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Nina Goga, Sarah Hoem Iversen
and **Anne-Stefi Teigland** (Eds.)

VERBAL AND VISUAL STRATEGIES IN NONFICTION PICTUREBOOKS

Theoretical and Analytical
Approaches

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Verbal and visual strategies in nonfiction picturebooks

Nina Goga, Sarah Hoem Iversen and Anne-Stefi Teigland

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2. The artistic nonfiction picturebook

Giorgia Grilli

Abstract This chapter analyses the extent to which a picturebook can be considered a nonfiction product even when its aim is not to provide definitive answers, but rather to question accepted definitions of the world, encouraging the reader to take part in the process of knowing and making sense. The examination of four picturebooks shows that nonfiction can be about learning how to think, more than teaching what to think, and about involving the readers actively in the definition/understanding of reality.

Keywords picturebooks, nonfiction, art, hybridity, critical thinking

ARTISTIC NONFICTION PICTUREBOOKS

Over the last decade, one of the most interesting and innovative events in international children's publishing has been the production of more and more nonfiction picturebooks, notably of particularly inventive or, more broadly, 'poetic' nonfiction picturebooks. Not a previously unknown object in itself, the visually and conceptually sophisticated nonfiction picturebook can be considered a 'new' publishing phenomenon because of the systematic willingness to experiment with its form and the distinct awareness of its potential on the part of authors, illustrators, and publishers today. Informative books for children have a long tradition, but only recently has the attempt to conceive and design them in a radically creative way become the challenge at a global level (Grilli, 2020).

For this reason, even though the overall corpus of nonfiction picturebooks has become increasingly copious, with the entire genre requiring critical investigation, my attention will go to this particularly ingenious, imaginative, deviceful nonfiction picturebook, which deserves detailed analysis and possibly even

a specific definition. I suggest ‘artistic nonfiction picturebook’, fully aware that this is a somewhat paradoxical expression. Art and nonfiction are two fields of human experience and communication based on very different, even opposite, premises, at least according to the most common and widespread understanding. Books built upon their possible and surprising intersection can therefore be considered interesting for many reasons, not least for the fact that bridging the gap between seemingly distant dimensions – and mindsets – can foster deep, all-encompassing involvement of the reader (McGilchrist, 2009; Nikolajeva, 2018). Artistic nonfiction picturebooks are, to all intents and purposes, hybrid creations (van Lierop-Debrauwer, 2018), or, in Bakhtinian terms, dialogical books (Bakhtin, 1981). To understand what they look like, how they work, or how they are even possible, given their supposed inner contradiction, we shall start by considering the different premises of nonfiction and art.

THE PREMISES OF NONFICTION

According to Joe Sutliff Sanders (2018), the majority opinion is that nonfiction is and should be a literature of final answers, meaning by this a truth-telling literature, a literature of facts, a literature in which accuracy of information and reliability of what is stated are the most important elements. Sanders wrote his book, titled *A literature of questions*, to explain why it shouldn’t necessarily be so – “nonfiction doesn’t have to be a literature of facts; indeed, it shouldn’t be” (2018, p. 34) – but throughout the book he observes that, nevertheless, most adults consider nonfiction as the shelf to which children can go whenever they want to learn true facts and acquire certainties about the world (both the natural and human world).

In the field, notes Sanders, there is an urge to produce – and to look for – authoritative information. Critics of nonfiction very often judge it according to how truthful, how reliable, and how accurate the books are in terms of verified data. Over the years, I’ve had the chance to witness many discussions of international juries gathered for the BolognaRagazzi Award, and when it comes to nonfiction, the issue is always the same: is the book authoritative enough, reliable enough as regards its subject matter? Is its message clear and objective, in other words ‘unquestionable’?

Sanders’ considerations find constant validation: nonfiction for children is still valued by most people for its ability to provide answers more than for its ability to prompt questions; for its ability to solve doubts rather than raise

doubts. Children's publishers promoting new titles of nonfiction normally use expressions like 'The Big Books of Answers' in their press release.¹ Even when promoting extremely stylized cardboard books for very young children (be they on volcanos, bees or trees), the promise behind them is to reveal 'the truth' about the world, to unveil its 'secrets' and give children 'the answers' about reality and its workings.

In general terms, nonfiction is still considered the realm in which children can find objectivity, factuality, a knowledge of the world that presents itself as solid and certain, as opposed to debatable, revisable, and open. I choose the word 'open' not by chance. In fact, it allows me to move on to the analysis of the premises of art.

THE PREMISES OF ART

Speaking about art and its distinctive characteristics, Umberto Eco, in *Opera aperta* (*Open Work*) (1962), explains that a work of art is defined by its ambiguity, by its plurality of meanings, by a structural opening that is also an openness, a willingness to be interpreted in more than one way. Art is such, according to Eco, when it does not provide final answers, but opens itself to dialogue, when it *demand*s a dialogue, an engagement, a personal involvement (both cognitive and emotional) on the part of the reader.

Art's aim, Eco suggests, is not to convey any authoritative message, but rather an elusive, evocative one; one for which a negotiation with the readers/spectators (with their previous knowledge and their sensitivity) is required.

In line with Eco, a work of art is open because, from a structural point of view, it needs a reader/spectator to be 'finished', to say what it has to say. It is an opposite stance to that underpinning nonfiction, which, in theory, doesn't even need a reader to state its message, because the message in nonfiction is already there, in the text, and is supposed to be the same objective message for whoever reads it.

In art, every fruition is different. And in Eco's opinion it is precisely this kind of fruition – subjective, active, revisable, as opposed to passive and reproducible – that is the specificity of art. Art is art, according to Eco, when it calls for inferences,

1 The sentence was highlighted in the press release of the Italian publisher Gallucci, sent to me via email while I was writing this chapter.

connections, hypothetical explanations, multiple interpretations. When its meaning is not straightforward, univocal, or unequivocal.²

If nonfiction, in the opinion of the majority, is the accurate transmission of pre-determined knowledge that the reader should memorize and store, with no interpretative freedom because the message is presented as objective, demonstrable and somehow indisputable, a work of art is, in terms of its message, a field of possibilities that depends on readers' unpredictable interpretations (Eco, 1962). Art is ambiguous and open to a plurality of meanings, or it isn't art at all.

Which brings us to the seemingly unbridgeable gap between nonfiction and art.

HYBRIDITY IN NONFICTION PICTUREBOOKS

Over the last few years, several books have been published that are, paradoxically, both nonfiction products and works of art in Umberto Eco's sense: i.e. open works, works calling for interpretation, integration, and co-construction of meaning on the part of the reader; indeed, works that encourage readers to become co-authors.

These books have the real world and information about the real world (as opposed to a fictional story) as their focus – which makes them by definition 'non-fiction' – and yet they invite the reader to take part in the process of making sense of and explaining the world, as if the world needed to be understood and defined again and again and information about it re-thought, revised, and discussed; as if the meaning of reality were open to negotiation and the function of nonfiction to help children see things differently rather than make them memorize definitions and data mechanically. More and more nonfiction picturebooks have recently been published that, though dealing with aspects of the real world, do not provide any ready-made information about it. On the contrary, they create for the reader a dialogical space, an openness as to their message, just as art does. Inferences, implications, connections and not discrete figures, definitions, and other kinds of data are the core of these artistic nonfiction picturebooks.

2 Writing about open works, Eco refers mostly to 'modern' literary works, and especially to books written after the dissolution of certainties brought about by the philosophic theories of Nietzsche, Bergson, Freud etc. Yet, for the purpose of our analysis, we can extend his definition of openness to include art in general, because art, even in its more controlled examples (the 'readerly' texts, in Roland Barthes' words (1974), different from the 'writerly' texts because of their seemingly unitary, fixed or pre-determined meaning), is always somehow subject to interpretations which are other than final or 'authorized', it is always inherently, or in any case partly, more 'open' than any distinction between classical novels and twentieth century works may lead us to think.

The artistic nonfiction picturebook is a hybrid form of literature which encourages children to think critically about the world (Sanders, 2018), because it does not provide final answers, but rather invites readers to question common knowledge, opening it up to doubt, dialogue, and revision, as we shall see through the analysis of some exemplifying titles.

VISUAL/TEXTUAL STRATEGIES IN FOUR ARTISTIC NONFICTION PICTUREBOOKS

To show how artistic nonfiction picturebooks work, and what their visual/textual strategies are, or can be, I will analyse four titles: *L'imagier des gens* (People), by Blexbolex (2008), *Saisons* (Seasons), by Blexbolex (2009), *Avant Après* (Before After), by Anne-Margot Ramstein and Matthias Aregui (2013) and *Chaque seconde dans le monde* (Each second, in the world), by Bruno Gibert (2018). All of them are French books, and all of them can be considered books for young children, because they are apparently very simple. Yet they are also, to all intents and purposes, cross-over books (Beckett, 2013), since they are conceived in a very sophisticated manner. They represent the world not in a conventional, but rather in a deconstructive way, which helps readers go beyond stereotyped visions and invites them to take part in the re-definition/re-signification of reality.

There is something in the very structure of these books that invites critical participation: the use of very little written text (sometimes just one word which, because it has been selected so carefully, becomes important and enlightening), and the juxtaposition of two images that somehow clash with each other, or don't match in any obvious way, so that it is necessary for the reader to think about their association.

At first glance, the examined books could be considered language-learning tools, or concept books (Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer, 2018). However, they don't fit simply and easily into this category. Rather, they should be defined as widening-concept books. And if they *are* language-learning tools, their teaching of language is not straightforward but challenging, provocative, conceived in ways that invite the reader to think about words (and concepts) with critical eyes, rather than according to their most common meaning/use.

The technique of placing two images next to each other, used by all four picturebooks, suggests comparing one illustration with the other or wondering about their relationship. Placing two images in each doublespread, and repeating this layout over and over, provides multiple opportunities for thoughtful contrast. Every couple becomes another occasion for critical engagement, because each of them, and their accumulation, encourages the reader to consider obvious and not

so obvious connections between things/words, rather than learn about them in an isolated and unreflecting way.

Moreover, these books, each in its own way, are particularly ingenious in the technique of coupling two things/images/words/concepts within the same doublespread. The pairings are surprising, intriguing, the authors' aim clearly being to break the conventions of accepted language and definitions, play with expectations, challenge stereotypes, beliefs, taboos, and offer children the chance to think critically about the world, as well as learn the meaning of many words.

L'IMAGIER DES GENS, BY BLEXBOLEX

I first realized that nonfiction was changing and offering different possibilities than the traditional approach to knowledge when *L'imagier des gens* by Blexbolex came out in 2008. The visual/textual strategy used in this book is the one mentioned above: conceived as a gallery of human types, categories, jobs, occupations, it doesn't just name many of them one after the other in a supposedly neutral way, but artfully matches two kinds of people in each doublespread, thereby suggesting bewildering comparisons between them. The more so, because some fit but others don't fit into the same group, or frame of reference, at least according to the most common way of thinking and classifying. By coupling two kinds of people who are not usually seen together, the book does not provide objective, factual, undebatable knowledge or information, but invites critical engagement, encourages a process of questioning, discussing, making hypotheses, allowing many possible interpretations as to why those human types are together on the same page.

The more a book gives readers interpretative freedom, the more it moves from a didactic to an aesthetic function (Sanders, 2018). This is extremely clear in Blexbolex's book, which is a nonfiction picturebook stepping into art and poetry, a picturebook whose very structure invites children to re-think standard definitions and see the world (and the people in it) in a more critical way than that envisaged by traditional (language-)learning processes. Readers are implicitly asked to find the possible link between two human types, they cannot but wonder why these persons are depicted together and what they have in common, this common element being unobvious and therefore open to question. As the image containing some random but subsequent doublespreads of *L'imagier des gens* shows (Fig. 2.1), the book starts in a rather plain way, matching people who are commonly seen as belonging together or normally associated ('a gentleman / a lady'; 'a mother / a baby'). But then it suddenly couples 'a father / a family' (with the image of a very specific kind of father, and a very specific kind of family) and we are left



Figure 2.1 *L'imagier des gens* (2008), by Blexbolex, Albin Michel.

Reproduced with permission.³

3 For graphic reasons it was not possible to insert more than 4 illustrations in the chapter. I thank the author/illustrators and publishers who very kindly allowed me to use these images for their improper use/reproduction.

wondering. Are there different traditions, different beliefs in different cultures as to what a family is? Are there cultures in which only your father represents your family? (If you are a boy, maybe? Or from a certain age on, possibly?) Relativism of parental bonds is introduced, as are hints to a possibly stereotyped representation of the word 'family'. In the page coupling 'a corpse / a grandmother' taboos concerning death and the proximity to death are faced in a very easy way. At the same time, nothing in the image of the grandmother makes this connection obvious, the old lady being represented as a very lively woman. In the page matching 'amateurs / an inventor' the interesting comparison is suggested by the visual code as much as by the text (we are indeed talking about nonfiction *picturebooks*): some children are shown as awkwardly trying to put together a precarious construction, but it is the supposedly professional scientist who in the end seems to be doing a more dangerous and threatening experiment. In the page with 'a curious boy / a spy', we are left wondering about the desire to see what we are not supposed to see: is it a good or a bad drive? Is it precious when it is spontaneous in childhood, and ethically controversial if driven by money in the adulthood? The 'a speaker / a snake charmer' pair is also interesting due to the way it is visually conceived, with the microphone wire on the left page resembling the snake of the right page, to further stress the fact that the two men are possibly doing the same thing: enchanting someone (a crowd or an animal) that will follow their lead in a somehow entranced way. A similar consideration applies for the couple 'an orchestra leader / a tyrant'. Very smart too, is the matching 'a football player / a rascal': shouldn't we explain to children why we, as a society, give so much importance (and money) to adults whose job is basically to kick a ball, yet are generally bothered by children who play ball whenever and with whatever they can? 'Dancers / warriors' point to rituals and how strong and unconscious ritual expressions can be (not to mention how similar looking) in times of peace and war. 'Party goers / a hermit' make readers think of the dual human desire to be a cheerful part of a community, included in a group but also sometimes to be alone, far from the madding crowd, focused on deeper thoughts. When looked at together, the two representations counterposed in the book can be felt as both part of one's own needs. Striking too, is the contrast between 'a myth / a docker': two men basically performing the same endless physical effort, one destined to become some sort of hero, the other to lead a harsh uneventful life. 'A homeless person / a camper' is another thought-provoking association: we want to be homeless sometimes and experience a freer more essential way of life, but mostly this is true if we *have* a home we can go back to. Shall we wonder about a privilege that is also sometimes a prison? – the page seems to suggest.

The couple ‘a hunter / a soldier’ may seem obvious: what they have in common is a rifle, used for a different purpose. But – we may ask as we see them so closely associated – would it be easier, in different circumstances, for someone who normally kills animals to also kill people? A very crucial doublespread, topical in our days, is the one showing ‘a traveller / a migrant’: they both have luggage, they both leave their home and head for a faraway, possibly unknown place, so what is it that makes them different, so much so that we need two words to name them? Is ‘choice’ the divide?

These are only a few of the many pairings and the many possible questions (and I stress the word ‘questions’) that *L’imagier des gens* arouses. We can read, play, discuss and ponder with children endlessly over its pages, and children will not only undoubtedly become acquainted with a lot of words about people while looking at it, but will also discover how to be critical about definitions, labels, and concepts, which are systematically dismantled and never taken for granted thanks to these clever, thoughtful associations.

SAISONS, BY BLEXBOLEX

In this picturebook about the four seasons (a nonfiction topic for young children *par excellence*), Blexbolex uses the juxtaposition of images in each doublespread, but also the accumulation of hints leading to a constant turning of the page as a technique to achieve both knowledge and poetry. The four seasons are not presented by means of accurate and precise information concerning their characteristics, but by means of a sequence of textual and visual elements characterized by a very vague connection with one another and with a specific time of the year. Again, the reader is left to ponder their possible relationship, meaning and pertinence, which is by no means self-evident. Yet, every element represented (every word and every image) has something to do with our perception of Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter, with what they mean and imply in terms of specific objects, fruits, natural phenomena, weather (a sprout, a caterpillar, a plum, gloves, a scarf, a beach umbrella, a watermelon, a t-shirt, mushrooms, a thunderstorm, a snow-fall...), as well as the physical reactions (an allergy, a cold...), and feelings (sadness, solitude, love...) involved.

Some associations within the doublespread are particularly striking, such as ‘a queue (of cars) / a colony’ (of caterpillars), when the things of Summer are being defined and portrayed. The meaning of the pairing is strengthened by the fact that it is preceded by ‘a departure / a breakaway’, ironically alluding to the desire to leave and get away from it all, a desire soon to be frustrated by the amount of people going

on vacation at the same time. Very subtle and open to interpretation are pages like the one displaying ‘love / obstinacy’, an association possibly implicating that love can sometimes be the result of stubbornness. Or that love may be a seasonal phenomenon (bound to end even if we don’t want it to). This page is also interesting because of the images used to convey these two abstract words: a deer and a doe on the left and, on the right, a tree which, when every other tree is bare, holds its dead leaves as if not wanting to let them go. Out of metaphor: don’t we all tend to do so?

Figure 2.2 showcases a very small selection of the seemingly endless progression of ‘impressions’ connected to the changes (in the landscape, sky, our daily routine,



Figure 2.2 *Saisons* (2009), by Blexbolex, Albin Michel.

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and in people's minds) brought about by the cyclical passing of seasons as portrayed in this book. Imitating this endless process, the book begins by displaying words and images related to Spring, progresses to things to be found in Summer, Autumn, and Winter, only to start all over again several times.

AVANT APRÈS, BY ANNE-MARGOT RAMSTEIN AND MATTHIAS AREGUI

The visual strategy used in this picturebook is again the pairing of two different images on each doublespread. As in *Saisons*, it is also possible to detect certain narrative threads throughout the book, with elements that return and are recognizable for those who pay attention. The specificity of *Avant Après* is that the title serves as the entire text of the whole book, with all the coupled images referring to it: they all represent, by means of an exclusively visual code, the 'before' (on the left page) and the 'after' (on the right page) of some situation. The topic of this nonfiction picturebook is clearly time, or rather, the effects of time (on objects, landscapes, persons). It shows children how things change – seasonally, historically, spatially – and why. The rigorous before/after rule, which might seem limiting, in fact surprisingly expands the ways in which time and its passing can be represented. In these pages, time appears not just as a measurable thing, a chronological sequence or abstract unit. Rather, it is shown as the frame within which weather change, climate change, technological progress, natural metamorphosis, artificial transformations, processes of growth and decay, moral actions (when behaviours have consequences) and much more come about. Time and the changes it brings, in as 'simple' a book as this (wordless books are often considered simple (Terrusi, 2017)), is shown in all its complexity: as something physical, psychological, sentimental, and perceptual. Time is a dimension that affects the natural and human world, distancing things but also unexpectedly approximating them, as in the case of the 'rocking horse / rocking chair' page where childhood and old age are related in a truly poetic way. *Avant Après* is another example of how a nonfiction picturebook can be at the same time informative and poetic (Fig. 2.3). Resourcefully combining an exclusively visual code according to a given temporal pattern, it triggers critical thinking (How similar can childhood and old age be? How important is a bridge to foster communication?) and offers specific information and knowledge (How is chocolate obtained? How have writing devices evolved?).

The book is also full of extra-textual references for the reader to discover and delight in, as in the case of the straw house that gets blown away, the wood house that gets easily destroyed, and the brick house that stays the same – except for the



Figure 2.3 *Avant Après* (2013), by Anne-Margot Ramstein and Matthias Aregui, Albin Michel.

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fact that a following doublespread shows a solid house well kept on the left, and the same house falling apart on the right, having been clearly abandoned for a long time. Nothing really lasts forever, the book seems to say, although never outright. Isn't this a totally nonfiction (i.e. objective) message as much as it is intuitive, revealing, and emotional?

CHAQUE SECONDE DANS LE MONDE, BY BRUNO GIBERT

Chaque seconde dans le monde is, once again, at least superficially, a nonfiction picturebook about time, conceived with yet another creative perspective. All the images and data presented in the book are about events/facts that happen in the world in just one second, and every second (Fig. 2.4). Interesting per se, this information is made more surprising, enlightening and open to discussion by the appealing pairing of two of these facts on each doublespread. In the same time



Figure 2.4 *Chaque seconde dans le monde* (2013), by Bruno Gibert, Actes Sud Junior. Reproduced with permission.

lapse, and on each doublespread, two things happen that are somehow connected, leaving readers to wonder how and with what implications (as in the case of ‘4 babies are born / 2 persons die’, or ‘14 books are sold / 40 smartphones are sold’, ‘450 \$ are invested in humanitarian aid / 53.500 \$ are payed on weapons’ etc.). It is this pairing, this implicit association created by the very layout of the book that makes what would otherwise be cold data, figures, and numbers suddenly meaningful and not abstract and somehow ungraspable. Although objective and quantitative, the information about the world offered by this book is theoretically neutral, but no longer dispassionate. Displaying the figures concerning two phenomena side by side in this unexpected manner encourages readers to compare them and think critically about what they really mean in broader (social, cultural, anthropological) terms.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the artistic nonfiction picturebook chooses knowledge of the real world as its subject matter using a well devised combination of words and pictures, it is clearly more interested in teaching how rather than what to think. Its aim is, very often, to make readers familiar with the process of connecting things that are apparently far-fetched, distant, unrelated: a crucial process both in the arts and sciences at their deepest level. It is by connecting elements, facts, data, and anecdotes that are apparently uncontinuous with one another that scientists make interesting discoveries and reach new and enlightening visions of the world; it is by finding metaphors or comparisons (i.e. associating different images), by linking words together in unexpected ways, by connecting distant thoughts, that poetry is created.

The artistic nonfiction picturebook is both a learning book and also an artwork. It favours knowledge of the real world, but encourages the reader to be critical and creative, so that knowledge does not coincide with a passive acquisition of data and information but is the result of a co-construction of meaning on the part of the reader. Because of its very structure, the artistic nonfiction picturebook can only function by means of inferential and interpretative activity of the reader; it only makes sense if the reader, each reader, integrates what it has to say. The process of knowing is conceived as a shared activity within its pages, one which involves children intellectually, emotionally, and aesthetically.

My focus in this chapter was to analyse the extent to which a book can be called a nonfiction book (i.e.: credibly informative about the world) even when the author/illustrator deliberately leaves its message open to interpretation – as is typical of

art. The research question was: is encouraging multiple interpretation and being structurally dialogical with the child reader still a way of being informative about the world? My answer is that this is possibly the best way of being informative about the world, if we understand the world not as a given entity that has already been satisfyingly classified, but as a revisable reality that children can contribute to define, interpret and construe while learning about it.

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