

# WAR AND PEACE BETWEEN WORDS AND PICTURES

THE PICTUREBOOKS  
AS NEUTRAL GROUND  
FOR THE DIALECTICS  
BETWEEN GRAPHIC  
AND VERBAL  
LANGUAGES

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## ESSAY 111/07

GRAPHIC LANGUAGE

WORDLESS WORKS

ILLUSTRATION

PICTURE BOOKS

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

This article discusses the relationships that have been established throughout history between drawn pictures and written words. An almost epic interweaving of war and peace emerges between the two languages that, depending on the times, cultures and contexts, have sometimes prevailed one over the other, have sometimes allied themselves, and then again fought and imposed themselves on each other.

Despite the fact that this diatribe never seems to reach a conclusion, there are some fields in which the two languages

seem to succeed in dialoguing in unpredictable and surprising ways. One of these is the picture book, a neutral field in which the longstanding struggles for supremacy between graphic and verbal languages seem to disappear, whereas they instead dialogue and experiment together in new forms of narration. Words and images here renounce their traditional meanings and configuration, defining unusual forms of wordless books, which go far beyond the classic and almost predictable format of the silent books.

## INTRODUCTION

Written words and drawn images are elements of two different languages on which the construction and transmission of knowledge of our culture is based; two different forms of visual communication that over the course of time have been able to respond to the different needs that have emerged from time to time from society, in different contexts, to achieve different objectives, in relation to different audiences. Needs, these, that in many situations have forced the two languages to find a meeting point, to establish a relationship and to collaborate in order to achieve common goals. Thus, throughout history, countless forms of interaction have developed between images and words, leading to the delineation of a continuum rather than a dichotomy between images and words understood as antithetical and incompatible elements, with wordless works at one extreme and pictureless works at the other, in the midst of which there are infinite declinations in which the two elements collaborate and interact, sometimes with images that illustrate texts, sometimes with texts that describe images. The two forms of expression thus give life to a story of conflicts and agreements, of wars and peace, in a continuous alternation and coexistence of competition and mutual collaboration.

## METHOD

This article analyses the possible interactions between images and words starting from the state of the art discussed in paragraph 3 –*War and Peace between Words and Pictures*– which retraces, without any claim to exhaustiveness, a historical evolution by dwelling on some of the most significant moments and visual artifacts.

This state of the art will provide the tools for observing continuities and discontinuities with the current panorama, which is discussed by limiting the field of ob-

servation to a particular field of investigation, the picture books. This sphere is in fact among those in which images and words have greater degrees of freedom to interact and in which, therefore, the two languages can best experiment new modalities of dialogue (Campagnaro, 2013). Paragraph 4 –*The Picture books as Neutral Ground for the Dialectics between Graphic and Verbal Languages*– will discuss some of the possible ways in which the two languages can interact, focusing especially on the role of pictures. Again, the review of case studies does not claim to be exhaustive but is intended to propose a potentially implementable exemplification. Both paragraphs 3 and 4 are articulated in sub-paragraphs intended to exemplify the possible modes of intersections between the two languages, which from time to time tend to modify their balances and their power relationships. What emerges is a map of ever-changing relationships that together define a complex mosaic, the overview of which is fundamental in order to be more aware of the use of images in the various forms of multimedia communication. From this analysis, in fact, elements of continuity and invariants emerge that also constitute useful references from a designing point of view.

## WAR AND PEACE BETWEEN WORDS AND PICTURES

### **Pictures anticipating words**

“In the beginning was the word”, writes John in his Gospel, giving the word a primordial role. “In the beginning was the image”, would instead seem the more correct incipit to tell the story of the evolution of languages both from a collective historical-cultural perspective and from an individual psycho-cognitive perspective.

Indeed, images dominate the first phase in the evolution of human communication, both in reference to the early graphic-visual evidence at the beginning of the history of human civilisation, and in relation to the first ways of expression at the start of the individual's life.

In fact, although the function of cave paintings (Figure 1) –the earliest known human-produced images– is unclear, there is a general consensus that they were a form of wordless communication rather than merely a wall decoration. Having overcome the theory that the caves that sheltered these earliest forms of representation were places of habitation, these sites are now considered as a kind of primordial library in which information was stored and made available through graphic language alone (Male, 2014). Thus, the transmission of knowledge began without written words but with drawn images that anticipated the role that would only later be fulfilled by writing. Therefore, images emerged as the first form of representation and communication without words.

### **Words undermining pictures**

The same primacy can be highlighted in the history of another evolution, that of the psycho-cognitive development of individuals. In the cognitive development of the child, from the first months of life to pre-school age, graphic expression takes the form of a spontaneous communication channel. Therefore, images can be considered as the most natural form of expression, communication and transmission of information, even before writing. Then, graphic language gradually declines due to the enhancement of verbal language in which school education tends to invest more. Written words thus replace images, becoming the main visual language (Anning, 1999).

### **Pictures generating words**

Despite their undeniable communicative function, the pictures in cave paintings as well as children's drawings cannot be considered a form of writing in a strict sense, as it is not possible to highlight in them a codified system of standardised symbols. It was, however, precisely these images, used spontaneously to communicate objects and concepts, that evolved into those more abstract and symbolic pictographic forms considered to be the earliest forms of writing

(Harris, 1998). In this way, images take the form of graphic codes with a shared meaning, becoming true languages. From communication through hieroglyphic pictograms (Figure 2) to that using the characters of phonetic alphabets, via syllabic symbols, it has been shown how words originate from images and derive from a process of simplification and abstraction of figurative forms into symbolic forms associated with single phonemes (Figure 3).

### **Picture substituting words**

Images make events and concepts visible. Over the course of time, this capacity has been fundamental in making intelligible narrative, celebratory and symbolic contents, even of a complex nature, and transmitting them to both posterity and contemporaries. This is the case of the Trajan column, erected to celebrate the conquest of Dacia by the emperor Trajan, around which scenes recalling the salient moments of that particular event are wrapped, organised strictly with chronological intentions (Figure 4). Another example is the Bayeux Tapestry, which recounts the key events surrounding the Norman conquest of England in 1066 by celebrating the figure of William the Conqueror (Figure 5). In both examples, the narration is entrusted almost exclusively to the images alone; the few accompanying texts have the sole role of explaining the little information useful to contextualise the events.

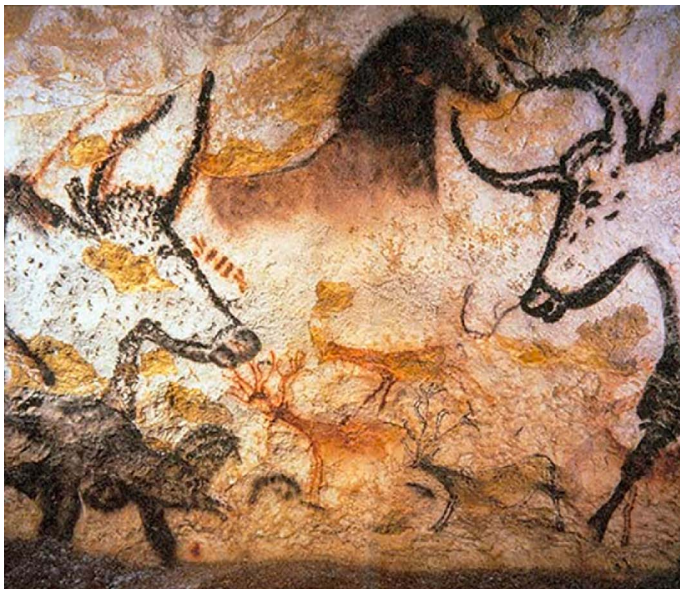
From the classical era onwards, pictures then became fundamental tools not only for the propaganda of the powerful, but also for the transmission of knowledge, as in the case of religious paintings inside church buildings (Figure 6), adopted by Christianity as a privileged means to communicate the messages and contents of the sacred scriptures to the great masses of illiterate believers (Bossaglia, 1992), who could only receive the teachings of Christian doctrine through them (De Fiore, 1967).

### **Words overpowering pictures**

While up to this point it had been easier to convey messages through works aimed at a collective audience through

**Fig. 1** Wall paintings, 15,300 BC, Lascaux.

Retrieved November, 1, 2022 from <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lascaux#/media/File:Lascaux\\_painting.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lascaux#/media/File:Lascaux_painting.jpg)>



**Fig. 2** Egyptian Hieroglyphics, 1321 BC, inscription on stone stele, Louvre Museum, Paris.

Retrieved November, 1, 2022 from <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egyptian\\_hieroglyphs#/media/File:Minnakht\\_01.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egyptian_hieroglyphs#/media/File:Minnakht_01.jpg)>



**Fig. 3** Evolution of the Phoenician 'aleph' character from the hieroglyphic representation of an ox (2000 BC) to represent the sound 'A'. Graphic elaboration by the author.





**Fig. 4** *Supplies on the Danube, Trajan's Column, 113 AD, bas-relief, Rome. Retrieved November, 1, 2022 from <[https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rilievi\\_della\\_colonna\\_Traiana#/media/File:006\\_Conrad\\_Cichorius,\\_Die\\_Reliefs\\_der\\_Traianss%C3%A4ule,\\_Tafel\\_VI.jpg](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rilievi_della_colonna_Traiana#/media/File:006_Conrad_Cichorius,_Die_Reliefs_der_Traianss%C3%A4ule,_Tafel_VI.jpg)>*



**Fig. 5** *Bayeux Tapestry, detail, 1100, embroidery, Centre Guillaume-le-Conquérant Bayeux. Retrieved November, 1, 2022 from <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bayeux\\_Tapestry#/media/File:Tapisserie\\_de\\_Bayeux\\_31109.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bayeux_Tapestry#/media/File:Tapisserie_de_Bayeux_31109.jpg)>*



**Fig. 6** *Wedding at Cana, Resurrection of Lazarus, Lamentation over the Dead Christ, Resurrection and Noli me tangere, Giotto di Bondone, 1303-1305, frescoes, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, [https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Q3739862#/media/File:Giotto\\_di\\_Bondone\\_-\\_Scenes\\_with\\_decorative\\_bands\\_-\\_WGA09284.jpg](https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Q3739862#/media/File:Giotto_di_Bondone_-_Scenes_with_decorative_bands_-_WGA09284.jpg)*



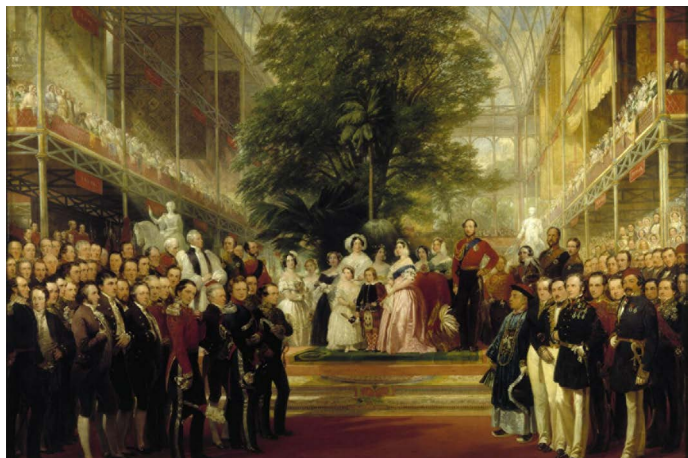
modes that had encouraged the use of images and graphic languages, with the printing press, communication became individual, private, domestic. Printing with movable type spread written works widely, fostering literacy (Rachal, 1988) and consequently the spread of written works over pictorial ones. The Bibles of the poor are no longer the frescoed paintings inside basilicas but are printed books (Figure 7), no longer the prerogative of a cultural elite but widespread among the people. These



**Fig. 7** *Eve and the snake, the Annunciation, the miracle of Gideon, Biblia Pauperum, 1465-1475, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford. Retrieved November, 1, 2022 from <<https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/45a081c8-5211-43ac-a1ef-dbf1ef3e20e/surfaces/7c35fd91-b998-4f21-bf3c-6bf363cb4371/>>*



**Fig. 8** *Henry Courtney Selous. The Opening of the Great Exhibition by Queen Victoria on 1 May 1851, 1851, olio su tela, 169,5 x 241,9 cm, Victoria & Albert Museum, Londra. Retrieved November, 1, 2022 from <<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O8820/the-opening-of-the-great-oil-painting-selous-henry-courtney/>>*



books initially see the words commenting on the images according to a scheme of complementarity and then relegate them to a purely decorative role.

### **Words belittling images**

When images become ancillary to the written text, they go from being works per se to being just an accessory component of a work of a different nature. In the traditional conception of illustration, in fact, this is an image having a secondary role to the content expressed through written language and could, therefore, also be omitted without losing this meaning (Walther, 2019). In this way, images go from being unique pieces and works of high art (Figure 8) to being considered commercial products aimed at reproduction in large quantities (Figure 9). The marriage with words celebrated in books and printed products eventually vulgarize printed images, which become products of lesser quality and prestige as they are considered closer to popular culture and mass communication rather than pure aesthetic enjoyment. The illustrator for printed books thus becomes a less prestigious professional figure than the artist who produces unique works, autonomous from verbal language, that continue to retain a connotation of 'high' art (Gowans, 1971).

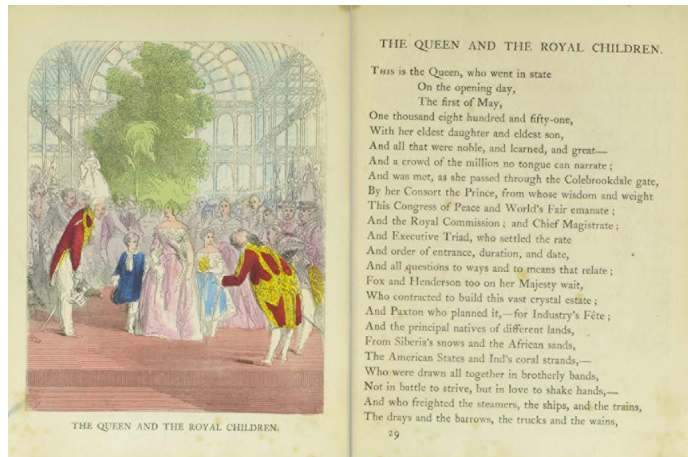
### **Words removing images**

As we have seen images in some phases of the history of civilisation trying to impose themselves on words in narrating and communicating events, to the point of excluding them and totally emancipating themselves, words too –with the establishment of movable type printing– try to impose themselves on images as witnessed by the immense pictureless book production that sees words as the sole means of narration and communication and at most images relegated to marginal decorative roles (Needham & Joseph, 2009).

### **Words generating pictures**

However, the thirst for revenge of words on images seems not to be quietened by the spread of pictureless books. The

**Fig. 9** John Gilbert, *Queen Victoria and her children visiting the Great Exhibition of 1851, Crystal Palace, Hyde Park, London*. Illustration from *The Crystal Palace that Fox Built, a Pyramid of Rhyme, 1851*. Retrieved November, 1, 2022 from <<https://digitalarchive.tpl.ca/objects/240676/the-crystal-palace-that-fox-built--a-pyramid-of-rhyme>>



word not only refuses the presence of images but further challenges them by stealing their figurative connotation. Indeed, in the calligrams the word becomes image and tries to acquire figurative meanings thanks to the clever graphic composition of the individual words. They could be called pictureless works even though the word actually becomes an image by using meters of different lengths to reproduce the shape of objects (d'Alessandro, 2013), so the image is actually present to some extent. This is a challenge that words launch to Industry starting from Greek technopaignia (Figure 10) and Latin carmina figurata up to Louis Carrol's concrete poetry (Figure 11), passing through Apollinaire's calligrams, Mallarmé's visual poems, Depero's abstract verbalisation and Marinetti's words in freedom.

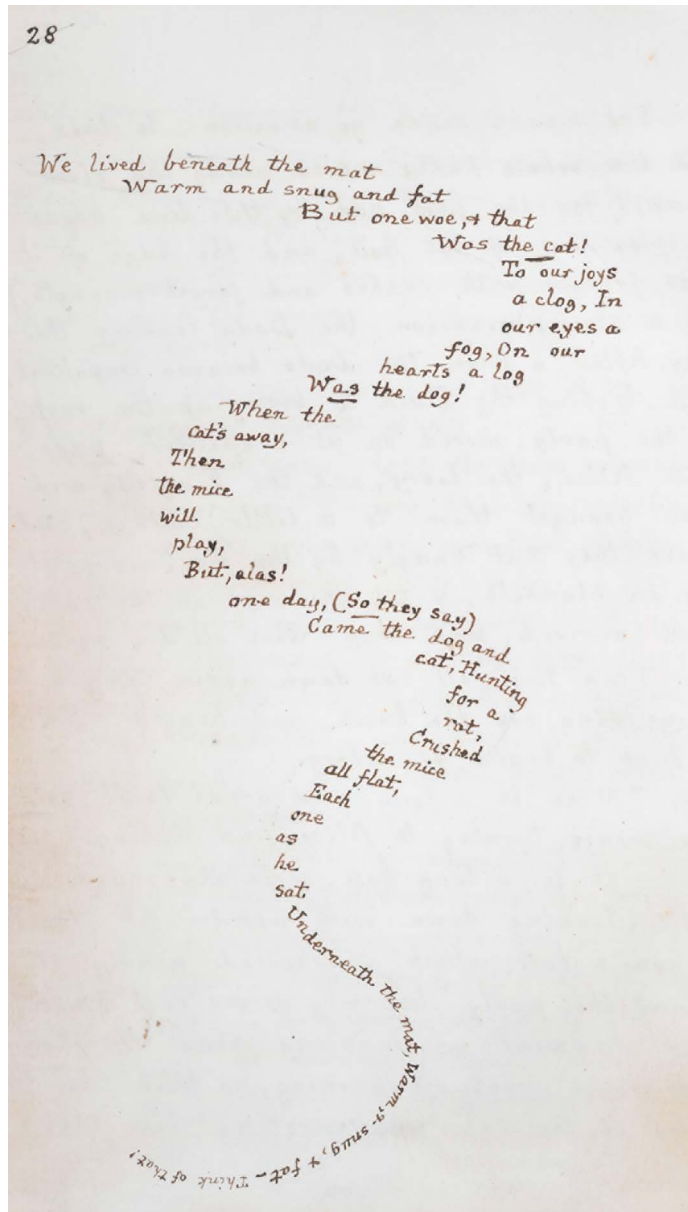
### Images entering words

While with the spread of printing, texts dominated over images for centuries, today with the rise of new digital media, images have become central again to communication and the production of meanings. Speed is the distinctive feature of these new forms of communication and images become attractors capable of conveying content quickly and to catalyse the attention of the public towards written contents.

In the age of digital communication, in which the production of content constantly quickens and becomes endless



**Fig. 11** Lewis Carroll, *The original manuscript of Alice's Adventures Under Ground*, 1863.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Mouse%27s\\_Tale#/media/File:Alice's\\_Adventures\\_Under\\_Ground\\_-\\_Lewis\\_Carroll\\_-\\_British\\_Library\\_Add\\_MS\\_46700\\_f15v.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Mouse%27s_Tale#/media/File:Alice's_Adventures_Under_Ground_-_Lewis_Carroll_-_British_Library_Add_MS_46700_f15v.jpg)



text, and thus play a secondary role. However, it is now agreed that visual narratives take on meanings of their own, although always read in relation to the written text (Kress, 1997; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) through synergistic relationships (Sipe,

1998). Sartori states in this regard that words and images are able to reinforce and complement each other (Sartori, 2014). The illustration of texts as well as the commentary of images allow the multiplication and enrichment of the meanings conveyed. The image connects to the written texts but each maintains its functional autonomy and collaborates with the other in the construction of the narrative (Dallari, 2008).

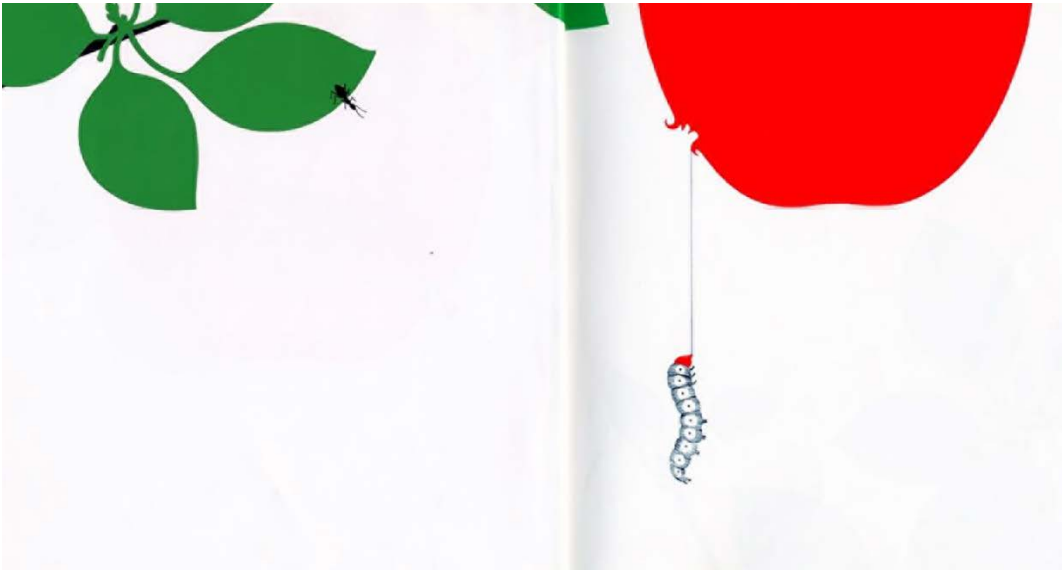
A privileged space for this collaboration between texts and images are the picture books (Nodelman, 1988; Lunn, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In picture books, images and words can interact in unpredictable ways. Each of the two languages acts along two parallel narrative lines (Schulevitz, 1985). Word and image intertwine bringing specific content (Moss, 1990), without which understanding and interpretation of the text could not be comprehensive (Campagnaro & Dallari, 2013).

Texts and images sharing the space of the page can interact in multifaceted ways in which they continue to challenge each other producing new narrative modes. Images and words renounce to the classic manner of interaction based on the concept of translation, of words into images and images into words, moving towards the experimentation of new forms of dialogue. The text and the image 'dance' giving rise to the most diverse configurations: irony, paradox, symmetry, contrast, complementarity, parallelism, or even as an active relationship in absentiam, in the case of the silent books (Terrusi, 2012).

Images sometimes emancipate themselves from words by going beyond the well-established tradition of silent books (Figure 12), which are often seen as the conclusion of an evolutionary cycle of autonomization of visual storytelling; as the ultimate triumph of images over words that brings us back to the beginnings of the history from which the discussion in this article started.

The following discussion will present some examples of how images can relate to texts while emancipating themselves from them.





**Fig. 12** Iela e Enzo Mari, *La mela e la farfalla*, 2004.

### **Pictures foretelling words**

Actually, for any pre-school child—who has thus not yet been alphabetized regarding verbal languages—every picture book, despite containing written words, acts as a wordless book subject to multiple and personal interpretations, including those of the adult reader who offers the child his own interpretation of images and texts.

Every picture book in which texts and images are composed according to the traditional translation pattern (Figure 13) is thus a potential wordless book, to whose images the child can ascribe her own meanings, just as adults who present silent books to children through their own personal readings do, disproving or confirming what the child had already interpreted through his own personal interpretation.

### **Words denying pictures**

The two narrative paths, that of drawn pictures and that of written words, can also run parallel without ever meeting. In this case, the visual storytelling of images functions as an autonomous silent book on which a parallel textual narrative flows (Schwarcz, 1982). Two apparently autonomous and





**Fig. 13** Helen Oxenbury,  
*Cappuccetto Rosso raccontato da*  
*Beatrix Potter, 2019.*

unrelated different stories seem to create a cacophonous composition that instead, surprisingly, adds new meanings and new levels of reading to both. In the book *Gli uccelli* (Figure 14) author and illustrator are different figures, each telling his own story, which when added to the other's stimulates an even more intense third narrative.

### **Pictures resignifying words**

Pictures can thus give the written words new meanings, totally altering the sense of the narrative. In these cases, reading the texts assumes two different meanings depending on whether it is done with or without the support of images. As in the case of *Cappuccetto Rosso*. Una fiaba moderna by Roberto Innocenti (Figure 15), in which the narration of the classic story of Little Red Riding Hood is accompanied by images that change its features, updating not only the setting but also the meaning. The reading of one of the two narrative lines creates expectations in the reader (Nikolajeva



**Fig. 14** Germano Zullo and Albertine, *Gli uccelli*, 2010.

& Scott, 2006) that are punctually betrayed by the other, but it is precisely this dissonance that fosters the production of new meanings.

### **Words drawing pictures**

When the text becomes a picture drawn through graphic compositions of the words different from the simple sequence of words, it acquires new character, following the tradition of calligrams described in the previous paragraphs. The rhythm of words on the page suggest the rhythm of reading, white spaces turn into silences, the intensification of characters on the page result in the acceleration of reading. In *Il grande pesce* by Aoi Huber-Kono (Figure 16), there is a dialogue between wordless pages and pages in which words become images, translating not only the story represented by the images but the sensations it conveys, an emotional narrative level that goes beyond the simple events of the story and becomes visual poetry.

### **Pictures becoming words**

In continuity with another tradition, that of hieroglyphic languages, pictures can also aspire to become codified and



**Fig. 15** Roberto Innocenti.  
*Cappuccetto Rosso. Una fiaba moderna*, 2012.

standardised language in picture books. A significant example is Sandro Natalini's *Little Red Riding Hood* (Figure 17) in which the narrative unfolds in a long narrative plane, almost like a long folded papyrus in which a narrative map is drawn and in which events follow one another through a sequence of events entirely composed of pictograms. The only text present are the numbers marking the sequentiality of the scenes and a few onomatopoeic sounds describing the actions. The narrative plan seems to leave no room for words, which will however take their revenge on the back of the map...

### **Pictures decrypting words**

Texts can also take different forms from the traditional words of the verbal language. Wordless works can also be considered those in which the alphabetic compositions take on an onomatopoeic role, in which they describe sounds instead of meanings. The meaning of the narration emerges through the interpretation of the images that make it possible to decrypt the alphabetical compositions, allowing the reader to attribute emotions to the reading of the texts on the basis of the events narrated by the pictures, as in the case



**Fig. 16** Aoi Huber-Kono, *Il grande pesce*, 2007.

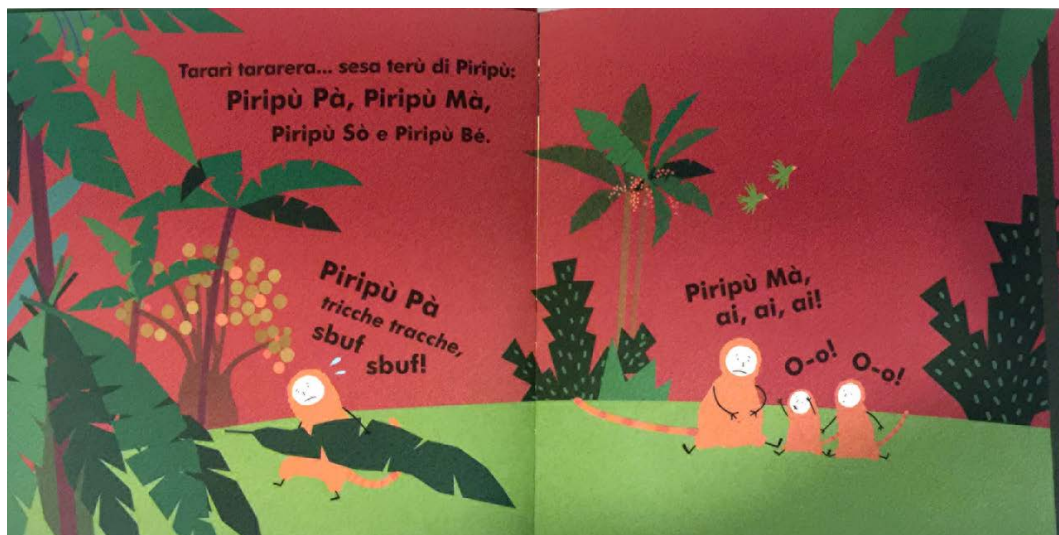
**Fig. 17** Sandro Natalini, *Cappuccetto Rosso*, 2019.

of Emanuela Bussolati's picture books (Figure 18) in which a text without meaning surprisingly takes on meaning thanks to the clues provided by the pictures.

### Words revealing pictures

In the same way that pictures help to reveal the meaning of words, words can also return the favour by suggesting





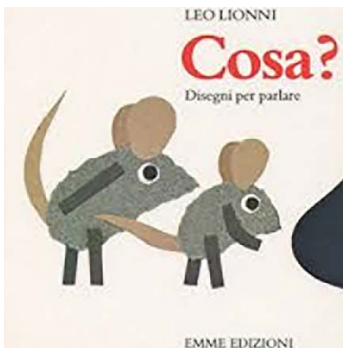
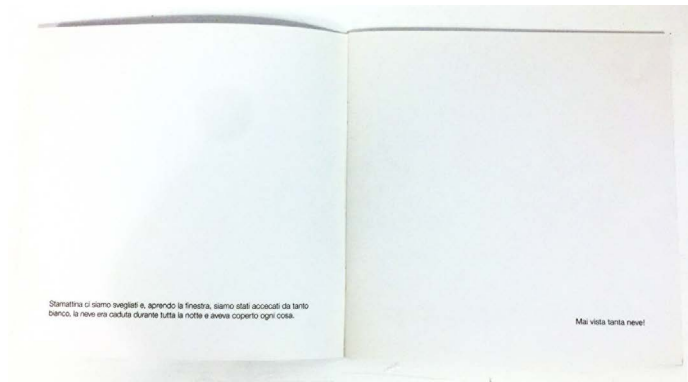
**Fig. 18** Emanuela Bussolati, *Piripù Bibi*, 2020.

hints for reading the pictures. Thus an apparently picture-less book like Bruno Munari's *Cappuccetto Bianco* (Figure 19) turns out to be a book based on pregnant images, so cumbersome that they become practically unreadable. The words confer meaning to the wide white spaces of the pages, dissolving the ambiguity of a graphic composition that seems to privilege words, then discovering that the weights between the presence of the text and the absence of the image surprisingly are reversed.

### **Pictures teaching words**

The introductory role that images play in confronting words is stated in Leo Lionni's series *Disegni per parlare* [Drawing for Talking] published in Italy by Emme in 1991 (Figure 20). These small wordless booklets present a series of scenes that give, both the young reader and the adult who interacts with the child through the books, cues on which to base stories, relationships, discourses with the greatest degree of freedom (Serafini, 2014). The title of the series seems to contradict the concept of the silent book to be read solely through images, inviting instead to use the absence of the written word as a space of freedom for the spoken word (Figure 21).

**Fig. 19** Bruno Munari, *Cappuccetto Bianco*, 1999



**Fig. 20** Leo Lionni, *Disegni per parlare*, 1991.

**Fig. 21** Leo Lionni, *Chi? Disegni per parlare*, 1991.

### Words trivialising pictures

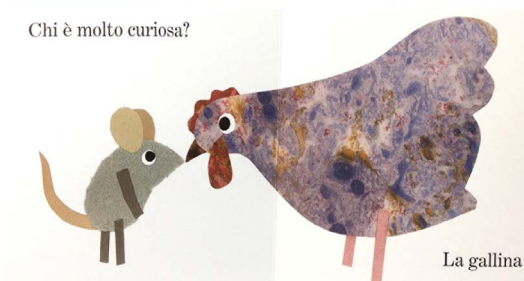
In the most recent re-edition of Leo Lionni's series (Figure 22), the title *Disegni per parlare* [Drawings for talking] (1991) is lost on the cover and the series is renamed *Due topolini curiosi* [Two curious mice] (2017). This difference is not of secondary importance as the words that are lost on the cover, and that invites the reader to use the book and its lack of words as a stimulus for the imagination of the



Chi è molto curiosa?



Chi è goloso di carote?



La gallina



Il coniglio

**Fig. 22** Leo Lionni. *Due topolini curiosi*. 2017.

**Fig. 23** Comparison of the same pages of the two editions, 1991 and 2017.

reader and for his or her ability to learn verbal language, are compensated by the insertion of texts inside. What were once freely interpretable silent scenes on which endless and ever-changing stories could be plotted from time to time become now fixed dialogues, defined once and for all. The printed words so imposed limit the interpretive possibilities by trivialising personages and scenes, which in the end result in stereotypes and clichés linked to the personalities of the protagonists. The irruption of words in wordless work leads to a weakening of its narrative potential and perhaps, by simplifying and trivialising the content, also its quality (Figure 23).



## CONCLUSIONS

This article discusses the possible relationships between pictures and words within the different forms of visual communication, starting from historical aspects and ending with the application of the same interactive modes observed within historical case studies to the field of picture books, especially those related to children's literature.

In particular, it has highlighted the features of wordless works and of those in which the presence of the written word triggers virtuous relationships capable of revealing the value of the image. This is obviously the case with silentbooks, which the article briefly mentions but intentionally does not deepen, although it highlights how the inclusion of words on a silent book unquestionably undermines its potential (Figure 23). The article prefers to focus on other declinations of wordless works such as books in which the written text does not recall words but sounds (Figure 18), in which drawn images replace words according to codified linguistic patterns, as in the case of pictograms (Figure 17), in which words become images acquiring the value of a pure graphic element within a complex composition that can thus be read as a particular declination of ambiguously wordless work (Figure 16). All these examples are discussed on the background of the cultural-historical knowledge presented in the first part of the article. As a result, the continuity between the text-image relationships of the picture books and those of the historical case studies becomes evident. The visual poetry *Il grande pesce* by Aoi Huber-Kono descends from Greek *technopaegnia* and from concrete poetry (Figures 10, 11), the pictograms in *Cappuccetto Rosso* by Sandro Natalini recall the mode of communication of hieroglyphic languages (Figure 2), *Cappuccetto Bianco* by Bruno Munari (Figure 19) mocks the reader by presenting itself as a pictureless book but forcing the reader to look further, seeking images in the white space of the page through imagination.

In the silent books (Figure 12) we can recognise the conclusion of an evolutionary cycle of autonomisation of narration

through images that brings back to the beginnings of the history from which the discussion in this article started (Figures 1, 4, 5, 6) and the acknowledgement of the high quality that images have always had throughout history, produced to be works in themselves, and not as a support for texts (Figures 8, 9); therefore to be wordless works, where the lack of a text leads back to a concept of the picture as a visual product aimed solely at aesthetic enjoyment and the structure of the pagination stimulates an organisation of images in sequence, the ideal support for a form of narration, obviously exquisitely visual.

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