Illustrated narrative: a new way of reading

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In the actual context of Children’s Literature, the “illustrated narrative”, which is composed by picture books and illustrated books, is an important field of production, not less than a pregnant field of research. Particularly, they are an important part of Children’s Literature because their special characteristics (like themes, artistic images and text-image interaction) are stimulating for children and teenagers from the point of view of aesthetic, emotional and cognitive development. Recently picture books are developed in a very complex way: the children they represent are very true and real, and the themes they talk about are very close to cognitive and emotional needs of children. In modern picture books, words and images interact in variety of textual forms extremely distinguishing. This complexity encourage a way of reading characterized by an active and interpretative process, because the reader connects constantly words to images as well as images to words. Picture books and illustrated books are precious tools for building a bridge between children and books, for encouraging a love of books in children and for acquiring narrative skills. But for doing this, adults must be facilitator and help children through a dialogical and facilitative approach.

1. Types of books and innovative illustration

The illustrated narrative as discussed here regards picture storybooks, comprising solely pictures, or words and pictures, which tell a story, leaving aside picture dictionaries and concept books. Principally previously addressed to very young children, nowadays, thanks to a sophisticated approach to aesthetics and an innovative narrative complexity, this type of book makes interesting reading also for older children, teenagers and even adults. In this way it is possible to provide today’s youngsters, who are in the main audiovisual and multimediial readers, the pleasure of reading “differently”, by joining words and images (Blezza Picherle, 2002).

As in studies carried out for English books, I have divided illustrated narratives in Illustrated books and Picture books. The former refers to books in which the written text existed before the images, that is the text is already complete in itself and pictures are not needed to understand it (Nikolajeva 1997, 2006; Graham 2005; Nikolajeva, Scott, 2006). The illustrations (of which there may be many), albeit subordinate to the text, make an important contribution to the interpretation of the story (Blezza Picherle, 1996, 2002) as, for example, in different versions of fairy tales or other children’s classics (Zipes, 1996).
The term “Picturebook” refers to a special type of book, in which the meaning of the story is created and expressed through the interaction between words and images (Nikolajeva, 1997; Blezza Picherle, 1996, 2002, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d; Nikolajeva, 2006, p. 247). It is not a “genre”, as sometimes sustained, but a “medium”, which is used for different types of narrative (Nikolajeva, 1997, p. 18). The words and pictures continually recall and refer to each other and constitute an indivisible whole in which neither form of expression has its own narrative autonomy (Blezza Picherle, 1996, 2002; Nikolajeva, 2006, p. 248). The amount of text in relation to pictures varies from case to case: in some books the text may be a few words or sentences, whilst in others the text may be fairly substantial. Scholars suggest a variety of typologies of picturebooks concerning the balance between text and image, according to the parameters adopted (as for example, the format, the type of interaction between the text and the image, the content, the materials, the structure etc). Picturebooks also include “wordless books” which tell a story solely through pictures, with the title the only text present. In these cases the illustrator is the narrator tout court, as he creates and structures a picture story, through which he expresses actions, events, thoughts, emotions, feelings, life styles, values (Blezza Picherle, 2002). Many of these apparently simple picture stories are in reality complex as they require sophisticated cognitive and logical abilities as well as narrative competence to be understood in their deeper meanings, as for example, L’onda by Suzy Lee (2008), the Lapis “Wordless” series and The Snowman by Raymond Briggs (1978).

The best illustrated narrative has for some years now been directed towards a new form of expression, which is manifested firstly in the artistic quality of the illustration. Contemporary illustrators not only make express reference to the history of art and to a wide range of artistic themes, but also to advertising graphics, comics, cartoons and audiovisual and multimedial languages. They move imaginatively and creatively from one field to another, creating innovative, amazing cocktails which are merged to form a personal, original style, evoking atmospheres and meanings (Poesio, 1998, 2001, 2002; Fochesato, 2000; Detti, 2002). Especially widespread and appreciated is the caricature since, by calling into question the traditional views of the world, it amuses and attracts younger readers who are unconventional by nature (Blezza Picherle, 2002). Indeed, artists such as Q. Blake, Pef, P. Corentin, H. Heine, T. Ross, Pef, M. Foreman, D. Mc Kee and A. Ahlberg have been very successful with children. In addition, many contemporary artists give great importance to colour, which can endow the image itself with great force of expression, since colour conveys emotions, feelings and values highly effectively. We may indeed speak of a poetry of colour, the result of a search for new chromatics, original colour combinations, unusual contrasts, plays on
different colours and different shades (Blezza Picherle, 1996). This artistic approach helps to refine the aesthetic sense of the reader and encourages him to read in a very active-interpretative manner as the artistic image is polysemic (Blezza Picherle, 2002, 2004d).

2. Artistic illustrations: a key to open the door to critical reading

In *Illustrated books*, or at least in the best ones in aesthetic terms, the image which accompanies the text no longer has a decorative function or describes the story. On the contrary, it has an interpretative function as the artist feels what can be drawn, highlights it and manifests it (Pallottino, 1988). By playing with lines and colours, the artist reveals hidden actions and realities, while at the same time communicating the sensations, emotions, feelings and thoughts of the characters which are only mentioned or implied in the text. Thus the illustrator becomes co-author of the story, as the pictures use different ways to complete, supplement or extend the verbal narration. Bruno Munari, for example, believes that an illustration must not be redundant to the text, but complementary to it, hence if you draw Little Red Riding Hood going into the wood it is important to show a scary wood with large, dark areas in order to communicate a sense of danger, of the unknown, of tension (Munari, 1990). In some cases the illustrator goes further, beyond the text, telling a parallel story in pictures. “Since anything written is in itself finished”, maintains Roberto Innocenti, “I know I am superfluous and I tell a parallel story, using the story as a pretext, weaving relations with it, but rarely too closely. When I write the text, I am careful that it is not enough and that the images are not complementary but can extend it” (Innocenti, 1990).

For these artists illustrating a story means tracing a critical parallel, offering an insight into the story, an interpretation of some aspects and moments in the literary work (Eco, 1979). In this way the child and the youngster are encouraged to become active readers critical of the text. The more artistic the illustration is (hence unusual and unexpected, amazing and not banal, or inconsistent or contradictory to the text) the more attentive the reader, led to pause, to return to the text, to read it again more deeply, in order to grasp the correspondence between the text and the image, in addition to the subtle meanings hidden between the lines and in the pictures. For example, there is the interesting interpretative work on different illustrated versions of the same classical fairy story which stimulate deeper reflection on the written text, reading and re-reading it and discussing it in groups (Blezza Picherle, 1996; Zipes, 1996). These different pictorial interpretations provide an opportunity to understand
the similarities or inconsistencies between the text and the pictures, a useful way to broaden our knowledge of the fairy tale genre and to clarify their numerous implicit meanings.

Artistic illustration, by fostering a deep, reiterated approach to the written text, counters today’s widespread tendency to read approximately and superficially. The process needs to be supported by the constant, specific encouragement of the adult-mediator, since we know how children nowadays – and unfortunately adults too -, immersed and absorbed in a world which is a vortex of images, tend to swiftly pass over images and text.

3. Picturebooks as a way to become critical readers

The quality of picturebooks has been steadily improving for many years now, not only in terms of the artistic nature of the images but also in terms of themes, writing, text-image ratio and layout. Increasingly original and diversified interaction between these elements makes these books interesting and stimulating to read as they are close to the needs and interests of their readers, in addition to being new and unusual for the reading processes which they imply.

With regard to themes, as well as narrating the actions and daily events lived by the very young, there are many others which, at different levels of complexity, speak of problems and fears which pervade children’s lives. In an imaginary world, for example, stories are told of their fears, emotions and negative feelings (anger, envy, jealousy, sadness, melancholy, happiness, joy etc.), conflicts in the family and with friends, the need for affection and friendship, problems with food, insecurity, everything concerning the child’s interior world. Picturebooks, for pre-school children too, also address social, cultural and even political arguments which may even be of a difficult nature such as death, war, the Holocaust, adoption, sexuality, ecology, pollution, hunting, diversity, interculture, solitude (Blezza Picherle 2001, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). This is because the best writers consider children as they really are, that is intelligent, logical, perspicacious, intuitive people who are complex in emotional-affective terms, true philosophers and “explorers” of existence, ever seeking out “why” and the reasons for events. Children and youngsters are very attracted to these books, since, as for literature tout court, they enable them to know themselves and the world, to understand and give a sense to experiences and life, to discover new aspects of existence (Blezza Picherle, 2004a).

It is especially the “way” they are narrated which makes picturebooks so interesting and absorbing. Whilst in the past there prevailed the narrative perspective of the adult who
explained and taught (Ewers, 1996), today writers take “the point of view” of the child, in the sense that the characters embody the way of reflecting, questioning oneself and hypothesising of children. However, at the same time, as in literature tout court, they also present other existential perspectives and other points of view, as in Quel coso lì (Corentin, 2005), and Quell’altro cucciolo (L’Engle, Davenier, 2002), where the point of view is that of a dog which feels unloved following the arrival of other “puppies” in the family. In Papà! (1999) on the other hand, Corentin tells the story from two different points of view (that of a child and of a small monster) creating a sort of “perspective counterpoint” and thus rendering the story exciting as a whole (Nikolajeva, Scott, 2000, 2006).

When a text - possibly short but original in style - is added also the picturebook becomes a valuable tool to teach how to become critical readers, to create readers who love and appreciate not only the story and the illustrations but also the words, the original expressions, the rhetorical figures of speech. With regard to Italy I would like to mention in particular Roberto Piumini, a writer who adapts classical fairy stories and translations magnificently, and the writer Alfredo Stoppa who writes original, sophisticated picturebooks, using words and phrases which surprise children, who, we should never forget, are fascinated by unusual, amazing words. Stoppa uses rich language and seeks out the “right” terms, pausing on them, seeking to approach them with grace and rigour, so as to unleash loud, intense sounds, a music of adjectives and nouns, a language which is a source of images and scenes, visions and the new (Stoppa, 2007). In the current phase of internationalisation of the illustrated narrative, with much activity directed towards publishing the same book in different languages, more care should be taken with regard to the translations, bearing in mind that, as had previously been stated in the European Charter on books for children (1970s) a book for youngsters must have a real literary quality, therefore richness and beauty of language (Held, 1978).

The themes, points of view and text are motivating, driving forces to teach how to read narrative works. Indeed children, fascinated by these aspects of the story and not only by the pictures, ask adults (or do so themselves if they know how to read) to read the book again and again, to better enjoy, in addition to the pictures, also the verbal narration and the language. Clearly it all depends on the mediation of the adult, who, when reading and re-reading aloud, must emphasise these narrative features so that the youngsters can pick them out.

A further interesting aspect regarding teaching critical reading is the wide variety of interaction between text and image which is a feature of the picturebook. In the best cases the words and pictures do not communicate more or less the same information (symmetrical interaction), rather they have many forms of complementarity (complementary interaction).
(Nikolajeva, 2006; Nikolajeva, Scott, 2000, 2006). In the latter, for example, *pictures can expand* and develop the text (Nikolajeva, Scott, 2000, 2006), showing what it does not say, as is often the case for emotions. Following in the footsteps of Maurice Sendak, the first to paint the deep psychological states of the child (Nikolajeva, 2006), writers today tend to represent the child’s emotional-affective interior in images rather than in words (Blezza Picherle, 2004c). The latter carry forward the action, while the different emotions and their development are gathered mainly from the gestures and the positions of the characters, from their position on the page, from the expression on their faces, especially when they are close ups, but also the perspective of single images, as too the background colours which convey specific feelings sensations and moods (Blezza Picherle, 2004c). As in *Che rabbia!* (D’Allancè, 2000), where all the anger which mounts up and then gradually wanes can only be fully appreciated by the postures, facial expressions, colours, or in *Tre lupi* (Cousseau, Turin, 2002), where the meanings are to be found in the expressions on the faces, drawn in the manner of caricatures. A second type of *complementary interaction* is when the *words expand* the meaning of the pictures (Nikolajeva, Scott, 2000, 2006), describing in a broader, more explicit manner the thoughts, reasonings and moods of the characters, also through direct speech, as, for example, in *Torniamo a casa, Piccolo Orso* by Firth-Waddell (1994) or in *Un rumore come di uno che cerca di non fare rumore* by Irving, Hauptmann (2003), two splendid books also for the quality and originality of the text. Nikolajeva and Scott (2000, 2006) analyse in detail further interesting, complex types of text-image interaction, in which there is a sort of counterpoint and contradiction between the verbal and pictorial parts, as the words and the images give alternative information or contradict each other in some way. As in *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986) where the images contrast ironically with a simple, clear text ( ironic counterpoint), adding a touch of irony which is lacking in the words (Nikolajeva, Scott, 2000, 2006). I agree with Nikolajeva (1997) in maintaining that these more complex picturebooks are the best of current production, since to understand them requires a considerable creative and logical-interpretative effort by the reader, who must “build” the meaning (Bruner, 1992, 1997b, 1998).

Even the different forms of *layout*, which today are highly original, impact on the way of reading the picture book, as they are designed to foster continual interactions and references between text and image. Thus the child goes more than once from one illustration to the other, and then from the text to the illustrations, so that the story is created by a deep integration
between picture and text (Blezza Picherle, 2002). In addition to books with a classical layout, there are an increasing number of books which propose innovative solutions, as, for example, more images of different format on the single or double page spread, with a brief text alongside; the written text inserted within the image which almost becomes an integral part of it; the words which follow the image in a winding, wavy pattern; the single words enlarged or reduced to convey particular meanings; double or four-fold spreads of the scene and setting, and many more. Some layouts almost “force” the reader to pause on the single words and expressions, in order to be able to proceed in the understanding of the story.

As can be surmised from the brief summary above the picture book is highly stimulating and fascinating for readers, due to its intrinsic complexity which attracts and arouses their attention and curiosity and desire to explore. The credit for this should go to the authors who draw on a wide range of artistic and graphic expedients to attract the attention of their readers, starting from the “trail-blazer” Beatrix Potter, who deliberately included discrepancies and contradictions between the verbal narration and the illustrations, in order to keep the reader alert and involved (Lurie, 1993; Nikolajeva, Scott, 2000, 2006). However, these technical-motivational strategies are not enough to read and fully understand the meaning of these illustrated stories, as children and youngsters, fascinated by the originality of the pictures and graphics, tend to leaf through the book quickly, to later look at it again and re-read it pausing especially when reaching the aspects and details which interested, fascinated or surprised them personally. I witnessed this over the course of many years of action research, carried out together with teachers, into the reading of illustrated books and picture books with children aged 3 to 13.

According to Rosellina Archinto, founder of Emme editions and later Babalibri, picture books are designed for the child to read alone, freely, without an adult intervening as these books should only amuse children, cheer them up and stimulate them (Archinto, 2007). Although I agree with this idea of “free reading”, I think that discreet, non directive and encouraging adult mediation (Rogers 1973; Knowles, 1996; Blezza Picherle 1996) is important to foster the consolidation of exploratory reading and of research as required in picturebooks. The professional adult (librarian, teacher, educator) should above all “explore” the books together with youngsters so that they perceive the different ways of reading (Blezza Picherle, 2007a). It is not a question of explaining or asking questions to check their understanding but rather of reading together with them to accustom them not to rely on rushed

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1 An image on each page with a short text (above, below, to one side) or the text on one page (right or left) and the illustration on the whole page opposite.
interpretations, not to get lost in marginal details, to stop and look at the pictures, to listen carefully to the written text, to make the text and the images interact correctly, to return to the various pictorial and verbal aspects of the story, to discuss in groups to seek out together the objective meaning and the various interpretative shades of the story. This means transforming the group of readers in a true research community, where members listen to each other respectfully, everyone’s idea is integrated, members are asked to give reasons to support their opinions and help each other to draw conclusions from what has been said (Lipman, 2005). The adult mediator of reading thus becomes a “creative leader” who deliberately liberates the energies of the readers and manages the processes which channel the liberated emotions and thoughts towards the comprehension and interpretation of the text (Knowles, 1996).

To understand a picturebook is a complex activity (Graham, 2005), since it is necessary to enact sophisticated cognitive processes of analysis, of re-elaboration, of construction of meanings, both of single images (on single or double page spreads) and of the relationship between the text and the pictures in the course of the whole narration. Reading this type of book, given its intrinsic structure, accordingly requires acquiring the behaviour (besides the abilities) typical of the habitual, mature reader, who uses a personalised rhythm of reading, responds to the “signals” given by the text and images, re-reads with renewed attention, pauses to check comprehension, knows how to read in a calm, unhurried manner (Blezza Picherle, 2007a). This is why picture books, even if the picture prevails and is much stronger than the words, are an excellent tool to teach children to become readers, as they provide quality narrative and stimulate the formation of a reflective, critical reader.

**Biographical Notes**

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**References**

**Critical texts**


**Picturebooks**


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