Abstract

In this article I attempt to clarify an essential difference between the ways in which pictures and words convey meaning. Despite the fact that the distinction between showing and telling is widely understood and clearly marked in ordinary language, it is often ignored when writers and researchers provide accounts of how children's picturebooks work. As a result, such accounts are often unrealistic, providing distorted images of picturebook text. I briefly examine one such attempt to differentiate and characterise various types of picturebook and then conclude by showing how Anthony Browne exploits the distinction between showing and telling to create the atmosphere of uncertainty and mystery in his classic book Gorilla.

Pictures and words – the same only different?

In this article I want to re-examine a fundamental difference between pictures and words, focussing in particular upon the contrast between the ways in which words affect pictures in picturebooks and the ways that pictures affect words. I also want to show how the difference can be exploited to create specific narrative effects. However, I would like to begin elsewhere – at the recent exhibition of drawings by Francisco Goya at the Hayward gallery in London. The works on display in this exhibition were all drawn from albums and folders that the artist had kept in his possession until his death. In the nineteenth century the albums were split up and dispersed, eventually finding their way into private collections, galleries and museums throughout the world. The exhibition at the Hayward brought together a selection of the drawings for the first time. The images are tiny and are mostly finished, in brush and ink, with care. They were not intended as preliminary studies or sketches for larger prints or paintings, but were considered by the artist to be completed works in their own right. They share with Goya’s larger and more familiar works a distinctive vision of his contemporaries and their surroundings. This is by turns, comical, seductive, pathetic, fantastical, angry. He does not avert his eyes from cruelty or stupidity and can be fiercely satirical. Unlike Rembrandt, whose prints were on display at the British Museum whilst Goya was at the Hayward, he is almost always impelled to comment upon what he sees through what he draws. He has, to put it crudely, ‘something to say’ about the world that he watches and experiences.

Take for example his drawing of a donkey, or ass, dressed as a man and sitting at a desk apparently holding a manuscript or book in its hooves. Even without looking at the translation of the caption we might guess that we have before us not simply a masterfully rendered capriccio, but also something like a kind of judgement upon the stupidity of humans – in particular, bookish humans. And we would not be far wrong for beneath the image Goya has written, Tambien hay mascaras de Borricos Literatos (There are also masquerades of Literary Asses). The ass, of course, is a fairly conventional symbol of stupidity so we have little difficulty in grasping Goya’s general drift without reading the words, even if something is lost to us of his original intent. But if we say that in this image the artist says something about the gullibility or bone-headedness of readers and writers, is he really saying something in quite the same way as if he had written it down in words? Does the image speak to us like a passage of prose?

My guess is that most people would say not, and if we had before us the drawing in question it would be fairly easy to see why not. The picture has an immediacy of impact that words could never match. Goya has so organised his image that although the ass’s body is roughly in profile, its head is swivelled round to face the viewer so that the beast glares out at us from black, seemingly empty eye sockets set in a skull-like head. The more you look at it the more you want to shudder. No, this is not something that could have been done in words, at least not wholly, for the drawing shows us something that cannot in the end be reduced to, translated into or otherwise rendered in words; something that cannot be told.

This distinction – between showing and telling – is even clearer in the self-portrait reproduced in the exhibition guide. In this work, again a miniature in Indian ink, the artist gazes out towards the viewer from a stern, oval face framed in thick, dark, curly hair. He faces towards us but does not look directly at us for if we align our eyes with his he seems to be
staring slightly downwards, towards the viewer’s chest. So this is not strictly a demand image for the artist looks pre-occupied, thoughtful – in short he is looking inwards and it is this reflective air which gives the tiny drawing its power. The self-absorption in the eyes together with the slight downturn to the mouth, the creases descending from the nose, the peaked eyebrows, the hint of a frown all contribute to the image of a man who has seen and suffered much.1

The point is that, despite my attempt to describe the picture in words, we can only know these things about the portrait – in the special way that the portrait renders them – by experiencing what the portrait has to show. We have to look at it and utilise what we know about faces and people to make sense of what Goya was aiming for. If we are to access the meaning of the image then we must pay attention to what the image shows us. There is no great mystery about this for we are familiar with the distinction between showing and telling and utilise it in our daily lives and our ordinary language. ‘I’ll show you what to do’, says the instructor or teacher, intending a demonstration, a visual display. ‘No, don’t bother . . . just tell me how to do it’, replies the impatient student who simply wants a concise account in words. ‘Show me what you did at school today’, says the fond parent, and sometimes, ‘Tell me all about it’ when the child comes home in tears.

It was the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein who first drew attention to the way in which many puzzles about meaning could be resolved through careful attention to the ways in which we use ordinary language. He famously compared words to tools in a tool-box in an attempt to reveal how, despite their similarity, they have different functions, different applications (‘...what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script or print.’ Wittgenstein, 1968:6). Screwdrivers, hammers and pliers display their function in their form, so to speak, whereas words are all made out of the same stuff. Nonetheless, Wittgenstein tells us, if we pay attention to how we use them, to what purposes we put them we find that they are different. We use ‘show’, ‘showing’ and ‘shown’ at different times, in different ways and for different purposes than ‘tell’, ‘telling’, and ‘told’.

So pictures show and words tell. But of course the distinction is far from being straightforward. Pictures and words are not like oil and water; they do not resist and repel one another. Visual images for example are never entirely dumb. How could they be since our very perception of them is shot through with words? They show us a ‘face’ that we can recognise and understand, sometimes almost immediately, just like we recognise faces in the street;2 but almost always, a significant part of our interpretation of images comes to us mediated through language. We grasp what is before us in a picture partly through concepts that were framed for us in words. Our minds are to a large extent word-shaped, and we cannot switch off this part of ourselves when we look at pictures.

Pictures therefore always have a discursive component – they do often seem to be telling us something – but some are more discursive than others. Victorian narrative paintings and wordless picturebooks bring this aspect of the visual image into the foreground whereas the still life and the passport photograph are relatively free of such effects. The problem is that there is a strong temptation to imagine that pictures can, even should, be read like words, and never more so than at the moment when we feel ourselves to be more visually literate than previous generations. We feel comfortable with the notion of reading images, with the language-like qualities that they possess, and that is fine just so long as we remain aware that images are also, always unlike language. They cannot be completely dissolved into, merged with, forms of verbal discourse no matter how much the concepts and procedures of semiotics seem to blur the boundary. Pictures do things differently and when words and pictures are put together in picturebooks that difference can make all the difference. And ignoring the difference can lead the unwary critic and analyst into deep water.

What happens when you mix pictures and words? – some misunderstandings

Let us turn to this latter point first. There have been a number of attempts in recent years to categorise picturebooks according to the different ways in which words and pictures are perceived to interact. However, since this kind of enterprise usually rests upon an unexamined assumption that what pictures do to words is the same as what words do to pictures, the results are frequently confused and unhelpful. Take for example the scheme worked out recently by Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000 and forthcoming). The authors claim to have identified a ‘broad spectrum of word-image interaction’ (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000 p. 225) extending from symmetry at one end to contradiction at the other, symmetry being, roughly speaking, an equivalence of word and image; contradiction, a maximal dissonance. At different points along the continuum between these two poles they locate what they consider to be two further significant forms of interaction – enhancement and counterpoint – and taken together these become the categories into which different kinds of picturebook are placed. The categories are explained as follows.

Words and images are considered to be in a symmetrical relationship when they come as close as possible to conveying the same information or telling the same story. Thus if the words tell us of a boy standing in the rain in a garden, the pictures show us
Moving along the continuum, the relationship between words and pictures becomes enhancing when the pictures expand upon the words or vice versa, the possibilities within this one category ranging from minimal enhancement to significant enhancement which the authors also term, complementarity. In the former case (minimal enhancement) there is little difference between what the words say and what the pictures show, but in the latter case (complementarity), one strand within the text will be seen to enlarge upon the other in ways which clearly affect the overall meaning. William Steig’s *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* is cited as an example of minimal enhancement, the argument being that the pictures do only a little more than echo the words and thus barely shift the text beyond the condition of word-image symmetry. On the other hand, when words and pictures enhance each other significantly something quite distinctive is added to one strand of the text by the other. Beatrice Potter’s *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* is, for Nikolajeva and Scott, a good example of a book where words and pictures are in just such a complementary relationship. Potter’s verbal text gives us the bare tale but her pictures tell us things about Peter’s relationship with his family not mentioned in the words. When words and pictures counterpoint one another they offer the reader ‘alternative information’ so that an effort must be made to forge a connection. Finally, Contradiction – essentially an extreme form of counterpoint – pushes the words and pictures even further apart so that they seem to be saying entirely different things.

Now I believe that there are a number of weaknesses in this manner of proceeding but in particular, consider the authors’ use of the term ‘symmetrical’. In their view, a relationship is symmetrical when ‘words and pictures tell the same story, essentially repeating information in different forms of communication’ (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2000 p. 225). The difficulty here is that, as we have already seen, a picture can only offer the same information – can only ‘tell us something’ – in the loosest possible sense. For example, the words in a picturebook might tell us what someone did, that is, provide an account of an action (‘Alfie ran on ahead . . .’, ‘Rosie the hen went for a walk . . .’, ‘The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief . . .’) but even the simplest, barest depiction of the action in a visual image cannot help but show much more than is provided by a bald statement. It cannot help, for example, representing the bodily lineaments of the actor carrying out the action; it might also represent facial expression, posture, clothing, circumstances of accompaniment – the bits and pieces that surround the figure in the scene. In addition it might not be at all clear exactly what action is being depicted. On the second page of *Alfie Gets in First*, for example, is Alfie running, hopping, skipping or sliding? Without the words (‘Alfie ran . . .’) we could be forgiven for getting it wrong. In fact, without the words to help us, in some cases we may not even realise that it is the action to which the illustrator wishes us to attend. The point is that we can rarely tell from the picture alone until the words give us some kind of clue.⁹

Pictures show and words tell. The images on their own simply do not offer up ‘information’ or ‘statements’ or ‘stories’ in quite the way that words do. So if a picturebook, or a sequence of pictures and words in a picturebook, appear to be symmetrical it is only because the words help us to interpret the pictures, to understand them in one particular way rather than another. Symmetry in picturebooks is thus largely an illusion, an artefact, a product of word-picture interaction. Perry Nodelman has already made this very plain:

...pictures themselves can imply narrative information only in relationship to a verbal context; if none is actually provided we tend to find one in our memories.

And again:

Words can make pictures into rich narrative resources – but only because they communicate so differently from pictures that they change the meaning of pictures. For the same reason, also, pictures can change the narrative thrust of words.

And again:

...pictures can communicate much to us, and particularly much of visual significance – but only if words focus them, tell us what it is about them that might be worth paying attention to.

(Nodelman 1988 p. 195, p. 196, p. 211)

‘Symmetry’ however is not the only problem. Similar difficulties arise when we consider the category of contradiction. If this is taken to mean something like ‘stating the opposite’ then Nodelman’s warnings still apply – we simply cannot identify what it is that a picture ‘states’ in relation to the narrative outside of its animation by the words. Pictures certainly do possess an ideational function – that is, they are perfectly capable of representing facts, events and states of affairs – but words, whether in the form of captions or fragments of narrative, will always affect how we take up and interpret those facts. In other words, the impression of contradiction is once again an artefact, a product, of the pictures and words coming together and acting upon one another rather than simply a matter of two discrete modes offering transparently contrary meanings.⁴

**Showing and telling in combination**

Let us now turn to the other point that I raised earlier – the fact that the difference between words and
pictures can be used by picturebook makers to create distinctive narrative effects. One of the problems with attempting to classify picturebooks according to how the words and pictures work upon each other is that picturebook text is remarkably flexible. In many cases this flexibility is exploited and the word–image relationship manipulated to create different effects at different points in the tale. A seemingly symmetrical text may become ‘complementary’ or even ‘contrapuntal’ part way through.

A good example of a tale with a twist that hangs on the manipulation of word–image interaction is *Gorilla* by Anthony Browne.\(^5\) Despite the sophistication of the book it has a fairly simple structure, one that Browne has used many times. The story as it is told in words is relatively undecorated and is essentially an account of what Hannah, her father and the gorilla thought, felt, said and did (‘Hannah loved gorillas. She read books about gorillas…’; ‘Don’t be frightened, Hannah,’ said the gorilla, “I won’t hurt you…”’; ‘They opened the door and went outside…’). The pictures on the other hand – a small square illustration to the left of each left-hand page, a much larger picture on the right – show us not only locations and appearances but also contain many embedded details that make us pause and reflect on what seems to be happening. These seem to be the basic principles of the text’s organisation. Except that at the pivotal moment in the story when the toy gorilla appears to come to life in Hannah’s bedroom, not only is the gorilla transformed, the text is too, and the transformation is brought about by a shift in the relationship between words and pictures.

Up until the moment when Hannah throws the despised toy gorilla into a corner of her bedroom the story-in-words can just about stand alone. Once the toy is in the corner though, the written text suddenly loses its grip on the narrative. On the left hand page, opposite the picture of a huge gorilla looming over the foot of Hannah’s bed, and beneath a sequence of three square images (the only such sequence in the book), the words run as follows: ‘Hannah threw the gorilla into a corner with her other toys and went back to sleep. In the night something amazing happened.’ Here the text breaks off and we are not told what the ‘something’ is (and this is the crucial point – here there is no telling). This is the only place in the book – significantly a climactic moment – where information is deliberately withheld from the reader so that the pictures must take over the narrative. However, it is in the nature of pictures that they can only do this by *showing* what we have not been told and as this involves transformation, a change from one state to another, Browne needs a strip of three frames to do it.

Showing us what happened though is not the same thing as telling us what happened. Had Browne chosen to give us some hard information in words we would know much more about the gorilla’s mysterious growth than is represented in the pictures. Instead of ‘…something amazing happened’ Browne might have written, ‘…in the night the toy got bigger’, or perhaps, ‘…the toy turned into a real gorilla.’ But this would be to tell us too much. It would reveal something about which the book remains silent, and the point about the silence is that it allows interpretation to enter into the story. As a result of Browne’s manipulation of the difference between what pictures can show us and what words can tell us we never know whether Hannah’s gorilla actually comes to life (which would mean that the events that follow, in the zoo, the cinema, the garden, ‘really’ occurred) or whether the transformed creature belongs to some other plane of experience: a dream perhaps, or a symbol of Hannah’s longing.

*Gorilla* is a far better, richer story for this refusal to tell. In making the words step back into the wings and giving centre stage to the pictures Browne creates a reading experience that forces us to do some serious interpretative work and elevates what might have been a trite story in the toys-come-to-life-in-the-nursery genre into something much more rewarding. Browne of course is justly famed for his ability to create complex, layered stories from apparently simple materials and few picturebooks are quite so self-consciously constructed as *Gorilla*. Nonetheless, it is not difficult to find further examples of books that make effective use of the showing-telling distinction. And even when picturebook makers attempt to smooth over the differences between the words and the images, aiming for the symmetry that Nikolajeva and Scott try to capture, they will always affect us in different ways. Despite occasional appearances to the contrary, in picturebooks, what we are shown is never the same as what we are told. The telling influences what we take from what is shown and the showing helps us interpret and understand what we are told. Sometimes we are told less or shown more than we expected but however the words and images work upon each other, it is precisely in their difference and their mutual animation that the fascination and the value of picturebooks reside.

**Notes**

1. Some viewers of this image may disagree that the eyes are downcast and may genuinely see a bold, full frontal gaze. I can see this too and believe the ambiguity stems from the slightest of differences between the ways in which the left and right eyes are rendered. As a result, the portrait gains in animation and depth as the artist’s gaze flickers before our eyes. Unfortunately reproduction of this beautiful and moving drawing is not possible.

2. *Face* and *physiognomy* were the words that Wittgenstein used as labels for that kind of understanding which appears to need no mediation. According to this view, places, people, scenes, images present us with a face, a physiognomy, and we recognise them, understand them, instantaneously.
3. The situation is slightly different when we take away the words and look at pictures in sequence for the gaps, the ‘jump cuts’ from image to image coerce us into making links and connections. Something like a story, a thread begins to emerge, but again, in the absence of words, what story emerges depends upon the interpretation that the reader places upon the represented events. Perry Nodelman provides a convincing account of how different viewers tell different stories when shown the same sequence of pictures (Nodelman, 1988: 193–195).


5. I make no apology for using once more a book that has been referred to repeatedly as an example of picturebook artistry, almost since the day it was first published. Fine literature always repays repeated study and besides, everyone knows it – if not, then they should – and I need an example that makes crystal clear the point that I want to make. Gorilla fits the bill perfectly.

References


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