

Visual metaphor

in the illustrated children's album

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This text proposes paths for research and reflection around children's illustrated album. In particular, it focuses on linguistic questions, not exclusively verbal, but focusing especially on the image as message. Comparing image and word as text is not new. However, it is interesting to apply this approach to the illustrated album, that nowadays enjoys great social impact and artistic recognition. This format presents a series of expressive features of special interest, since it is illustration the element supporting most of the narrative and descriptive load, while the text that accompanies them is quite brief.

Key words: children's illustration, visual metaphor, children's books, visual rhetoric, visual story, visual narrative.

The metaphor is found in all our surroundings, in words and images, it is a usual element of communication. Although it is so frequent in our environment, it is a phenomenon that has great conceptual and visual appeal for the reader. In the illustrated album the visual metaphor is closely linked to narrative and expression, and also to form and artistic expression. It is a conceptual value, proceeding from the rhetoric language, that affects very different aspects of the visual work globally.

Equating image and word as text is not new. However, here we return to the consideration to approach the expressive particularities of the album, where illustration supports most of the narrative and descriptive weight. A great part of the meanings are presented as images and function as messages, frequently recurring to visual metaphors to transmit, although words are still necessary since they act as semantic anchorage. The double nature of the object of this study will make the considerations swing from aspects of plastic arts to literary ones since their profound union enriches their analysis. To that purpose, reference will be made to works of different periods which will serve as examples and invite evaluation of the connection of metaphor with values in art and form, how the external context affects the work and how it is perceived. One of our goals is to explain how form and content converge in an album in a subjective discourse which is attractive to all public despite it being originally a children's product.

The illustrated album: a good media for constructing metaphors

The album differs from other literary forms in that it is a short story in which the illustration supports a great deal of the narrative weight, often more than the

text. In broad strokes, we can say it is the pre-eminence of illustration what defines the album. Thus, reading the image has the same importance as reading the text, which will guide us along the plot of the story¹. Besides, there are information gaps between word and illustration which the reader must complete with his knowledge and imagination. The illustrations contribute components to the story which are absent in the text, inviting the reader to delve further than the literal sense of the words, delighting in the possibilities of visual thought. The maximum aspiration of an illustrated album is to achieve complete fusion of text and image, in such a way that the two become necessary to the development of the story¹.

From its origins, two centuries ago, albums have shown images with many connotations, making a metaphoric language necessary. We shall briefly range chronologically from then to our days in order to appreciate, on one hand, the evolution of both its graphic aspect and that of the themes, and on the other hand, the constant use of visual metaphors as a way to transmit meanings. We shall link this presence with the strong symbolic character of popular stories of oral tradition, present in contemporary children's literature (such as Grimm fairy tales). We shall also identify other factors, external or environmental, agglutinated in the illustration and that the rhetoric discourse gathers and exploits.

Emotional components (abstract) and narrative components have the same weight as the formal and compositional elements, both must be totally fused. The creative freedom that present day albums reflect does not correspond with that of primitive children's books when they appeared late in the XVIII Century and towards the middle of the XIX Century. During the so-called Golden Age² of illustration and children's literature, the stories and illustration fulfilled a very clear function: the works were defined by the purpose of teaching, moral consideration and the prevailing social customs of each time and place³. Consequently, the illustrations and stories were adapted to these needs. The authors were conditioned by what the public expected to find in their works, since "the assigned function of an image is linked to its form and its appearance"⁴. This does not allow us to judge those illustrations as better or worse than the contemporary ones, but does bear witness that the construction of the discourse is greatly determined by the context and the prevailing conventions of society. Such a strict limitation of contents did not kill ingenuity, visual messages that were not limited to the rule were formulated in little evident ways. We can establish parallelisms with news illustration of the same period, political censorship made the authors wring out the maximum possibilities of the figurative visual

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See: VVAA: *Illustrated Children's Books*, London, Black Dog Publishing, 2009, pp 6-9.

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The Golden Age of Illustration is dated between the last decades of the XIX and first of the XX Centuries; mainly in Anglosaxon culture.

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See: VVAA: *Illustrated Children's Books*, London, Black Dog Publishing, 2009, pp 14-15.

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GOMBRICH, E.H.: *Los usos de las imágenes*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2003, p.7.

language: they created very direct images with strong connotations, with little or even no text. The passage of time has made some of these metaphors lose strength to the contemporary eye, however, in other cases the illustrations function as historical documents⁵. There were also children's albums that exceptionally vaulted over the conventions of their time. Within the vast British production, special attention should be paid to "A Book of Nonsense"⁶ (1846) by Edward Lear: visual poems that seek to surprise and delight in the absurd, devoid of moral and pedagogical values. Children's albums were produced in the frame of the artistic vanguards of the XX Century, such as "Two Squares" *Dos Cuadrados* (1922) by El Lissitzki, with illustrations comprised of simple geometric forms in accord with the supremacist canon. The geometric compositions, paradoxically, carry strong connotations and launch political messages favourable to the Russian revolutionary sector, represented by the red square which finally overcomes the black one (czarist sector).

In time, moral limitations decreased and the stories increasingly sought identification with the reader, embodying emotional values. These approaches favoured the presence of the visual metaphor as a connector. If before the purpose of teaching prevailed, in our days creativity and subjectivity are the determining motor. As a consequence of this evolution, authorship and personal style become especially relevant as appeal of the work.

As we stated, classic or traditional stories, arising directly from popular tradition have been reworked a myriad times, the authors who delve in this field have the possibility of playing with stereotypes and symbols, exploiting the fact that the reader has previous knowledge of the story. A good example is the album *Caperucita Roja* (Little Red Riding Hood), (Narval, 2011) by Adolfo Serra⁷. The story is told in images only, without words; despite their absence, as we pass the pages we realise that a guiding text is not necessary. The story is so well known that we can follow the plot and narrative as if we actually had the text. We recognise the high-points with the action of the images alone. The popularity of the story allows the author to introduce his personal vision and ignore more conventional representations. Contemporary interpretations of classic stories show the possibilities of the traditional/innovative binomial. The stereotype and symbol are adapted to the present moment without losing its essence: they still must transmit the original sense. Tension between what is known and what is new is generated in the reading.

Thus, it is not the themes that define the albums, but rather the manner in which the story is told with images. The role of the visual metaphor is important in this sense, it gives shape to the creative discourse, where subjectivity prevails over what is literal and immediate.

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The way stories are told with images: word-image, image-word synergy

Despite the fact that the dominant presence of illustration in the album conditions the narrative character of the work, we must not forget the function of the word, in most cases necessary. Any image is polysemic by

nature, which makes it necessary that it be limited by the text, to avoid ambiguities. Before explaining the text-image relationship, it is convenient to dwell briefly on the narrative structure of the album in which a number of illustrations share the skeletal plot and art style. The sequential axis of the work develops along the pages as they are passed, marking how it is read. However, the visual nature of the albums is two-fold: each illustration can be read individually and isolated from the rest, or in relation to the entire story, following the narrative thread. Either way, both ellipsis and the subjective frames that transcend immediate meanings abound.

Text and illustration should form a solid unit, both contributing specific elements to the reading experience. One of the most notable characteristics that verbal and visual languages share is the capacity to create non-existent realities, imaginary or oneiric entities that we deem possible within the context of the work⁸. This capacity of creating other worlds that escape the logic of the senses, is one of the identifiable features of the book-album, inside which any preestablished convention or notion of reality is constantly ruptured.

The metaphoric elaboration of image and discourse has a direct effect on these traits which define the book-album. Reality is ruptured from our perspective, but in the story itself coherence reigns thanks to figurative language. In contrast, although characters and environments may be particular, they speak of actual and recognisable matters, parts of our experience. What is known, the formal convention, is transgressed with different discursive and expressive purposes, which affect the relationships of proportion, perspective, colour... Material reality is re-elaborated to represent abstract truths.

Popular children's stories and their contemporary adaptations show the notable evolution of the text-image-visual metaphor relationship. Initially, stories were transmitted orally until they began to be written down in the XVIII Century. Originally these stories carried an important symbolic component and many of their elements in a figurative sense. Images were sought to accompany the written stories, the same that took shape in the imagination of the listeners. Each character, each place or object shown acquired a double meaning, making reference to a stereotype, beyond literal readings; acting as images of invisible values, such as fear, wilderness, comfort... Cultural references are necessary to assimilate these conceptual movements and to identify their meanings. Cultural conventions contribute to lock the meaning of the images as much as the words⁹.

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Presence of the visual metaphor in the illustrated album

Visual metaphor is deeply rooted in verbal language, from it derive many of its characteristics; besides it maintains a close link to popular speech, from which many resources stem. It does not only concern conceptual aspects; it simultaneously affects objective rules of formal representation favouring discursive guidelines. The new reality shown in these metaphoric scenes "come from making conventions of graphic representation devoid of

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See: illustrations by Honoré Daumier in the satiric newspapers *La Caricature y Le Charivari*. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Honoré_Daumier (consulted 25 October 2012)

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See: http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_Book_of_Nonsense (consulted 14 October 2012)

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See: <http://www.http://adolfo.serra.blogspot.com.es/2011/03/caperucita-roja.html> (consulted 2 October 2012)

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See: PLA, V.: "Ilustradores del nonsense. Una aproximación a la obra gráfica de creadores de la época victoriana: Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, Charles Doyle." In *Ars Longa: cuadernos de arte*, nº 7-8, 1997. p. 231.

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See: CARRERE, A.: "Arte, palabra, realidad y contexto" in *El arte necesita de la palabra*, VVAA, Valencia, Col·lecció Formes Plàstiques. Institució Alfons el Magnànim, 2008. p. 30.

meaning”¹⁰. We state that images and stories are generated one way or another, but always related to the socio-cultural context from which they spring. In the album the relationship between reality and story are distorted and blurred; new worlds capture our attention. However, if these fantastic, allegoric or symbolic proposals work it is because “the belief in the irrational is a part of our cultural heritage”¹¹. The use of figurative language to represent that which surrounds us or to pose imaginary situations as phenomena close to our experience is usual. The metaphor allows capturing everyday happenings and presenting them as something new, or inversely, nonsense and fantasy seem coherent and normal, to the point of identifying ourselves with characters and situations. In both cases, although they may seem opposed, it is the displacement of convention that acts as an appeal, what causes an impression and acts as a fundamental element of expression¹².

There are many metaphoric resources we can find in illustrated albums, however, given the character of the text, we will establish a taxonomic division in three great groups. These categories offer a broad and general vision, while they contribute models to identify the most specific cases. In the three categories we can speak of the generation of global metaphors, those that imply formal and conceptual aspects at the same time, also capable of transmitting abstract meanings. With this division which in no case means to be absolute, we propose extrapolation of the analysis of the stated cases, which are very common, to other more specific ones.

Metaphor works substituting some conceptual dimensions for others, this subjective action relates concepts that are foreign, creating new non-literal meanings. The connotation of the message is easily recognised because this discursive practice is well rooted in our culture. The effect this has on the reader is to afford an entry to deeper feelings and senses, establishing the play of double meanings, which in many cases become established as social conventions¹³.

-Personification of animals. It is almost an identifying characteristic. Ancient tales (Aesop) and many popular stories (La Fontaine, Grimm, Andersen, Samaniego) have main characters played by animals with human attributes. They can speak, dress as do those of their occupation, guild or their time and in general have the same problems as any human being. The personality of these characters is linked to certain conventions, polarising the subjects, emphasising the opposition between good and evil, ability and clumsiness, beauty and ugliness... The animals/characters are not ambiguous in their behaviour and do not pose dualities or half tones as would be natural in any person, but rather represent absolute roles, with certain stereotypes that help in the interpretation of the situation. A good example is the classic story of “The Grasshopper and the Ant”, originally Aesop’s tale, in which both characters recreate opposite poles to transmit a moral teaching.

The classic personification, par excellence, is that of the Big Bad Wolf, the eternal enemy, the image of evil that introduces tension in the story and threatens the main character’s peace. Although the metaphors and stereotypes

vary with time, probably the Big Bad Wolf is an example of the perdurable type, that maintains the same negative connotations with which it was created, a cultural convention profoundly rooted in our social environment, which generates direct visual messages. We again remit you to Adolfo Serra’s wordless Little Red Riding Hood.

The animal substitutes the person or abstract dimension, thus taking up a new role. Scenes which could literally seem senseless or void, are logical in the story. This metaphoric representation of reality allows synthesising certain subjects. The fact that the characters of an album may be animals instead of people can generate different effects: it may be comic or absurd, disrupt logic, induce confusion... Some authors consider that the presence of animals as characters seeks the child’s empathy and motivates his imagination¹⁴. The presence of these impossible characters demonstrates the strong power of transmission of the metaphor. This trend towards fantasy was already frequent in the first illustrated albums, with representations of more or less realistic animals, having human qualities, and occasionally being completely anthropomorphic¹⁵. We can speak of a type of visual metaphor taken up and carried to the convention, which is no longer disruptive of the rules. The substitution is effective when the process of conceptual analogies work, and the elements lose their literal meaning and acquire a new and totally illogical one¹⁶. The books illustrated by Anthony Browne, whose characters are gorillas are very popular. The gorillas (occasionally other animals) are shown in a realistic manner, but dressed in human clothes and interacting with people, achieving a disconcerting sensation, while respecting the rules of representation of space and volume. Browne’s illustrations are quite close to the surrealist painting of the early XX Century, with oneiric and strange passages. The author invites the reader to wander about the illustration, and introduces in the compositions humorous sparks, small details that are secondary but make the reader pay special attention. In his opinion, “illustrated books are addressed to public of all ages, and should not be abandoned upon growing up. They are stimulating literary works in which there are tempting empty spaces that the reader must fill from his imagination”¹⁷.

-Formal transgressions. Human anatomy is profusely modified to guide conceptual reading. The subjective elaboration of the illustration begins with the selection of characteristics and proportions that will be altered: the formal aspect reflects the personality of the subject and creates a very specific sense of equivalence. The works in which this principle is most clearly evident are caricatures and cartoons, linked inevitably to formal hyperboles. Again extremes reign, the characters tend towards archetypes and absolute roles. However, the origin of the characters is in the surrounding environment, they are recognisable types. Despite all, the connection with reality is blurred in the creative process, the characters exist in the story and for the story in which they have a meaning in relation to the other elements. The anamorphic imagined by Lewis Carroll in *Alice in*

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PLA, V.: “*Ilustradores del nonsense. Una aproximación a la obra gráfica de creadores de la época victoriana: Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, Charles Doyle.*” In *Ars Longa: cuadernos de arte*, nº 7-8, 1997. p. 232.

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GOMBRICH, E.H.: *Los usos de las imágenes*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2003. p. 190.

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Ibidem, p. 257.

13

See: BETTELHEIM, B.: *Psicoanálisis de los cuentos de hadas*, Barcelona, Crítica, 1994. pp. 8-9.

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See: SALISBURY, M.: *Ilustración de libros infantiles*, Barcelona, Editorial Acanto, 2005. pp. 68-69.

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See: VVAA: *Illustrated Children’s Books*, London, Black Dog Publishing, 2009.

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See: CARRERE, A., SABORIT, J., *Retórica de la pintura*, Madrid, Editorial Cátedra. Signo e Imagen, 2000.

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See: <http://www.walker.co.uk/contributors/Anthony-Browne-1481.aspx> (consulted 10 October 2012)

Wonderland are a classic example, a story of a dream close to surrealism and full of non-sense.

Therefore, formal hyperboles abound: the selection of specific characteristics to be exaggerated, the emphasis of physiognomic values contribute to establish hierarchies in terms of expression and definition of the characters. The will to narrate with form motivates designing unique, hybrid beings. Alterations of scale and deformations with conceptual and expressive ends are constant along the History of Art from ancient times. If these formal modifications function as visual messages it is because we recognise the social conventions which support them and that are the same that give form to the idea of reality that we perceive¹⁸. Confrontation of formal opposites continues to function as transmitter of the messages and their connotation, beauty is confronted with ugliness, large with small, and these qualities are assimilated to categories of good or evil, courage or helplessness, associations traditionally present in Western art and literature.

-Interpreting everyday life. The connection with everyday life helps to understand the messages, although the subjective discourse might disappoint the reader's expectations. The visual metaphor surprises, showing us reality as we did not know it, inviting us to compare, unconsciously, what is known and what the book proposes. What is shown in the illustrated pages is posed as a novelty and it is revealing for the reader who discovers unexpected relationships¹⁹. Perhaps this is the appeal for the adult reader, although a priori, the album is destined for children.

Playing with what is real and transforming it allows giving formal entity to abstract magnitudes, making it possible to understand them in a synthetic manner. Events of human experience are approached in short, simple stories. The classic *Where The Wild Things Are*²⁰ (1963) by Maurice Sendak, shows a child's tantrum through a dream passage of great simplicity and strong connotation. In the XX Century, the decade of the 60's was a new turning point in the development of children's album: subject matters are notably broadened and important novelties are incorporated in the plastic arts conception of the work. There is ever greater freedom with respect to the more traditional plastic arts rules. Decades later, Emily Gravett constructs the metaphor of child fears in *Little Mouse's Big Book of Fears*²¹ (Macmillan, 2007). Children identify themselves with the mouse that comically and ironically documents his fears in the pages of the album. In *Dear Diary*²² (Walker Books, 2000) by Sara Fanelli, everything refers to everyday life: subject matter, title and form merge in the plot. Besides, the collage technique reinforces the connection with actual visual context, great eclecticism. The album represents a girl's diary, written longhand on different types of papers, splotted with paint and ever-present doodles give the work a *naïf* characteristic (concept and form mutually reinforced).

In conclusion, after this approach to the character of the illustrated album, we can ascertain the importance of the connection with the visual metaphor even if it is a product of dual nature, (literary and visual). This relationship remains unaltered through time, de-

spite the outstanding evolution in contents and form that children's albums have experienced since the XIX Century. Having reached this point, we must point out the important displacement produced along its evolution: the albums are no longer works addressed to children. Now they appeal equally to readers of all ages. We can point out a determining turning point for this change: the importance of authorship as a fundamental value of the work, innovation in both the graphic and the theme become a great incentive.

The confluence of word and image gives rise to a unitary work, a metaphor of reality in which the idea is embodied. As a complex work, it invites the reader to analyse and consider the multiple facets: it is possible to pose more profound investigation avenues which attend simultaneously to graphic, conceptual, social and literary matters that normally concur in the work, and even studying the manner in which they are strung.

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See: CARRERE, A.: "Arte, palabra, realidad y contexto" in *El arte necesita de la palabra*, VVAA, Colección Formes Plàstiques, Valencia, Institució Alfons el Magnànim, 2008. pp. 45-49

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See: CARRERE, A., SABORIT, J., *Retórica de la pintura*, Madrid, Editorial Cátedra, Signo e Imagen, 2000.

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See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Where_the_Wild_Things_Are (consulted 15 October 2012)

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See: <http://www.macmillan.com/hk/pma/english/LittleMouseBigBookofFears.pdf> (consulted 2 October 2012)

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Véase: <http://www.sarafanelli.com/docs/bg02.html#> (consulted 2 October 2012)