



Silent Books for Reader's Voices: ineffable speaking through pages

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Resumen: Wordless picture books are playgrounds for naming and discussing the world. Without the boundary of the written text they are a poetical form of storytelling welcoming every contribution of readers to co-construction of meaning, in the inclusive act of negotiation and listening to others. Readers find a wide horizon for sharing impressions and hypothesis about ineffable elements of life, like the importance of everyday moments, the space between people in every kind of relationships, from love to politics, the experiences of wonder and displacement. Wordless books can be a pathbreaking and encouraging experience for different readers; in a classroom they can provide the experience of being an active voice in the communitarian dialogue of cultures, societies and languages.

Palabras clave: Children literature, visual narrative, co-construction of meaning, inclusion, storytelling

1. Paper proposal:

This paper is devoted to the theme of children excellent wordless picturebooks as extraordinary chances to explore and grow the reader's experience in the didactic of language and widely in literature, art and storytelling.

Wordless picture books are in fact like playgrounds for naming and discussing the world. Without the boundary of the written text they provide wonder and surprises to readers, and create a different kind of experience that involve a great fan of knowledge and a great individual motivation to share views and interpretation of what is seen.

Readers find a wide horizon for sharing impressions and hypothesis about ineffable elements of life, like the importance of everyday moments, the space between people in every kind of relationships, from love to politics, the experiences of wonder and displacement. Wordless books can be a pathbreaking and encouraging experience for different readers; in a classroom they can provide the experience of being an active voice in the communitarian dialogue of cultures, societies and languages.

The research method on which this paper is based is a mixed one, with mostly a qualitative approach, it includes observations, recordings, mostly discussion.

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The approach is a basically theoretical and multidisciplinary one, following the most important Italian scholar in children's literature, Antonio Faeti's method. This means that picturebooks are chosen in an international wide range, they are proposed to children, students or educators and the debate is stimulated by the conductor, who proposes open questions and welcome all the possible interpretations. The book itself will show the right or most meaningful direction in interpretation. Readers are encouraged in co-constructing the meaning sharing their own knowledge, using their own point of reference, telling about their experiences. In this way the inquiry is about all the different areas that are involved in storytelling and reading, with a particular attention to surprises and displacements often present in wordless books. So the reading is like a journey, and the reader is a collective one. This approach looks at children books, and mostly at illustrations, as representation of worlds: a special view on the subject of childhood and its marginal social position; a special way of telling things that are not easy to say in words; a way to tell a story to the most big number of readers, since they can speak no common language, they can have different backgrounds and ages or abilities, they can be either children or grown ups. The choice of the title proposed in this paper refers to the most acclaimed contemporary wordless children picturebooks. Not surprisingly, this increasingly interested for publisher and reader type of book often deals with themes that are crucial in pedagogy, in didactics of language and literature, and in cultural studies in general: journeys, metamorphosis, movement, migration, displacement and belonging can be keywords for this contemporary books shelf. Antonio Faeti in his important essay *Guardare le figure* (1972, Einaudi) invited the cultural studies to look at illustrations in children books. He wrote about an alliance between visual story tellers and children and this is still a point far from being enough explored. In fact, references are also due to the work of Evelyn Arizpe (Glasgow University) and the international project *Visual Journeys with Migrant Readers* that involved 5 different countries in reading the same very wordless book about migration with migrating 10-11 years old kids.

But the observation I keep on constructing on the subject of "what happens when a group of readers look together to a wordless book" are based on a 5 years old composed experience in conducting this type of readings in different situation and with many different age, competences, backgrounds readers. For example university students of graphic and designs, future educators or teachers and actual educators, migrant children.

The aim of my inquiry and proposal to this congress is to show how contemporary excellence in wordless picturebook can be an outstanding chance for encouraging practices of co-constructing of meaning and negotiation, inclusion and dialogue between readers.

From the experience done with the only migrant kids group of readers there was a great surprise in discovering, by semi-structured interview with children, that the 5

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weeks experience had increased their linguistic ability. Teachers could confirm this, that was not one of the declared aims of that project.

If we are pushed to the will to share something with others then languages we use are infinite: aim of a school didactic of language and literature is to show how there are millions way to communicate each other, and every code has a different way to look and tell about the world. So, shifting the attention away from the written text is a great chance to rediscuss categories like scholastic hierarchy, and “free” the will of the readers to take an active role in the communitarian discussion. This of course means that a practice of group reading like this can be seen as an excellent citizenship practice, where everyone has the right to participate, and where there is a common direction to follow, that is the visual text, the “voice”, the sign, and the sense that the author offer in a picturebook.

It's not strange to notice that wordless picturebooks are often very metatextual: David Wiesner's *Flotsam*, that can be considered a sort of Manifesto, deals with the neverending circulation of images and stories through places and people apparently far away in time and space. So do other masterpieces, like Quentin Blake's *Clown*, showing like the distance between children and grown ups is a space that can be explored and told, can be visible and has the dignity of all the story dealing with minorities and people who has no voice. *El aranje Rojo*, a wonderful spanish wordless books, belong to a different type of story telling: the type that depict a crowded world and invite to look at details and follow and “read” the many stories than cross around.

Provoking wonder and displacement, and dealing with important and dialectical poetical issues like visibility/invisibility, childhood/grown-ups, conflict/relationship, time/space, journeys/belonging, this books provide the possibility of discussing, in the school of the authentic value of literature: becoming ourselves, looking to the diversity of world, being more and more capable of looking around us and discover differences. Art and literature are born with the human being and in reading promotion and in didactic of language is very important to avoid a mechanical or strictly cognitive reduction of the role of this soul neverending human activities. Meeting other readers, meeting the world, meeting other signs, getting lost and find your way, changing your mind and correcting you hypothesis, sharing the projection and the knowledge we have on things: this are the possibilities that we provoke offering wordless picturebooks to a group of readers.

There is of course a strong political and social function in this: giving voices to every readers, giving back language to every speaker, sharing comprehension of poetical issues of life, co-constructing meanings in the respect of the telling line and other's interpretations: those are exercise that can be really pathbreaking for citizenship constructions.

And children books authors, and children themselves, as Jella Lepman, founder of the International Board on Books for Young People and the Jugendbibliothek in Munich wrote, will maybe show us the right direction to put the world again on the

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right verse, if we let them look at the wide horizon of the great questions, with their attention to details and the exploration of the bridge that goes from the little to the big picture.

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