

Exploring Picturebooks Through the Model of Double-Scope Stories

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Abstract

This article investigates the picturebook as the aesthetic object that integrates the verbal narrative and the visual narrative, and hinges on interactions between the two levels of narratives. Often drawing on the theory of semiotics, picturebook scholars have revealed the complex interactions between the verbal and the visual, the demands that a picturebook may put on the reader, and the hermeneutic nature of picturebook reading. Two significant issues, however, still need to be further explored: why the reader can possibly relate and integrate the verbal and the visual, and why some readers may turn to pictures more than to words, or vice versa. I propose to explore the two issues primarily through the model of double-scope stories within the theoretical framework of cognitive criticism. I argue that the universality of the intellectual and imaginative activity of conceptual blending makes it possible for the reader to relate pictures to words, or vice versa, and to integrate them. Though to make meaning from the picturebook as a double-scope story requires the reader to integrate the two levels of narratives, the verbal and the visual can sometimes constitute two relatively independent input stories. Readers may be more oriented towards either one of them, partially due to the difference in their innate cognitive structures. The arguments will be illustrated with a close analysis of Lane Smith's picturebook *Grandpa Green*.

Keywords: picturebook, cognitive criticism, conceptual blending, double-scope story

1. The Two Levels of Narratives in Picturebooks

The word “picturebook” has become a household word in the area of children’s literature. “Picture” and “book” are put together as one word without a hyphen in between to denote the close interrelationship and interaction between the verbal and the visual,¹ which is

deemed characteristic of the picturebook medium (e.g. Hallberg, 1982; Schwarcz, 1982; Nodelman, 1988; Pullman, 1989; Lewis, 1996; Sipe, 1998; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). Picturebooks are not any books that contain pictures, but those where the visual and the verbal share in the workload of conveying meanings and developing narratives. The books in which pictures only serve as illustrations for words and do not add anything substantial to words are often excluded from the category of the picturebook. As mapped out in Nikolajeva and Scott's important book-length study *How Picturebooks Work* (2006, pp. 2-6), current approaches to picturebooks include for instance the investigation of picturebooks for educational purposes, especially as a vehicle for facilitating socialisation and language acquisition (e.g. Spitz, 1999), the examination of picturebooks as art objects with a particular emphasis on the design and artistic technique (e.g. Lacy, 1986), historical and international surveys of picturebooks that focus on their thematic variety (e.g. Bader, 1976), and so on. Recent decades have witnessed a surge of aesthetic approaches to picturebooks—seeing picturebooks as aesthetic objects that consist in both words and pictures, and hinge on interactions between the two levels of narratives. Some scholars for instance draw metaphors from music to describe the visual-verbal relationship in a picturebook, such as the “duet” (Cech, 1983-1984, p. 118), or “counterpoint” (Pullman, 1989, p. 167) between words and pictures. Among various aesthetic approaches, the theoretical framework of semiotics has often been drawn on, because it can offer significant insights into the essential characteristics of and differences between the visual and the verbal.

Picturebook scholars have revealed the complex interactions between the verbal and the visual, the demands that a picturebook may put on the reader, and the hermeneutic nature of picturebook reading. Lewis employs the notion of “polysystemy” to describe the reading of a picturebook as “the piecing together of text out of different kinds of signifying systems” (1996, p. 105). Nikolajeva and Scott argue that picturebooks communicate “by means of two separate sets of signs, the iconic and the conventional” (2006, p. 1). Iconic signs are those in which the sign is a direct representation of its signified, whereas conventional signs possess no direct relationship with the signified (p. 1). The examples that Nikolajeva and Scott give are: the picture of a printer is an iconic sign, a direct representation of the object printer; the word “print” is a conventional sign, as there is no direct relationship between the word “print” and the object signified. In a picturebook, the primary function of pictures, complex iconic signs, is to “describe or represent,” and that of words, complex conventional signs, is to “narrate” (p. 1). The reader's movement between the visual and the verbal constitutes a hermeneutic circle, starting with the verbal, proceeding to the visual, and returning to the verbal with a renewed understanding and interpretation, or in the other way around (p. 2). The significant contribution of Nikolajeva and Scott is to develop a spectrum of the word-image dynamics. For instance, the visual and the verbal can be “symmetrical” with or “complementary” to each other. The verbal can “expand” or “enhance,” and even completely “counterpoint” (that is, contradict) the visual, and vice versa. In some cases, a “sylleptic” picturebook offers the verbal narrative

and the visual narrative independent of each other (pp. 8-26).

Compared to Nikolajeva and Scott's study, Sipe (1998) offers a more elaborate explanation of the hermeneutic circle of reading picturebooks by associating the hermeneutic circle with the essential difference between the verbal narrative and the visual narrative. Sipe builds his arguments on the tradition that Lessing (1766/1984) starts by distinguishing arts grounded in simultaneity of perception (such as painting, sculpture) from arts grounded in successivity of perception (such as music, literature). Simultaneity of perception corresponds to the mode of space in which we experience the world, and successivity of perception the mode of time. A painting and a sculpture can be taken in all at once, whereas in listening to a piece of music or reading literature, our experience unfolds in a linear progression of time. The hybrid art forms that are based on both simultaneity and successivity of perception include opera, drama, film, and picturebook. Jakobsen takes up the tradition started by Lessing yet with modifications. He suggests that words are not purely, but *primarily* temporally linear, and pictures are not purely, but *primarily* simultaneous or spatial (1971, p. 340). Drawing on Lessing and Jakobsen, Sipe therefore argues that the essential difference between the verbal narrative and the visual narrative in a picturebook creates a tension—the primarily temporal nature of the verbal urges us to read on, whereas the primarily spatial nature of the visual seduces us to pause, to stop. This tension gives rise to the hermeneutic nature of picturebook reading:

to go backward and forward in order to relate an illustration to the one before or after it, to relate the text on one page to an illustration on a previous or successive page; or to understand new ways in which the combination of the text and picture on one page relate to preceding or succeeding pages. (1998, p. 101)

Sipe moreover borrows the concept of transmediation from semiotics to account for the reader's movement across sign systems in a potentially inexhaustible sequence (pp. 101-103). Sipe's theory, however, still does not solve the significant issue of *why it is possible* to relate words to pictures, or in the other way around, to relate pictures to words, and to integrate the two levels of narratives. It moreover does not explain why some readers may turn to pictures more than to words, or vice versa. This difference in the way readers attend the visual and the verbal is particularly relevant to the discussion of picturebooks, if we remember that picturebooks are often shared between adults and children. Adults and children may display different tendencies towards the verbal or the visual—empirical studies have demonstrated that children would pour over the visual (e.g. Arizpe & Styles, 2016), while adults often rush through the plotline stated in the verbal.

2. The Model of Double-Scope Stories

I propose to explore two issues, that is, (1) why it is possible to relate the visual and the verbal to each other and to integrate the two levels of narratives, (2) how the reader

can possibly display different tendencies towards the verbal and the visual, primarily through the model of double-scope stories within the theoretical framework of cognitive criticism. Referring substantially to experimental psychology, neuroscience and brain research, cognitive criticism provides a cross-disciplinary approach to the issues of reading, literacy and literature (Stockwell, 2002, pp. 1-11). Cognitive criticism in literary studies blossomed towards the end of the 1980s, though its exploration in the area of children's literature is quite a recent phenomenon. To employ cognitive criticism in literary studies, scholars link strands of literary scholarship to human cognitive-affective skills, capacities, and mechanisms rather than directly borrow theories from cognitive science. In other words, the essence of cognitive criticism is not to embellish literary scholarship with scientific hard facts, but to seek a "rapprochement" between these areas traditionally deemed completely separate, and to see what new insights can be engendered from this rapprochement (Richardson, 1999, p. 158). Stockwell moreover demonstrates that cognitive criticism is fundamentally a new way of thinking about literature (2002, p. 6). Nikolajeva further elaborates that the particular explanatory potential of cognitive criticism lies in the issue of how a text is constructed in a way that can "maximise" or "optimise" readerly activity (2014, p. 4). Cognitive criticism therefore affords a way to connect potential readerly activity to the affordances of the picturebook.

The notion of double-scope stories corresponds to the cognitive activity of conceptual blending. Human beings construct mental spaces at the same time when they think, talk, and act (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, p. 40). These mental spaces are "conceptual packets" (p. 40) or "domains" (Stockwell, 2002, p. 107), which consist in long-term schematic knowledge (also referred to as "frames") and long-term specific knowledge (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, p. 40). Conceptual blending occurs when two mental spaces are combined "selectively and under constraints" to create another mental space, from which new structure and meaning arise (Turner, 2002, p. 10). Taken apart for the purpose of analysis, conceptual blending can be seen as happening in three stages: 1) mapping between elements of two mental spaces, in other words, finding counterpart connections in them, 2) projecting selectively different elements of the mental spaces to a blend, and 3) emergent structure arising from the blend (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, pp. 40-44; Turner, 2003, p. 127). Conceptual blending, as a universal cognitive ability shared by adults and children, occurs at lightening speed often without conscious awareness. It is involved in every aspect of human activity from everyday bodily action to imaginative creation (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, pp. 17-31). Turner further proposes the notion of "double-scope story" as a literary concept to denote that "input stories with different (and often clashing) organizing frames ... are blended into a third story whose organizing frame includes parts of each of the input organizing frames" (2003, p. 128). New meaning and structure arise from within the blended story (p. 128). Turner asserts that children even as young as 2 years old should have no difficulty in understanding blended stories (p. 134), and further argues that blending is the "mainstay" of children's literature (2002, p. 12).

The model of double-scope stories is especially applicable to the picturebook medium,

because the picturebook fundamentally embraces the mode of a double-scope story. The spectrum of the visual-verbal dynamics in the picturebook varies from symmetrical to counterpointing. New meaning and structure arise from the blend that is the result of assembling the two input stories conveyed in the verbal and the visual, which operate on not necessarily clashing yet indeed different organising frames—temporality and spatiality. I am not suggesting a binary division of the visual and the verbal into spatiality and temporality, because the visual can also convey the sense of temporality, for instance, through motion lines, and the verbal surely can construct the spatial aspect of the fictional world. Particularly important in this regard though, is that in picturebooks the visual has more potential for constructing spatiality whilst the verbal for temporality, as Nikolajeva and Scott (2006, pp. 139-172) and Sipe (1998, pp. 98-101) have demonstrated amongst others. The model of double-scope stories and the relevant concept of conceptual blending have particular explanatory potential in exploring how the reader can possibly relate and integrate the visual and the verbal in terms of the innate cognitive structures. I argue that the universality of the intellectual and imaginative activity of conceptual blending enables the reader to relate pictures to words, or vice versa, and to integrate them. Though to make meaning from the picturebook as a double-scope story requires the reader to integrate the two levels of narratives, the verbal and the visual can sometimes constitute two relatively independent input stories. Readers may be more oriented towards either one of them, partially due to the difference in their innate cognitive structures. Moreover, I suggest the blended story that results from assembling the two input stories may constitute the input story for another round of the formation of a new double-scope story, which therefore brings in an alternative perspective on the hermeneutic circle of picturebook reading.

3. Exemplifying With a Close Analysis of *Grandpa Green*

I will illustrate my arguments with a close analysis of Lane Smith's picturebook *Grandpa Green* (henceforth *Grandpa*). When analysing the primary text, to more fully illustrate the input stories, I draw on two other concepts within the theoretical framework of cognitive criticism, that is, schema and brain laterality, which will be explained in detail when pertinent. The readers that I mention, for instance, the adult reader, the (young) child reader, are implied readers constructed and evoked by the text as opposed to real, flesh-and-blood readers. *Grandpa* tells the story of a great-grandfather who goes through various experiences in his lifetime. For instance, he grows up on a farm, gets chickenpox in nursery school, reads stories about secret gardens and wizards, steals his first kiss in junior school, goes to a world war, meets his future wife, and gets married. He and his great-grandchild play and enjoy horticulture together in an exquisitely crafted garden, where memories are passed down in the various shapes of topiary groves and trees.

In a first reading, until coming to the tenth spread, the reader may find it difficult to find the connections between the little boy represented in the visual and “he” that appears throughout the verbal narrative. They may interpret the little boy depicted in the visual

as the person who goes through all the events narrated in the verbal, that is, the visual point of view corresponds with the verbal narrative voice—third-person omniscient. The ensuing problem however is that in the visual the little boy does not show the slightest trace of growing up or aging. He goes to nursery school, junior school, and war, and gets married as a little boy. The sentence in the lower right corner of the ninth spread “At least to hear *him* tell it” (original emphasis) however challenges the interpretation that the little boy depicted in the visual corresponds to “he” in the verbal. Apparently, a narrator retelling what s/he has been told hides behind the verbal narrative. The identity of the verbal narrator is immediately revealed, when the reader turns to the tenth spread. On this spread, the verbal text says, “They had children, lots more grandchildren, a great-grandchild, *me*” (spread 10; my emphasis), while the visual presents the little boy wave his hands as if to draw the reader’s attention, and show to the reader “Oh, this is *me*.” The tenth spread prompts the reader to map the visual image of the little boy onto the narrator of the story presented in the verbal, that is, the little boy is the great-grandson retelling the great-grandfather’s life stories. This interpretation is reinforced on the fourteenth spread, which depicts the little boy bring to an old man the floppy straw hat, while the verbal text on the previous spread says, “and he sometimes forgets things like his favourite floppy straw hat” (spread 13).

In *Grandpa* therefore, the visual presents an input story, in which a little boy plays in a garden full of topiary images with an old man. The organising frame of this input story is spatiality and play. The verbal presents another input story, where the great-grandson narrates the life experiences he hears from his great-grandfather. Its organising frame is temporality, and the narrative act of retelling, which suggests human interaction. The tone in which the great-grandson retells his great-grandfather’s life stories is matter-of-factly, almost cold. For instance, “He grew up on a farm with pigs and corn and carrots” (spread 3), “In nursery school he got chickenpox” (spread 4), “After senior school his wish was to study horticulture” (spread 6), “but he went to a world war instead” (spread 7). It is the visual that renders the great-grandfather’s life experiences into vivid, emotionally charged and powerful images. Mapping across the two input stories, we can get: the little boy in the picture is the counterpart of the great-grandson in the verbal, the old man is the counterpart of the great-grandfather, and most of the topiary images correspond to the episodes from the great-grandfather’s life experiences. These elements (the little boy—the great-grandson, the old man—the great-grandfather, the topiary images—the great-grandfather’s life experiences) are projected into the blended story, where new meaning emerges: the spatial concept garden acquires a temporal dimension, that is, the part of the great-grandfather’s life that is irreversibly lost; the spatiotemporal concept garden gains another layer of cognitive-affective meaning since it is also the great-grandfather’s mindscape, in other words, what he remembers and wants to share with his great-grandchild.

Compared to the verbal input story, the visual one is more closely bound up with conceptual blending, as the topiary images are an immediate visualisation of the blending of conceptual domains. The first spread for instance represents a gigantic grove shaped

into a baby. The baby is green all over, and a curly sprout bristles, resembling the hair of a newborn. Tears well out, and on the next spread are revealed to be fountain water springing out of a hose. The fifth spread depicts groves shaped into the characters from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* that the great-grandfather read when he was a child staying home from school, including the lion, the straw man, the tin man, and the dog Toto. On the seventh spread, the cruelty of the war that the great-grandfather went to is toned down through integrating the war images with the groves. For instance, the fireball shooting from the cannon is represented as a small ball of green leaves protruding from a tree stump, and the fires are represented as red flowers. The topiary images constantly integrate two conceptual domains: trees and people, trees and animals, trees and fictional characters, trees and war, and so on. The topiary images that rely on conceptual blending can create the effect of schema disruption. Schema in the context of literary analysis refers to readers' existing knowledge and experience of a recurrent pattern that they bring to bear on a text (Stockwell, 2002, pp. 75-89), in other words, static repertoires (Herman, 2002, p. 89; Oziewicz, 2015, p. 58; Trites, 2014, p. 38). To take the first spread as an example, readers (both adult and child) have a stronger schema of babies as human beings than as trees. Schema disruption presents a challenge to readers' existing repertoire of knowledge and experience, resulting in changes in their existing schema, which, in turn, causes them to view the familiar in a different light, that is, the effect of defamiliarisation (p. 79). The device of defamiliarisation effectively grasps readers' attention from the very beginning of the text.

The verbal input story organises around a linear progression of time, starting with the sentence "He was born a really long time ago," which continues on to the next spread—"before computers or mobile phones or television" (spread 2). The second half of the sentence gives more information on the setting. Given that the television has the longest history among the three, the story is very likely to start around the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Adult readers, who are equipped with historical background knowledge or have lived through such an age, are able to figure out what "before computers or mobiles or television" means. For child readers, even though "computers," "mobiles," "television" are concrete gadgets, complementing the more abstract "a really long time ago," they may still have difficulty in understanding the temporal aspect of the fictional world. Using the three tokens as markers of time puts high demands on child readers who grow up with computers, mobile phones, and television. They are required to strain their imagination in order to picture what life may be like without these technologies. Child readers' possible difficulty in dealing with the three tokens may moreover have to do with their perception of time, which depends on their brain development.

Recent studies of the brain (e.g. McGilchrist, 2012; Panksepp & Biven, 2012) have acknowledged the function of the evolutionarily most recent layer of the brain, that is, the lateralised cerebral cortex, and its distinction from and connection to the more ancient "subcortical regions" in a relationship of oppositional pairing described as "up/down" (McGilchrist, 2012, p. 9). Located in the more ancient subcortical regions structurally

below the cerebral cortex (Panksepp & Biven, 2012, p. 2) are seven primal emotional systems, which give basic “value structures” to “higher mental activities” (p. 12). The cerebral cortex is also named “the neocortical “thinking cap” ” (p. 1), to which we owe largely the way of perceiving, experiencing and thinking about the world (e.g. McGilchrist, 2012). The bihemispheric structure (that is, the division of the cerebral cortex into the right hemisphere and the left hemisphere) gives rise to two fundamentally different ways of seeing and experiencing the world (McGilchrist, 2012; Panksepp & Biven, 2012). Human beings’ interaction with the world is synthesised from the workings of the two hemispheres that cooperate but more often conflict with each other. Though both hemispheres are involved in every human activity, there is striking difference in how the two hemispheres attend to the world and the self in it (McGilchrist, 2012). The sense of time passing is associated with sustained attention (pp. 75-76), that is, the type of attention that closely relates to a coherent perception of the world (pp. 38-39). Since the right hemisphere is the province of sustained attention, the sense of the passage of time, especially time as “something *lived through*, with a past, present and future” arises in the right hemisphere (p. 76; my emphasis). The left hemisphere however tends to perceive time as “an infinite series of static moments” rather than as “a single, unified motion” (p. 76). The left hemisphere thereby has a particular advantage where there is an emphasis on “a point in time” (p. 77). The right hemisphere, compared to the left hemisphere, matures earlier, and gets more involved in early childhood mental activities (p. 88). Presumably, this suggests that children are very likely to have a stronger sense of time as a flow, something to be “lived through” rather than as a series of separate, static points. Very young children “live in” time before their awareness of the passage of time comes into being (Gozlan, 2013, para. 4-5). Therefore child readers, whose left hemisphere is less operational than the right, may have difficulty in coping with the three tokens, that is, the three static points employed as the temporal markers of the fictional world constructed in *Grandpa*.

To unravel the temporal and cognitive-affective implications of the garden represented primarily as a spatial landscape in the visual of *Grandpa*, the reader is required to find counterpart relations between the verbal input story and the visual one, and to integrate them into a new blend story. Compared to the verbal input story, the visual one affords a more direct, immediate visualisation of the blending of conceptual domains through portraying various topiary images that represent people, animals, fictional characters, and so on. This effectively grasps the reader’s attention from the very start, and sustains the attraction of attention throughout. Since, as Turner argues, children as young as two years old can deal with conceptual blending, the topiary images should work for both the adult reader and the child reader. The verbal input story in *Grandpa* organises around a linear progression of time. The linear organisation of the verbal may pose a particular challenge to the young child reader because of the brain development. This may impact the young child reader’s way of assembling the two input stories and deriving new meaning and structure from the blend story.

4. Conclusion

I have argued in this article that, on the one hand, the picturebook medium that integrates two levels of narratives works and plays with the fundamental human capacity for conceptual blending. It is the intellectual and imaginative activity of conceptual blending that enables the reader to relate the visual to the verbal, or vice versa, and to integrate them. On the other hand, readers may take different senses of pleasure from the two input stories. For instance, young child readers may indulge themselves in the visual input story of *Grandpa* that organises around spatiality and play rather than wrack their brains to follow the linear progression of the verbal input story, which may result from the difference in the brain development of adults and children. This, however, does not make the picturebook less enjoyable for young child readers. The relative independent pleasures that readers may possibly take in the input stories can be heightened in the medium of picturebooks because the visual based on the mode of space may be a more efficient means of offering to readers an immediate experience of the fictional world. Deploying the model of double-scope stories has particular explanatory potential for the discussion of picturebooks because the model connects the unique characteristic of the picturebook medium to the inherent cognitive activity of conceptual blending, therefore adding a potential significant theoretical dimension to picturebook research.

Note

- 1 Not all picturebooks contain both the verbal and the visual. The term wordless picturebook, sometimes also referred to as “wordless narrative” (Beckett, 2012, p. 121) or “wordless picture-book” (Nieres-Chevrel, 2010, p. 137), tends to denote “a text where the visual image carries the weight of the meaning and where ... the absence of words is ‘not simple feat of artistry [instead it is] totally relevant and in keeping with topic’” (Arizpe, 2014, p. 94). But the focus of this article is on picturebooks that rely on both the verbal and the visual.

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