

Illustrations in children's books

Effect and effectiveness

Gorġ Mallia

“What we have seen with our eyes remains in the mind long after the spoken or written word has been dissipated into the air”

Within pedagogy, visuals are an arbitrary element, but often an important asset. It is an element that instructs through suggestion - an evocation of the familiar within the mind, placed within an unfamiliar context. Conditionally, both are jointly accepted because of their association.

The impact of the visual images cannot be underestimated, not only on the young mind but also on that of the adult. “What we have seen with our eyes remains in the mind long after the spoken or written word has been dissipated into the air” (Whalley and Chester, 1988 p.11).

Here I am proposing a brief **review of the literature** and **commentary** on the nature and effect of illustrations, particularly those to be found in children's books. The idea is to promote awareness of the mechanics of this very important element, providing a knowledge that can help turn its presence into a pedagogical tool.

In an excellent compendium of research done on Visual Culture through comics in America, Wigand (1986) comments that within learning,

Generally it has been found that a visual presentation is superior to an auditory presentation, an audiovisual presentation is not significantly superior to a visual presentation, but it is better than an auditory presentation alone. (p.35).

When dealing with the way we process visual information, he writes that:

Winn (1980) defines image as “a sensory (visual) experience in which there is some similarity between what is sensed by the mind's eye and corresponding percepts, derived from the real word experience by the physical eye” The experience of the image then, is constructed from stored information in the memory and resembles perceptual experience. (p.36)



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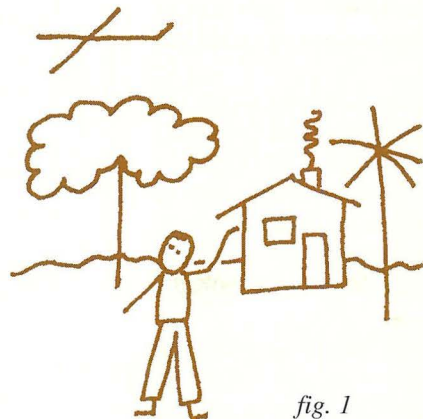


fig. 1

Note *fig.1* taken from Johnson and Johnson (1971).

Though the match-stick rendering necessarily provides stereotypes, the slanting roof of the *house* is culturally tied to those countries where such a construction exists. But, far from restricting the encoding of such a message to these countries, this case lends itself to being an example of how cyclical in nature the acquisition of a visual language is.

Malta is a case in point. By reason of our temperate climate, houses are built with flat rather than slanting roofs. So such a picture **should** not immediately communicate an accurate message of a *house*.

Preschool and early Primary education in Malta often makes use of teaching material that is most commonly of English origin. As a result, the basic stereotype pattern for *house* stored within the child's acquired code for pictorial recognition is often that illustrated here, rather than an ethnically accurate one in which the roof would be drawn flat. If the Maltese child were in fact to be asked to draw a simple house, more often than not the slanting roof would be an item in the drawing.

An acquired visual code

So a visual code that is acquired, no matter how simple and basic, could have nothing whatsoever to do with the reality surrounding the receiver. It is in fact true that

...despite the richness and diversity of the art created by human cultures around the world, artists everywhere are constrained and stimulated by certain common aims, common problems and common procedures. (Layton, 1981 p.211).

This statement is not universal at all levels, but it can be taken as a very useful working premise.

As a result of this stimulation, certain messages that would be normally difficult to decode because they are outside the individual's culture would be acquired, so to speak, *out-of-awareness*, through constant contact. Then they are assimilated within the individual's code dictionary.

This does not remove culture from being the major stumbling block in cross-cultural communication in general and visual communication in particular. What I am implying is that the visual can cut down on the obstacles and become an easier bridge to cross as it spans the different outlooks. McLuhan and Fiore's (1967) “the rational man in our Western

'and what is the use of a book,' thought Alice, 'without pictures or conversation?'



Illustration: Jemmy Thorne

Culture is a visual man" (p.44) can (within limitations) be extended to cultures beyond the western one - can in fact span across cultures.

But there can be no question about the strength of a visual communications medium created by and operating within one culture and using its codes.

We appreciate and understand most of the implied messages in Velasquez's paintings of his royal patron's family and entourage - but probably not as much on the everyday, familiar level as his seventeenth century compatriots did.

The codes of dress, body-language, interior design, etc; the intimate knowledge of the people portrayed; even an intrinsic awareness of the artistic fashions of the day within which Velasquez was (creatively) working: all contribute to recognisability of the familiar. That is, that the message encoded in the painting must have been more easily decodable by Spanish contemporaries of the same class, than by a Maltese buying a print of it now at the open air market in Valletta.

The fact that the print is actually bought is significant and can be made to back the above claims for the visual spanning of cultures.

But the print could be bought for a number of reasons which probably have nothing whatsoever to do with Velasquez's original intentions and the ones understood by his Spanish contemporaries. The print could have been bought, say, for the quaintness, by 20th century, Maltese standards) of the costumes depicted. Possibly for such mundane reasons as the predominant colour scheme fitting a convenient space on a compatibly painted wall. Even that the main characters may be looking in a direction that would not clash with that of the characters in the other prints in the room. All valid reasons on a mundane level, but hardly decoding the encoded message. Noise in the form of the codes transformed by space and time effects.

Still, once the print is on the wall, then a situation similar to that of the child acquiring the code of the slanted roof could result - the costumes, surroundings and over-all message of the painting impinging itself on the awareness of those constantly exposed to it.

The next time that Maltese person looks for a print, it could be possible that the *out-of-awareness* acquisition of the new codes makes the reasons of his search different from the previous ones.

Still - maybe - that same person would not be so eager to get a print of a medicine man's mask from some *African* culture of which he is less aware than that of seventeenth century Spain. But the process is the same and only less, or more effective depending on the degree to which the person is acquainted with the culture in question.

McLuhan's *Global Village* pretty much sums up the state of ethnic culture. Accepted, there is a difficulty in the recognition of the

figurative representation of the unknown by those not educated in the relative codes, but borders have been thinned out by modern media methods and awareness of an individual culture is no longer exclusively restricted to that people living it. So perception of the ethnically *strange* visual image that stems from a culture that is different from the one we experience daily is more possible in today's world with its satellite-linked television coverage than it would have been even a few decades ago.

So, when I speak of visuals within one culture, I also include the huge overlap, which practically encompasses most of the media-dominated world, at the same time keeping in mind that

Overall, research on interpreting pictorial cues and features demonstrates that although some fundamental skills such as object recognition are essentially innate, young children and adults without ample picture-viewing experience have trouble decoding pictorial information that is abstract, complex, or represented in culture-bound conventions - especially when the objects and concepts shown are unfamiliar... In fact, pictures are heavily laden with culture-bound conventions that must be learned if they are to be understood. (Levie, 1987 pp.7-8)

To illustrate the point:

...once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, 'and what is the use of a book,' thought Alice, 'without pictures or conversation?' (Carroll, Purnell Edition 1975, p.15).

That extract from the very beginning of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* competently sums up what most children think about the subject.

Pictures in books

The visual dimension within literature has always been there for varying reasons, often depending on a book's intended market. Pleasure reading books for an adult market are predominantly verbal, with the illustration on the cover more a marketing gimmick (standing out on the bookseller's rack) than a real aid to cognisance.

By "adult" here I mean the educated norm who reads books for pleasure - the less educated would not resort to books anyway, and those books aimed at basic adult education would follow the format prescribed for a younger market, but with a varied content. The same applies to technical books, but I shall go into the mechanics of instructional design further down.

Goldsmith (1987) writes that it would seem from the literature that in a culture where pictures are a regular feature of the environment, most children are pictorially literate by the time they are about 8 or 9.(p.68)

“**Illustration often helps with rounding off the meaning of the text, producing as complete a communicative exercise as possible**”

We appreciate and understand most of the implied messages in Velasquez's paintings of his royal patron's family and entourage - but probably not as much on the everyday, familiar level as his seventeenth century compatriots did.

Stewig (1980) acknowledges the importance of the visual stimulation provided by illustration within children's books, dedicating three chapters in his work specifically to its role.

The first of these, "Studying Book illustration is a detailed examination of artistic techniques and styles, with a special look at the influence of art movements such as impressionism, pointillism, Les Fauves, folk art, abstract art and surrealism - putting illustrations on the level of "high" art, as well as emphasising its importance as an educational tool.

The author writes about the main techniques used in illustration: watercolour, the woodcut, collage, stone lithography and photography - which is limited and non-comprehensive. Although these are popular techniques used for printed reproduction, one must not forget the extensive use by illustrators of coloured inks and air-brushed acrylics that have nowadays become very popular.

Accurate and interesting is his look at the visual elements: line, colour, proportion, detail and space - all of which vary enormously... indeed, from a simple figure in an empty panel, done in black ink in a line the thickness of which does not vary, to an almost photographically realistic rendition in colour giving the most minute details possible to imagine.

Possibly more important to the aims of the present work is Stewig's chapter on "Picture Books" in which he writes:

A picture storybook is simply a book in which the story and pictures are of equal importance. The two elements work together to produce an artistic unit stronger than either the words or pictures would be alone. (p.97).

Apart from the obvious analysis of picture technique, the author takes into consideration other elements that make such books what they are: i.e. shape and size, binding and paper, type faces and page layout - logically, all reflecting as accurately as possible the "feel" of the contents and integrating with them and the visuals to produce as complete a totality as possible.

In his introduction to the chapter "Wordless Picture Books" Stewig backs his case for textless books with referring to the prehistoric caves of France and Spain, Bishop Odo's Lascaux tapestry and stained glass windows - all cases used by comics' historians to make their case for that particular genre. "Why have these ... been so enthusiastically accepted by children and by adults who work with them?" asks Stewig.

There are three elements peculiar to wordless books that make them particularly attractive to young "readers".

First, children today are visually oriented. Television is such a pervasive element in society that when students graduate from high school they have spent more time viewing television than they have spent in school itself. Influenced almost from birth by this medium, children have been unconsciously inculcated with the

importance of the language of images. However, such awareness does not necessarily guarantee the ability to evaluate visual Images. A direct relation exists between children' immersion in television and their acceptance of wordless books.

Second, such books are popular because they are more accessible than other more complex genres. It is not necessary to be able to read or to read well to derive pleasure from following the plot of wordless books. These books tend on the surface at least, to be plot-oriented, and children like action.

Third, wordless books allow wider interpretation of the author's message than is usual in books with words. Children are not held as closely to the author's specific intent when the story is presented in picture form (pp.144-146)

Krasny Brown (1986) gives both the case against and for pictures in books.

Her case against is built on research she quotes that proves that when children first learn to read, pictures will hinder the process, being accepted by the learners as an integral part of the text, which therefore becomes unrecognizable once the visual is removed.

...even when illustrations are carefully related to the text, they may depict diverse, complex story content. When the task is deciphering words, pictures don't always help. If a child comes to a word he or she already knows, then the picture is superfluous. A youngster who doesn't know a word and looks to the illustration for a clue to its identity may be misled by unrelated things in the picture. We begin to see how critical is the relationship between picture and text. (p.34)

Another case against is one she is cautious about: the spoon-feeding of visuals as opposed to the leaving of a blank slate for the child's own creativity. But Dr Brown contends this in the sense that, albeit the truth of this, other images are communicated that the child may use and build creatively upon.

The case for pictures

The author's case for pictures is, to my mind, much stronger - a three-pronged argument beginning with the obvious: **appeal** - the attraction of the visual that entices the young reader (as her sister's book would have done Alice had it been illustrated). Then there is **reinforcing meaning**:

...that the addition of pictures improves what children remember and understand of stories is well documented. The claim most often researched is: children learn better the story content that appears in both pictures and text.(p .36).

From there she goes one step further: pictures can also be used for adding meaning - those cases in which the visual complements



painting detail: Velasquez

“There is a purpose for a picture - we are embellishing, or we are enlarging, or we are involving ourselves in some very deep way with the writer of the book, so that the book (when it is finally illustrated) means more than it did when it was just written (Maurice Sendak)”

the text instead of illustrating it, which is a different case all together. This is aptly pointed out by Whalley & Chester (1988),

Pictures' are independent works - they can stand by themselves, or they can be put into books in which they may or may not be relevant. Book illustration is something quite different and cannot properly exist outside its text - artist who forget this do so at their peril. Good book illustration should continue or enhance the narrative of verse that it accompanies. It should not overwhelm it, or contradict it, for the eyes of the child are sharp. Unlike the picture, which often makes its own point, illustration usually forms part of a sequence of events. (p.11)

And what do children prefer when it comes to illustration? At least according to Krasny Brown (1986), testing a set of pictures of the same situation executed in different styles on kindergarten to eleven year olds, primarily children go for realism. The definition of this word within the context, though, has to be taken to be wider than the lexical one - including as close to "realistic" a rendition of the fantastic as possible. For example, if a mouse were to speak, and he was a country mouse, he can't be rendered as a real mouse, but upright in posture and "dressed" in the stereotypical trappings that would represent his station.

A question of age

The younger children's choice was more varied, while that of the oldest (eleven year olds) the most stable.

Peeck (1987) refers to literature to be explicit about this.

Age differences relevant to motivational-affective roles were observed in a number of early studies and summarized in reviews by Spaulding (1955), Travers and Alvarado (1970), and others. Thus, it was found that young children prefer realistic pictures with colour and relatively simple design, whereas older children and adults prefer more complex pictures, perhaps because of an increased capacity to handle perceptual complexity (Travers & Alvarado, 1970).

Also speaking of picture books in her excellent analysis of contemporary children's literature Egoff (1981) says:

...the genre which seems to be the simplest actually is the most complex, deploying two art forms, the pictorial and the literary, to engage the interest of two audiences (child and adult). Combine these attributes and it is undeniably arguable that the picture book represents the most diverse, the most didactic, and the most debated of all forms of present-day children's literature. (p.248)

The union of the visual with accompanying

text (or vice-versa, depending on emphasis) is spoken of by Egoff as being a powerful vehicle for conveying not just the factual realities of the child's society, but even the more subtle, but just as real insecurities and questions that form an integral part of growing up, or just being a child.

Egoff tends to be rather derogatory when writing of the visual explosion of the sixties. There, the sheer joy of experimenting with different (often non-representational) styles, led to an almost art for art's sake context to the books. The authors tended to forget the actual content and readership. The art (becoming works of art) predominated on what the author describes as "an often mediocre text".

Only where the balance is kept and it portrays the child's world (subtle or obvious) is Egoff really happy. But she goes beyond even that:

The modern picture-book world in general raises the question: Is the picture book any longer only the preserve of the little child? It would seem not. A new market is already commercially viable - adults, teenagers, older children. Perhaps the greatest success of the "new-wave" picture books is the realization that in format and artistry, they are books for everybody." (p.270)

By 'new wave' the author is referring to the new trends not just in picture-book production, but generally in children's literature - i.e. the thematic preoccupation with "experimentation, candor, visual and textual sophistication, social conscience" (Egoff, 1981, p.270) - making the books just as adult oriented as they are child oriented.

In his short history of children's book illustration, Feaver (1977) does not balk (albeit with often implied negative undertones) from treating comics and animated cartoon characters simultaneously with within-book illustration proper. He writes,

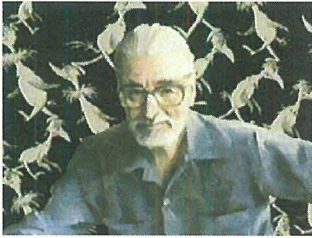
Children's book illustration is suspended in this welter of images, occasionally bobbing into fine art waters but more often drifting in commercial shallows. A tiny proportion survives to become classic. The fittest, not necessarily the most deserving. Noddy and Superman remain, unaffected by condemnations of their characters and appearance. Tenniel's portrayal of the Mad Hatter has outlived all others. Peter Rabbit, Mickey Mouse and Babar seem imperishable. Hoffmann's 'Little Suck-a-Thumb', 'Johnny Head-in-Air' and 'Struwelpeter' have remained in print continuously ever since they first appeared in 1845. Edward Lear's limerick personalities have persisted since 1846. Survival depends on continuing demand. (p.9)

The emphasis in this particular book is on the variety of aims that illustration has. More particularly:

...illustration is more than a means of



illustration: Maurice Sendak



“A child’s idea of art is a pen-and-ink drawing filled in with flat colour, with no modulation and no subtlety (Dr. Seuss)”

conveying instruction. ‘There must be above all things the power to slide into another man’s soul,’ Mervyn Peake said. The illustrator has to arouse curiosity, set scenes, spark off reactions. (p.24)

Another illustrator, possibly one of the most known and respected in the field today in America, Maurice Sendak, has this to say on the integration of the visual with the text:

...a picture is there, not because there should be a picture there; there is a purpose for a picture - we are embellishing, or we are enlarging, or we are involving ourselves in some very deep way with the writer of the book, so that the book (when it is finally illustrated) means more than it did when it was just written. Which is not to say we are making the words more important; we are perhaps opening up the words in a way that children at first did not see was possible (Sendak, 1977, p.252).

One of the best children’s books writers/illustrators, the pseudonymous Dr. Seuss [Theodor Geisel (1940-1991)] turns the point around,

Schools send me hundreds of drawings each year, and I find most kids draw as I do - awkwardly. I think I’ve refined my childish drawing so that it looks professional. But kids exaggerate the same way I do. They overlook things they can’t draw, the pencils slip, and they get some funny effects. I’ve learned to incorporate my pencil slips into my style.” And, “Technically, I’m capable of doing more complicated things. But every time I try to do something sophisticated in a children’s book, it fails - it doesn’t attract kids. This is due to the fact that I work the way they work. A child’s idea of art is a pen-and-ink drawing filled in with flat colour, with no modulation and no subtlety.” (Cott, 1983, pp.23-24).

So, taking both these authors’ comments together, arbitrary conclusions can be drawn about the role of illustration (and its varying styles) within a medium the primary aim of which is to communicate with a select group of receivers, often with educational (in the very wide sense of the word) intentions.

But there is text which is designed specifically for instructional use.

Society’s demands

Modern society, built to the tune of gigantic advertising campaigns (as well as to little advertising strategies everywhere) has become extremely exigent regarding the presentation of anything to it. Most children, brought up on the exacting professionalism of television, ad and magazine producers, have had inbred in them requirements that are just as exacting. In this case, the supply has created the demand.

Modern technology, especially the advancement in desktop publishing, helps the individual whose job or desire it is to

communicate in print, to design presentations that are not bland and basic, as was the accepted norm once, but has changed as much as the societal basis has changed on which the concept was built.

Within this dynamic channel, illustration plays an extremely important role. Visuals (including splashed text and strategically placed blocks) are, in fact, the foundations of an effective presentation. Illustration often helps with rounding off the meaning of the text, producing as complete a communicative exercise as possible.

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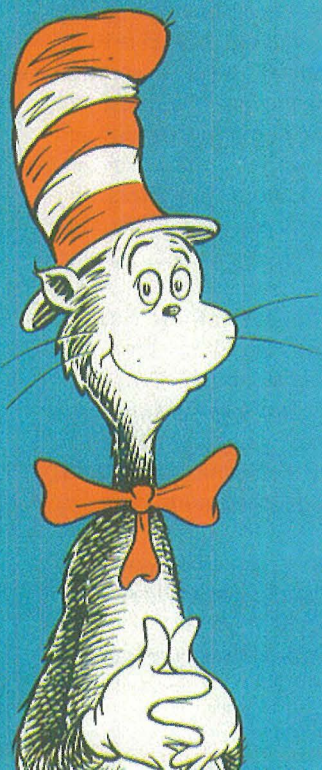


Illustration: Dr. Seuss