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Are Wordless Books Democratic?

Czy książki beztekstowe są demokratyczne?

KEYWORDS

wordless picture books, silent books, books without words, readers's responses to wordless picturebooks, children's literature

ABSTRACT

This article examines the wordless picture books in the context of evolving culturally conditioned communication methods (especially according to children with adult reading companions), as well as changes in the perception of implied readers. The author begins by discussing the "Silent Books: from the World to Lampedusa and Back" project, initiated ten years ago by IBBY, and analyzing the project's foundations, which emphasize a democratic narrative transmitted by the images. In the next section, the author considers the status of the recipient of a wordless picture book, the significance of adult reading companions, and the aspects that raise questions about whether the book's message is essentially democratic or hierarchical. The article also examines selected, representative examples of wordless picture books, illustrating the wide range between various creators' strategies. These examples illustrate a broad spectrum of visual storytelling techniques in visual narratives, including literal representations of reality, abstraction, and encoding of meaning on many different levels. The conclusions highlight that local ways of seeing always impose a particular view of the world, making democratic access to the content of wordless books an unrealistic goal. However, when we consider their reception as a multimodal interpretation based on language, democratic dialogue is possible, but only when multiple perspectives exist simultaneously.

ABSTRAKT

beztekstowa książka
obrazkowa, ciche/
nieme książki
obrazkowe,
recepcja książek
beztekstowych,
książki bez słów,
literatura dziecięca

Artykuł podejmuje problematykę beztekstowych książek obrazkowych, analizując ją na tle przemian w postrzeganiu wirtualnego odbiorcy oraz uwarunkowanych kulturowo sposobów komunikacji, ze szczególnym odniesieniem do sytuacji czytelniczych, podczas których kontakt z książką mają małe dzieci wraz z towarzyszącymi im dorosłymi pośrednikami lektury. Wywód otwiera przywołanie zainicjowanego dziesięć lat temu przez IBBY projektu *Silent Books: from the world to Lampedusa and back* i krytyczne przyjrzenie się założeniom projektu zakładającym demokratyczność narracji, która przekazywana jest poprzez same obrazy. Następnie refleksji poddano status odbiorcy beztekstowej książki obrazkowej, znaczenie obecności pośrednika lektury dziecięcej oraz zjawiska, które pozwalają zastanawiać się, czy przekaz książki jest w swojej istocie demokratyczny czy hierarchiczny. Osobną część artykułu zajmuje analiza wyselekcjonowanych, reprezentatywnych przykładów beztekstowych książek obrazkowych, które pokazują skalę rozpiętości pomiędzy podejmowanymi przez różnych twórców strategiami, od pokazywania w narracji wizualnej dosłownego i literalnego przedstawiania rzeczywistości po posługiwanie się abstrakcją i kodowaniem znaczenia na wielu poziomach. We wnioskach końcowych uwypuklono, że pomimo operowania wyłącznie obrazami, lokalne sposoby patrzenia są zawsze narzucaniem określonego obrazu świata, stąd demokratyczny dostęp do treści książek beztekstowych jest projektem utopijnym – a przestaje nim być tylko w przypadku, gdy proces ich odbioru potraktujemy jako wielomodalną interpretację dokonywaną w materii języka, która uprawnia równoczesne zaistnienie wielu różnych punktów widzenia.

Introduction

A decade ago, IBBY launched "The Silent Books: from the world to Lampedusa and back project" (see McGillicuddy, 2018), dedicated to wordless picture books "that could be understood and used by children regardless of language" (Soria and Bertelli, n.d.). The project's universal message championed the notion of equal access to books, fostering shared experiences through engagement with stories communicated solely through images, thus transcending the boundaries of any single culture or language. The democratic nature of wordless books implied that overcoming language barriers could also lead to overcoming other obstacles. Implicit in this was the aspiration to return to the romantic idea of a "universal children's commonwealth." (Hazard, 1963), envisioning a reading experience that transcends cultural differences, social norms, and processes of globalization and glocalization (O'Sullivan, 2022), while also accommodating individual aesthetic sensibilities inherent in wordless visual narratives.

The guidelines for working with "silent books" underscored their primary purpose[1]: to serve as a bridge of understanding between readers of different languages and cultures. This involved actively engaging in the reading process (Soria and Bertelli, n.d.) through bodily interaction, such as contemplating illustrations together, feeling the presence of others in the circle, and responding spontaneously, including through non-verbal communication, like rhythmic clapping. Empirical studies have shown that authentic interaction between participants in such meetings and engagement in interpreting illustrations in picture books facilitate the creation of communication bridges (see Mourão and Bland, 2016, pp. vi; Mourão, 2021). These analyses are particularly interesting due to the research material and participants, as the tradition of this approach traces back to the work of Lev Vygotsky (2002) and remains relevant in contemporary educational practices based on cooperation and interpersonal interaction (see, for example, Skibska, 2014, p. 309). Wordless books are regarded here as a tool to facilitate communication, in line with the utilitarian function proposed by Soria and Bertelli. However, the assertion that another culture can be understood solely through images is debatable.

Who is the recipient of wordless books?

To begin with, it is important to differentiate between wordless and almost wordless books (Richey and Puckett, 1992), and early-concept books (Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer, 2017, p. 58), which scholars of children's literature often conflate under a single conceptual umbrella (Rybak et al., 2022, pp. 366–367), thus limiting the scope of the former. Wordless books, while primarily aimed at children, actually represent a much broader phenomenon. While my focus in this article is on wordless books for children, it is crucial to bear in mind, as noted by Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (2018, p. 6), that these books can appeal to audiences of all ages.[2] This expansive category encompasses various narrative forms, thematic ranges,

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[1]   In the project's early stages, wordless books were employed with a specific aim: the initiators sought a method of engaging children affected by refugee trauma that could facilitate communication across diverse cultural backgrounds (McGillicuddy, 2018, p. 108). Over time, the project expanded; by 2021, the collection of wordless books comprised 383 books (IBBY, n.d.a), and in 2023, an additional 73 books were added, with the majority originating from Spain and South Korea (IBBY, n.d.).

[2]   An illustration of wordless books catering to different age groups simultaneously includes Joanna Karpowicz's Anubis series: *Anubis* (2017) and *Anubis – Thin Places* (2021), where the author communicates the theme of life's accompanying shadow of death solely through images, symbolized by the mythological god Anubis. Addressed to adult audiences, Michele Penco's *Incubi* [Nightmares] (2020), particularly the first part, or *Self-Portrait* (considered almost wordless), depicts intense emotional reactions like fear and a distorted sense of reality. Wordless picture books represent one end of the spectrum between words and images, yet, as Maria Nikolajeva suggests, they can be further categorized into narrative and non-narrative

and book types, hence it is inaccurate to label wordless books as a genre (Bosch, 2018, p. 192). Additionally, regarding early concept books, Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Jörg Meibauer argue that they too structure content[3] based on concept classes (Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer, 2017, p. 74 ff.) challenging their exclusion from the realm of pre-literature, as suggested by Marilyn Apseloff (1987).

The "story concept" accompanying pictures, which places them within material objects like a book, suggests that even everyday objects (or their arrangement according to accepted conceptual classes) can reflect the prevailing discourse in the local community. This issue intersects with research on the ideology of picture books, making it challenging to generalize that wordless books for the youngest readers can be considered "universal and egalitarian," as argued by Dorota Kowalik (Rybak et al., 2022, p. 367). The construction of these books, often based on simple illustrations with minimal text, does not automatically ensure universality or egalitarianism. Reflection on this issue primarily centers on how books illustrate the fundamental concepts with which children initially engage as they are introduced to cultural concepts through images. Recent studies, such as one by Reka C. Barton and Verónica González (2023), focusing on books for the 0–3 age group, emphasize the importance of visual literacy. Admittedly, this study does not exclusively deal with wordless books, but the analysis of the visual component plays a significant role in its findings. The scholars cite Frank Serafini's concept that "making sense of the world begins with making sense of visual information" (Barton and González, 2023, p. 418 after Serafini, 2014 , p. 25). However, visual information, like textual information, can still perpetuate stereotypes based on race, religion, gender, and other characteristics. In my analysis, I delve into whether the creators' intentions behind wordless books or the stories they convey can genuinely be considered democratic, and if so, on what terms.

The visual narrative in wordless books, insofar as it dispenses with representational literalism, blurs the boundary between the virtual viewer as it allows for multiple encoding of the message. On the other hand, the experience of a real reader with a given book is not, according to the findings of age studies, dependent on age, but on one's stock of experience and interpretive competence. Empirical research on the cultural perception of age confirms that categories previously seen as opposites, such as "innocence" and "wisdom" attributed to specific stages of life, are relational and

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forms (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006, p. 8). Emma Bosch expands on this classification, distinguishing between storytelling-based books and those that focus on "the narrative depiction of everyday life situations, landscapes and cityscapes, and the explanation of concepts" (Bosch, 2018, p. 193 ff.).

3   There are books on the market aimed even at infants (known as baby books) that prompt questions about their narrative qualities as narratives tailored for young children possess a unique dynamic. Take, for instance, *Flora and the Ostrich* (2017) by Molly Idle and many others, where characters representing different concepts interact, effectively weaving a story.

fluid (see Duthoy, 2022). Therefore, in this analysis, I prioritize selected examples that are symptomatic of the phenomenon under study, rather than restricting myself to a specific audience age group. This approach means that I do not exclude any group based on labels like "for children" or "for adults," (as suggested by the publisher) since many wordless books are accessible to child readers (though not all, due to obvious limitations related to children's developmental capabilities and cultural taboos).

The importance of an adult companion of children's reading

The visual layer[4] in wordless and almost wordless books is a significant factor for adults—translators, teachers, publishers, and other readers—seeking elements that can be effectively transposed from one cultural setting to another. This process often prioritizes identifying common themes and assessing economic viability through market analysis (predicting whether a product will sell). However, this emphasis on economic factors can lead to negative consequences, as noted by Anna Nasiłowska, who suggests that "democratization also means standardization of aesthetics" (2022, p. 9) (Nasiłowska, 2022, p. 9). Furthermore, she observes that the former modernist debate, which once addressed the tension between imaginative expression and societal norms, is now primarily influenced by economic considerations (Nasiłowska, 2022, p. 9). However, taking a purely economic perspective may overlook books that function in the reading circulation against the prevailing politics and laws of the market (Czabanowska-Wróbel, 2016, p. 10).

Various perspectives from researchers indicate that it is more reasonable nowadays to consider a spectrum of books, ranging from those conveying an explicit or implicit message or narrative to those whose existence is an end in itself, with meanings that can be interpreted at different levels. In this essay, I aim to portray the breadth of this spectrum, from examples depicting the desires and anxieties of the author's society to the strategies employed by authors of wordless books for communicating the non-verbal experience of interacting with art through visual storytelling.

Democratic or hierarchical?

In wordless and almost wordless picture books, the meaning conveyed through illustrations, pictograms, or symbols is typically elucidated by an adult intermediary

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4   In an interview, Iwona Chmielewska discusses the book selection process at the Bologna Ragazzi Award: "The jury doesn't really read the texts, only the synopses. Above all, they evaluate the visual concept – let's not kid ourselves" (Chmielewska, 2017, p. 365).

accompanying the child. This implies the presence of hidden adults (Nodelman, 2008), responsible for creating, disseminating, explaining, and guiding the reading process. Aware that adult companions project their own life experiences onto the child's mode of reception—characterized by sensory and physical engagement with signs[5] —and ignite a rich imaginative experience during "reading through images" (Cieślikowski, 1967; Ungeheuer-Gołąb, 2009; Reid-Walsh, 2017), creators of wordless books can consciously steer both the child and the reading companion toward a specific interpretation of the socio-cultural setting by employing deliberate strategies to encode meanings. For instance, they may embed messages at a metatextual level reflecting the values prevalent in a particular culture (Joosen, 2018, pp. 1-4). Examining the mechanisms governing the literary domain (Ogonowska, 2020) sheds new light on Vygotsky's classic research, [6] which posited the inseparability of meaning from the visual field (2002, p. 152), offering fresh insights into how young children interpret wordless books, especially when considering the hidden companion guiding them during reading.

The question of the democratic nature of the narrative is intertwined with reflections on the longstanding tradition of studying the educational and aesthetic aspects of children's literature. Focusing specifically on picture books, particularly those that convey narratives without words, necessitates an acknowledgment of new phenomena that have been previously marginalized or overlooked entirely. This should encompass a multidimensional study of the embodied reader (Silva, 2022; Nikolajeva, 2016), as well as cultural (Czabanowska-Wróbel, 2013) and pedagogical (Serafini, 2014) aspects.

Moreover, it is imperative to consider these aspects not only in terms of their role in shaping values through engagement with books in education but also in understanding the regularities inherent in human learning processes. Additionally, we must recognize the subjective attribution of meaning and significance to specific books, indirectly influenced by globalization and the prevailing aesthetic standards deemed worthy of promotion, support, and transmission across various spheres of education and lives of the young generation. As Jack Zipes observed at the outset of the 21st century while analyzing the Harry Potter phenomenon (2001, p. 172 ff.), the interpretation and

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5   Here I refer to Anna Łebkowska's (2011) somatopoetics and my own research on the sensuality of children's literature (Kuczaba-Flisak, 2022).

6   Vygotsky writes: "In a very young child there is such an intimate fusion between word and object, and between meaning and what is seen, that a divergence between the meaning field and the visible field is impossible.. ... the separation of the fields of vision and meaning occurs in the preschool period. ... The special feature of human perception – which arises at a very early age – is so-called reality perception. ... Essentially it lies in the fact that I do not see the world simply in color and shape, but also as a world with sense and meaning." (Vygotsky, 2002, pp. 152–153).

enjoyment of a book are contingent upon the conventions shaped by globalization and glocalization processes, as elucidated by O'Sullivan (2022).

Certain wordless books may face rejection based on accepted aesthetic criteria, preferences, and tastes. My interest lies in examining this phenomenon comprehensively and considering the works of authors who craft their stories while being naturally steeped in their culture and in the values to which their social group attaches great importance. Consequently, I pose the question: without understanding the cultural context, do these books still remain democratic or are they rather hierarchical?

Literalism of the message versus the encoding of abstract ideas

An area worth exploring is the ability of both adult and child audiences to interpret visual narratives. While a wordless story might be easy to decipher when it incorporates universally understood symbols from the real world, the moment the author introduces fantasy elements, it becomes a challenge, as interpreting such a story demands the capacity to identify intertextual references.

Many contemporary creators of wordless books tackle the complex task of depicting abstract concepts like ideas, music, movement, and emotions. These abstract themes which are difficult to depict solely through images often refer to realms of philosophy, religion, and mythology, addressing profound aspects of human existence. While such themes have been present in children's literature throughout history, their portrayal has evolved over time, shaped by cultural norms and literary conventions (these concepts have not been limited to the 21st century alone; rather, their portrayal has fluctuated over time in accordance with cultural acceptance of discussing them more or less directly in children's literature.).

Visual storytelling offers a more natural interaction with art compared to verbal-pictorial narratives, allowing for a sensory experience that remains elusive to inexperienced audiences while revealing itself to those to those readers who have the appropriate knowledge and readiness.

An example illustrating this phenomenon is Daan Remmerts de Vries's collaboration with Ingrid and Dieter Schubert on *Konijnentango* (*Rabbit Tango*), which was recognized as a White Raven a year later. Remmerts de Vries employed dance as a metaphor for love within the pages of a book, designed as a complementary reflection in the surface of a lake. Similarly, Molly Idle explored the theme of friendship in her almost wordless *Flora* series, published in 2013, 2014 and 2016, although, unlike in *Rabbit Tango*, decoding the narrative requires additional context provided by peritexts and author statements: clear interpretive clues can be found on the books' covers, as

well as in Idle's statements where she provides detailed insights into her creative process, inspirations, and concepts. In post-award interviews, particularly after receiving the Randolph Caldecott Medal for the first book in the series, *Flora and the Flamingo*, she elucidates that illustrating characters connected by dance symbolizes friendship (Koliopoulos and Wright, 2015; Khiani, 2016; Lopex, 2017). This deliberate portrayal of movement aims not only to depict space but also to convey emotions. Consequently, the author's strategies may facilitate or complicate the decoding of visual representations of higher emotions.

On the other hand, French visual artist Blexbolex explored the theme of jealousy in *Vacation* (Polish edition 2018). The narrative unfolds around a girl spending her vacation in the countryside, where her peaceful stay is disrupted when an unexpected guest arrives, forcing her to share space and games. Blexbolex adeptly employs imagery to depict the girl's profound feelings of rejection and disappointment, evident not only upon waking but also manifesting in haunting nightmares at night. These nightmares transform her daytime anger into nighttime uncertainty. It is noteworthy that the metaphorical element in the visual layer of wordless books can take various forms. In *Vacation*, it materializes as an elephant donning a sailor hat, a character eliciting the readers' fondness. However, the author strategically employs nuanced details to suggest that this perception of him as nice and kind is superficial. Situations typical of sibling or cousin quarrels become less evident in cultures favoring the nuclear family model with only one child.

The world of loneliness experienced by a child without a playmate is vividly portrayed by Chinese author Guojing in *The Only Child* (Polish edition 2022). In this story, a young girl must endure prolonged periods of lonely waiting for her working parents to return home. Through the illustrations, the artist captures not only the girl's cheerful disposition but also the complex emotions that surpass her childlike comprehension of the world (for instance, in one frame, the girl, who has just woken up, bids farewell to her mother as she leaves for work). Later, when the girl ventures out without permission and becomes lost, she finds solace in the company of a mysterious animal friend. A universal interpretations of this narrative will situate the story in the world of fantasy and daydreams, which lonely children tend to fill with invisible friends. However, in Chinese culture, the significance of the animal differs from that in Europe—it symbolizes happiness, prosperity, longevity, and, notably in Guojing's story, devotion to parents, valued as a virtue in Asian societies (Chinasage, n.d.). It is not by chance that the girl's mysterious guardian spirit takes the form of a deer; its age, evident from the shape of its antlers, makes it an ideal playmate for the girl, as they might be around the same age.

The reception of this book in Anglo-Saxon culture inevitably brings to mind another association: Raymond Briggs' (recently deceased) 1978 wordless picture book

The Snowman. In this story, a snowman crafted from the season's first snow becomes a young boy's companion. With a sense of humor typical of American culture, the snowman gets involved in various activities, for example tries using various household appliances, leading to a night filled with miraculous events, culminating in a skyward flight above the neighborhood houses.

The motif of flight and, this time, a lost playmate also appears in *Czarostatki i Parodzieje* by Polish illustrator Pawel Pawlak (2012). In this narrative, a sick little girl is left at home for a short time and experiences a dreamlike journey. While her solitude is brief, the passage of time in her daydreams is vast and nonlinear. Through her window, she observes ships that metamorphose into fantastical flying vessels with human characteristics, guiding her on an aerial odyssey through diverse realms. Together, they embark on a quest to find the girl's cherished companion, her beloved soft toy which she lost in the real world. Pawlak skillfully embeds numerous clues throughout the book, inviting readers to interpret the narrative beyond its visual elements. For instance, the destinations that the girl visits in the magic ship not only depict a world of wonders but also of global calamities.

What matters most here is the creator's intent—a journey around the world can simply serve as a magical voyage that inspires future adventurers. This is exemplified by Ingrid and Dieter Schubert's *The Umbrella* (2011), whose twelve panels depict a small dog with a red umbrella journeying through exotic lands. Similarly, Peter van der Ende employs a comparable approach in *The Wanderer* (Polish edition 2022), where the voyage of a small paper ship through fantastical seas ends upon its return to its home port. There, awaiting its arrival, is an enigmatic white figure—so abstract that its interpretation transcends cultural boundaries, allowing for a democratic understanding of the text through the universal language of art.

Leaving blank spaces within the pages of a wordless book opens up opportunities for a multitude of interpretations and emotions, allowing ideas to resonate similarly with a broader audience while also inviting new readings. Such is the case with *Periferia* by Andrés Sandoval (2018), a Brazilian artist whose work *Dobras* (2017) earned him a place on the White Raven list. Sandoval's narrative unfolds in the leporello format, depicting the city of São Paolo through a series of 23 hand-pressed stamps arranged in sequences.[7] Through these repetitions, the artist captures the rhythmic pulse of the city, presenting various configurations of people, buildings, vehicles, roads,

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7   A similar approach is evident in the illustrative style of *Emigration* (2013) by José Manuel Mateo, where the narrative of people compelled to leave their homes is conveyed through the repetition of similar elements. This book, presented in the form of a *leporello*, utilizes a different technique: traditional vegetable amate paper. In these works, both the representational layer of the illustrations and the technique in which they are made are equally crucial for conveying meaning.

palm trees, sand, and other elements. The accumulation of these images offers a topographical journey through bustling streets and urban landscapes.

The more literal the message, the more competence it requires to interpret the various nuances related to the cultural understanding of social phenomena. In recent years, one of the globally reflected themes in wordless books is the climate threat and the human-nature relationship. However, creators employ different strategies to depict this relationship. Cordell's American book *Wolf in the Snow* (2017) portrays the interaction between humans and the animal world as one of rapprochement and distance, thus exploring the boundaries that can be crossed and those that must be maintained. The bond between a girl and wild animals is depicted realistically, despite the fantastical storyline of a human girl rescuing a wolf cub lost in a snowstorm (which later undergoes a role reversal). Emotions of both animals and humans are portrayed without idealization or naivety: the girl recognizes the potential danger of interacting with wild animals, yet the prevailing belief is that caring for each other is the most important thing.

A different approach is taken by Italian illustrator Roger Olmos in his 2014 wordless book *Senzaparole*. Referring to the famous slogan "never again!," Olmos depicts, page after page, the callousness of industrial animal breeding. Here, the message is unequivocal and leaves no room for alternative interpretations.

Conclusion

Wordless books rely on narrative (Gressnic and Meibauer, 2010, p. 201), even if they consist of images alone. Despite this, even if the images seem to convey a universal meaning across cultures, their interpretations by children aided by their adult companions often bring out a lot of ambiguous content. As Maria Nikolajeva writes: "in wordless picturebooks, plots are vague and allow multiple interpretations, even if images are relatively simple" (2010, p. 32). The examples analyzed demonstrate that wordless books only acquire verbal references through interpretation and the mere depiction of an idea or theme rarely carries a universal meaning, one assessed and comprehended in the same way. Even during the acquisition of linguistic abilities (in the case of young children or people unfamiliar with a foreign language and culture) there is usually an intermediary (whether it be an individual or not) who proposes a meaning. The intermediary may incorporate elements of significance and cultural value into pretexts, in reactions during shared reading sessions, and finally into the metatext, more precisely speaking: in the meta-image.

The democratic nature of textless books, therefore, does not lie in their content but in the apparent ease of entry into another culture without knowledge of its language

or customs. Paradoxically, this may present a greater challenge, as interpreting images in a text-free world may lead to a more exotic journey than one guided by verbal signposts, as in Shaun Tan's *The Visitor*. Thus, the democratization of wordless books is an impossible project, as local perspectives always impose a particular image of the world. However, there is another aspect of democratization that allows for equal access to books: the acceptance of multiple modes of reception and the ability to articulate interpretations in the audience's language, even if it results in a Tower of Babel situation. Therefore, the primary task of companions in children's reading is to find the appropriate words and develop the necessary competence to describe the stories told through wordless book images.

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