements, and written language of a picturebook, they need to first be able to analyze and investigate these multimodal ensembles in greater detail by themselves.

In this chapter, I would like to extend the previous discussion concerning the basics of visual composition by focusing on one particular multimodal ensemble, namely the picturebook. Figure 6.1 details the various aspects of picturebooks I will be addressing in this chapter.

DEFINING THE PICTUREBOOK

Picturebooks are one of the most commonly used types of text in elementary classrooms. You might notice that I am using the compound word *picturebook* instead of using the two words *picture* and *book* separately to refer to these types of texts; I use the compound word to suggest the unity or cohesiveness of visual images, design elements, and written language that is part of all true picturebooks.

True picturebooks need to be distinguished from *illustrated books*. In an illustrated book, the illustrations serve as an added or decorative feature rather than as an inseparable component of the story being told. In general, illustrated books can be read and understood without the accompanying illustrations, though readers might lose some of the aesthetic qualities of the text. For example, some of Roald Dahl's books feature black and white line drawings by Quentin Blake. The illustrations contained in these books certainly add to the story, but the story could be read and understood without them. The original stories written and illustrated by Beatrix Potter would also be considered illustrated books. The illustrations in Potter's books certainly add to one's aesthetic experience, but these texts could be read and understood without the accompanying illustrations.

Picturebooks like *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 2001), *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001) and *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963) are examples of true picturebooks, blending visual images and design elements with written language in a cohesive structure that simultaneously unfolds in both visual and verbal narratives.

Figure 6.1. Aspects of Picturebooks

1. Defining the Picturebook
2. Elements of Picturebooks
3. Picturebook Codes
4. Text-Image Relationships
5. Art and the Picturebook
6. Postmodern Influences

So much of the story would be lost if one were to read *Where the Wild Things Are* without Sendak's illustrations that it would be almost a different story. To read *Jumanji* (Van Allsburg, 1981) without the accompanying images would render the story almost incomprehensible. It is the cohesive unity of visual images, written narrative, and design elements that makes up a true picturebook.

Throughout this book, when I refer to *picturebooks*, I will be referring to the characteristics Bader (1976) expressed in her oft quoted definition from *American Picturebooks from Noah's Ark to the Beasts Within*:

> A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historical document; and, foremost, an experience for a child. As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, written text, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning of the page. On its own terms its possibilities are limitless. (p. 1)

Her definition calls our attention to the commercial aspects of picturebooks, the aesthetic qualities of children's experiences with picturebooks, the synergistic relationship among the various visual and textual elements, and the sociocultural influences on the production and interpretation of these multimodal texts.

Picturebooks should not be viewed as a particular *genre*; rather they are a form of *multimodal ensemble* that encompasses many genres and literary styles. From my perspective, picturebooks are a unique literary experience, where meaning is constructed during the simultaneous unfolding of written language, visual images, and overall design. The visual and verbal narratives inform one another during the reading experience, allowing readers to oscillate back and forth between the textual and visual elements during their transactions with picturebooks (Sipe, 1998b). Each visual, textual, and design element enhances the other, with no single element revealing the meaning potentials of the narrative by itself.

Nodelman (1988) asserted the visual images in a picturebook show what the words do not tell, and words tell what the visual images do not show. Eisner (2008) contends that picturebooks are a form of sequential art, much like comic books and graphic novels. Marantz and Marantz (1988) called picturebooks a form of visual art, conceived as a unit that integrates all the designated parts in a sequence. Schwarcz and Schwarcz (1990) contend textual and pictorial narratives accompany, alternate, and intertwine with one another in picturebooks. Kiefer (1995) summarizes the relationship among visual and textual elements by suggesting they are simply interdependent on one another in rendering the narrative. Each of these conceptualizations of the picturebook addresses the interplay among text, image, and design and suggests the importance of the ensemble as a cohesive experience.

Sipe (1998b) describes the visual images, written text, and design elements of picturebooks as having a synergistic relationship, asserting that the meaning of

synergistic relationship

the whole book is greater than the sum of its constituent parts. It is through the interactive nature of the various textual and visual elements of a picturebook that meaning is communicated and constructed. Picturebooks give students the opportunity to engage in an unending process of meaning making, as every rereading brings new ways of looking at visual, textual, and design elements.

Nodelman (1988) referred to the relationship or interactivity among visual and textual elements as a form of *irony*, where the visual images do not work seamlessly together with the verbal narrative; rather they are in a state of tension with one enhancing and also contradicting the other in a variety of ways. Because words and pictures do different things in different ways, the tension between the two seems an important concept to consider.

Moebius (1986) suggests unlike famous works of art hanging in a gallery, the visual images in a picturebook cannot hang by themselves, and do not fare well when they are extracted from the context of the picturebook. All aspects of a picturebook are carefully chosen parts of a whole, with each element of design adding to the picturebooks' cohesive nature. In a picturebook, the written narrative propels the reader forward as the visual images serve to slow the reader down to linger with the details included on each page. Doonan (1993) describes the role of visual images or pictures in picturebooks as representing real and imaginary worlds, as forms of expression, and as histories embedded in style and form that reflect the values of a society.

The basic premise of these various definitions and explications of what a picturebook is and does, is that the different modes of representation, words (written language), and (pictures) visual images, do different things in different ways. In addition to words and pictures, the design features of picturebooks bring these visual and verbal elements together to create unified entity.

Too often, reviews of picturebooks only give cursory attention to the role of images and focus instead on the quality of the written narrative. Picturebooks are too often judged as works of literature, rather than as multimodal ensembles that contain visual art. Picturebooks depend upon the interplay of words, images, and design, and need to be interpreted and judged as cohesive unities, not by their individual systems of representation. To attend to the written text in isolation from the visual images and design features is shortsighted and prevents students from appreciating the wonders of the picturebook form.

ELEMENTS OF PICTUREBOOKS

Sipe (1998b) has created an extensive list of picturebook terminology that I have adapted and added to for organizing the wide array of terms used to describe and analyze contemporary picturebooks. This glossary of terms also provides support for teachers to develop a vocabulary or metalanguage to call students' attention to various elements of picturebooks (see Figure 6.2).

This list serves as a starting point for developing a vocabulary to support students' analysis and interpretations of picturebooks. Naming these elements will encourage students to notice and discuss them, and consider how these features work as part of the multimodal ensemble. When teachers label the constituent parts of picturebooks, students will take on this vocabulary and begin to use these terms to analyze and discuss the texts they experience.

PICTUREBOOK CODES

Moebius (1986) explicated a set of codes embedded in picturebooks, calling our attention to the design and communicative aspects of, "marking the deeper channels of a modern art-form" (p. 143). These codes begin with the *presented world*, how the world is depicted in a picturebook. This depiction depends upon "certain conventions of recognizability and continuity" (Moebius, 1986, p. 143). The literal sense of an image or picturebook illustration provides students with a starting point for their experience, offering them a way in to the illustrations and a foundation for further analysis and interpretation.

The five codes offered by Moebius (1986) are paraphrased in Figure 6.3. This set of picturebook codes serves to call our attention to various conventions used to interpret picturebook illustrations and narratives.

Understanding these various codes supports students' interpretations and analyses of picturebooks in general, and through closer attention to the visual images and written narrative, students can gain access to the meaning potentials used in the creation of visual art forms.

TEXT-IMAGE RELATIONSHIPS

Creating a continuum of the relationships between written text and visual images may help students categorize various relationships between text and image, and come to understand the roles played by each system of representation in a multimodal ensemble. On one end of the continuum, there are books that contain virtually little or no visual images, like classic novels, and at the other end would be books with relatively few words, like wordless picturebooks. Of course, texts at the extreme ends of the continuum are not realized in actual practice. For example, wordless picturebooks are not published completely void of words; even these picturebooks include a title, and many novels are published with cover art and the visual aspects of typography. However, the continuum is nevertheless helpful in distinguishing between texts that rely predominantly on words on one end and rely on visual images on the other end in their presentation.

The relationship between images and words may be viewed as a type of *interplay* between the visual and verbal aspects of a picturebook. Although a more

Figure 6.2. A Glossary of Picturebook Terminology

Bleed: When the illustration extends to the very edge of a page, with no white space or border, it is said to *bleed*. When the illustration extends to all four edges of the page, it is called a *full bleed.*

Borders: Illustrators often design a border for their illustrations in a picturebook. Sometimes elements included in the border are used to tell more of the story, or to tell a parallel story.

Cross-Hatching: Fine parallel lines, usually drawn in black, are crossed with another set of parallel lines, to produce the effect of shading. Cross-hatching also gives an illustration a feeling of energy or vibrancy.

Cut-Out: An illustration which has no frame, but which simply appears against the background.

Double-Page Spread: An illustrator may choose to spread the illustration over both pages of an opening. This is referred to as a *double-page spread.*

Dust Jacket: The thick paper wrapper around the outside of a picturebook.

Endpages (also called *endpapers*): The first pages one sees when opening a picturebook and the last pages one sees before closing it. Endpages are like stage curtains, framing the performance within.

Epitext: Term for anything associated with a picturebook found outside the book itself.

Frame: In a picturebook, the illustrations are frequently surrounded by an illustrated border or white space, giving the impression of a framed picture. Sometimes, part of the illustration may "break the frame," seemingly breaking out of and overlapping the straight edge of the illustration.

Front Matter: The front matter includes publishing and copyright information, as well as the Library of Congress classification and the ISBN number. Sometimes, there is a note about what artistic medium was used to create the illustrations.

Frontispiece: A decorative illustration or engraving that faces the title page at the beginning of a picturebook.

Gutter: When the book is opened, the middle groove where the pages are bound is called the gutter. If an illustration spreads over both pages, the illustrator must make sure that important parts of the illustration are not set in the gutter.

Half-Title Page: At the beginning of a picturebook, a page is often included with only the title of the book.

Jacket Flaps: The parts of the dust jacket which fold over the front and back covers. Frequently, the front jacket flap contains a summary of the book, and the back jacket flap contains information about the illustrator and the author.

Figure 6.2. A Glossary of Picturebook Terminology (continued)

Medium: (plural, *media*) Paints or other materials (tissue paper, real objects, etc.) the illustrator uses to produce visual images or illustrations.

Montage: In laying out a page of a picturebook, an illustrator may choose to include several illustrations on the same page. This is known as collage or montage.

Motif: A recurring element, pattern, or design included in the illustrations or text of a picturebook that has symbolic significance.

Openings: Picturebooks are planned as a series of facing pages called openings. In a picturebook, the pages are rarely numbered. Thus, there is a difficulty in referring to a particular illustration or page. The *first opening* is considered the two facing pages where the text of the book begins, and the openings are numbered sequentially after this initial opening.

Peritext: Term for anything in a book other than the written or visual narrative. This would include the dust jacket, front and back covers, endpages, title page, etc.

Point of View: Every illustration is planned from a certain point of view, placing viewers in a certain position in relation to the scene in the illustration. We can be placed to look down on a scene, below the scene, or on level with it.

Recto/Verso: The right-hand side of a page opening (recto), and the left-hand side of a page opening (verso).

Spine: The bound edge of a book, which is frequently reinforced with an extra strip of cloth or cardboard.

Stock: The type of paper used in a picturebook. We can speak of glossy or matte stock, or stock of various weights, colors, and thickness.

Stamping: Visual images or letters are sometimes pressed into the front or back cover of a picturebook by a heavy metal die. If the image is simply stamped without any color, it is called *blind stamping*; if it is pressed in gold or another color, it is called *foil stamping*.

Text Box: The written text of a picturebook may be printed below or above the illustrations, in a plain white space. The designer may also choose to print the text directly on the illustration. As well, the text may be printed in a bordered box placed outside the illustration.

Title Page: The title page usually includes the title of the book, the author, the illustrator, the name of the publisher, and the city in which the book was published.

Typography: Illustrators or designers choose the typeface or font which is used for the text, the title, and other printed text in the book.

detailed continuum has been offered by Nikolajeva and Scott (2006), for the purpose of this book I will discuss three types of interplay that would be worthwhile

Figure 6.3. Picturebook Codes

Codes of Position and Size

Where characters and objects are placed in an image affects how we interpret them. The impact of particular visual elements can be strengthened or weakened by their placement. Elements placed in the center of an image are given more attention than those placed on the periphery.

Codes of Perspective

The rules of *linear perspective* and the placement of the horizon and vanishing point influence our point of view when approaching a visual image. How we are positioned in relation to the setting or characters in an image changes how we interpret the scene and various actions or events.

Codes of the Frame

Framed and *unframed* images work in different ways. We look through a frame into another world, and become more closely involved with full bleed or frameless illustrations. In addition, the picturebook has a temporal frame—its beginning and its end, as well as spatial frames used throughout the book.

Codes of Line

The thinness and thickness of the lines used to render characters and objects influences our understandings of them. Diagonal lines are more dynamic than the stable representations of horizontal and vertical lines. Thicker lines are more pronounced, with thin lines suggesting frailty or submission.

Codes of Color

Color can be used to draw one's eye to certain elements in a visual image, affect the mood or emotional impact of an image, and is often associated with particular meanings in various cultures.

Source: Moebius, *Introduction to picturebook codes*, (1986).

to point out to students, namely (1) symmetrical, (2) enhancing, and (3) contradictory (see Figure 6.4).

The most frequently encountered type of interplay in books for young readers is the symmetrical interplay. In books with a symmetrical interplay, the words and images offer parallel or symmetrical information. However, a truly symmetrical relationship is theoretically impossible because written language cannot represent the exact same things in exactly the same way as visual images. Most picturebooks would be considered as having an enhancing interplay, relying on the interplay

Figure 6.4. Interplay Between Written Language and Visual Images

Symmetrical—visual images parallel the information provided in the text, and the written text provides similar information to the images, often repeating information in different representational forms.

Enhancing—visual images enhance or amplify the written text, bringing new ideas to what is written, and the written text offers additional information to the visual images creating a more complex dynamic.

Contradictory—visual images provide information that is contradicted by the written text, and the written text offers things that counter what is presented in the visual images. This oppositional interplay challenges students to consider the ambiguity among the visual and verbal elements and mediate among what is being offered.

of written language, visual images, and design features to render their narratives. Working in concert, visual images and written text offer an enhanced narrative from what a single representational mode could offer individually. It is not simply the artistic style used in the illustrations, nor the narrative structure of the written text that is important; it is the interrelationships among the various elements in a picturebook that create the dynamic aspects of this multimodal ensemble.

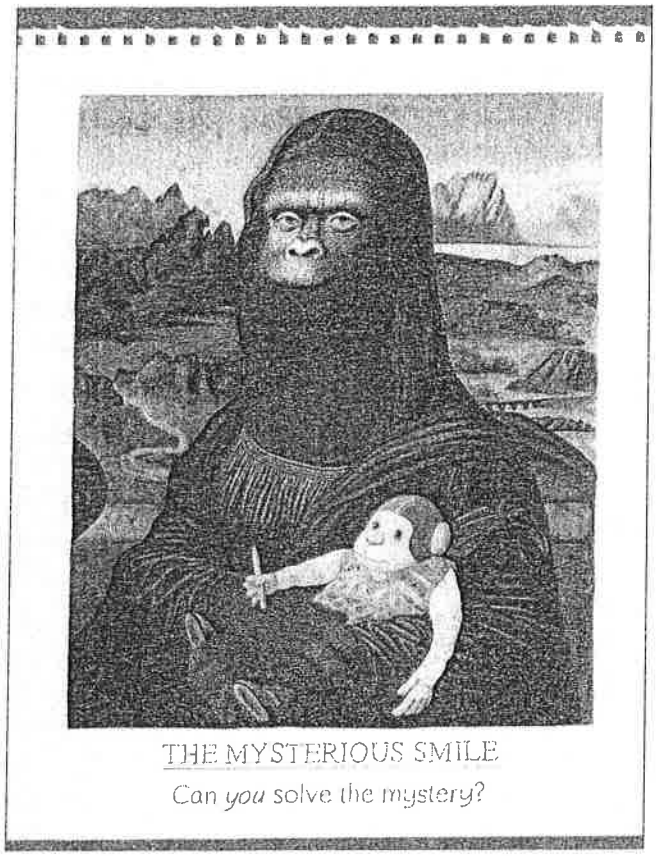
ART AND THE PICTUREBOOK

How something is represented in an image is just as important in the interpretive process as *what* is represented. The literal or denotative aspects of an image are only one aspect of the image that students will need to understand to make sense of it. The connotative aspects are influenced by the artistic style of an image as well as students' reading and viewing experiences. Different versions of the same story rendered in different artistic styles and techniques can yield quite different interpretations.

Art comes into the picturebook in a variety of ways, influencing students' experiences with these texts. Many contemporary picturebooks contain highly sophisticated, visual allusions to famous artwork (Beckett, 2010). This poaching, revisiting, or recontextualizing of famous works of art is characteristic of the postmodern world we inhabit (Hutcheon, 2000). While some works of art are reproduced faithfully in picturebooks, others are used as inspiration for a particular art movement or style.

In addition, fine art is often transformed to fit the narrative of particular picturebooks. For example, Browne (2000) transforms famous works of art, replacing human characters with primates throughout *Willy's Pictures*. These transformations help readers make connections between the story and the original work of art (see Figure 6.5).

Figure 6.5. *Willy's Pictures*



Finally, picturebook images and illustrations may be stylized after a particular art movement or technique. In Percy's (1994) wonderful picturebook *Arthouse,* the illustrations are influenced by a variety of famous artists, rendering the rooms of a house according to the style of these artists' original works. Whether reproduced, transformed, or stylized, fine art plays an important role in the creation of contemporary picturebooks.

All picturebook illustrators are trained in particular artistic styles or influenced by the world of fine art. They bring various techniques and devices taken from various art movements into the illustrations they create for picturebooks. Artists draw on techniques and devices taken from realism, folk art, surrealism, modern art, pop art, and other movements in their own work. The artistic styles and movements drawn upon by picturebook illustrators have different goals, intentions, and ways of representing ideas and the world. Understanding even the basics of these art movements and styles can support the discussions teachers facilitate in their classrooms and the interpretations constructed by their students. Without much effort, teachers can look up in online resources such as Wikipedia

the basic premises of various art movements, for example, folk art or surrealism, and use this information to expand students' interpretations.

POSTMODERN INFLUENCES ON THE PICTUREBOOK

In recent decades, postmodernism has played an influential role in architecture, literature, fashion, and culture in general. It has also played an influential role in the creation and design of contemporary picturebooks. Postmodern influences or *metafictive devices*, for example, multiple narratives—where more than one character or narrator offers their perspective or story; nonlinear structures—where the narrative does not follow a traditional beginning-middle-end sequence; self-referentiality—where the text refers to itself as a work of fiction; pastiche—where several genres or text types are juxtaposed and blended together; and parody—where traditional texts and stories are commented upon usually with humorous intent have become techniques drawn upon by picturebook authors, illustrators, and designers.

Metafictive devices are designed to interrupt readers' expectations and produce multiple meanings and readings of picturebooks (Mackey, 2003). In addition, McCallum (1996) suggests the common element of postmodern literature and associated metafictive devices is their power to distance readers from the text itself, disrupting students' traditional expectations and practices, and positioning them in more active interpretive roles. Metafictive devices call students' attention to the act of reading, and challenge them to engage in the process of reading at a metacognitive level.

In addition, there is a playfulness associated with experiencing postmodern picturebooks, as authors, illustrators, and designers break traditional expectations of what a picturebook is and how narratives may be presented. This sense of playfulness and the disruption of students' expectations challenges them to deal with the openness and ambiguity associated with these picturebooks, and focuses students' attention on the structures, visual images, and contemporary designs of these wonderfully unusual multimodal ensembles.

Sipe and Pantaleo (2008) have detailed how various metafictive devices and design elements are important components in postmodern picturebooks. Ten of these characteristics are listed in Figure 6.6.

Picturebooks influenced by postmodern culture present challenges for students accustomed to the *introduction-complicating actions-climax-resolution* structure associated with traditional narratives. As they approach stories offered from multiple perspectives, students are required to go beyond literal meanings and attend to the various codes and conventions presented earlier in this chapter. Postmodern picturebooks are fun to read and will challenge even adult readers to navigate the structures and meaning potentials of these picturebooks.

Figure 6.6. Characteristics of Postmodern Picturebooks

1. Overly obtrusive narrators who directly address readers and comment on their own narrations.
2. Polyphonic (multi-voiced) narratives or multiple narrators.
3. Two or more interconnected narrative strands differentiated by shifts in temporal and spatial relationships, and/or shifts in narrative point of view.
4. Postmodern framing devices (stories within stories, characters reading about their own fictional lives, and mutually contradictory situations).
5. Disruptions of traditional time and space relationships in the narrative.
6. Parodies of other texts, genres, and stories.
7. Unusual typographical and design layouts.
8. A mixing of genres, discourse styles, and modes of narration.
9. A pastiche of illustrative styles.
10. Description of the creative process, making readers conscious of the literary and artistic devices used in the story's creation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Starting with the multimodal ensemble most commonly encountered in many homes and school settings, the picturebook, teachers can build a foundation for understanding other multimodal ensembles that students will encounter in both print-based and digitally based environments. Using picturebooks as the bridge from the print-based texts students have come to know in school to the digitally based texts they encounter more and more frequently outside of school, allows teachers to help students move from what they know to what they have not yet experienced.