Review

Reading Visual Narratives: Image Analysis of Children's Picture Books.
Clare Painter, J. R. Martin, and Len Unsworth.
Sheffield: Equinox, 2013. Pp. xiii, 186.

Reviewed by
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"For Gunther." So begins Clare Painter, J. R. Martin, and Len Unsworth's *Reading Visual Narratives: Image Analysis of Children's Picture Books*. The dedication to and acknowledgment of Gunther Kress, as a "colleague, comrade and friend" (p. x), and in particular the influence of his *Reading Images*, with Theo van Leeuwen (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1990, 1996, 2006), is evident not only in the title, dedication, and Preface of the book, but throughout its five main chapters.

As Painter et al. note in the opening chapter, children's picture books are not only intended to entertain and delight readers, young and old; they may also represent an important first step, an apprenticeship and socialization, into literature, literacy, and social values. The authors argue that, while knowledge of language is an essential part of the toolkit used by literacy educators and children's literature specialists, similar knowledge about how images work, and, crucially, how images and language work together, appears to be less widespread. With this in mind, *Reading Visual Narratives* takes a social-semiotic, multimodal discourse analytic approach, with the aim of understanding how individual picture books make meaning, extending current social-semiotic accounts of the visual modality and exploring the relations between visual and verbal meanings.

The authors draw on a corpus of 73 "critically well-regarded" (p. 11) children's picture books, covering a publication period of approximately 100 years. The books include Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902), Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), and Anthony Browne's *Gorilla* (1983), and contain varying proportions of images to verbiage. They are aimed at readers of different ages and reading abilities, and are, according to the authors, likely to be used in (English-medium) education settings (p. 11). Examples from Painter et al.'s corpus are reproduced throughout the book.

The first chapter provides a necessarily brief, but useful, three-page introduction to the growing body of research on children's picture books. The authors begin by noting that the picture book, as a form, typically encompasses a number of textual and literary genres, including the fairytale, historical fiction, the recount, the "true narrative" (p. 4), and various combinations of these and other story types, a complex macro-genre (Martin & Rose, 2008) whose bimodality (visual and linguistic semiotic modes) ranges from the wordless or near-wordless picture book to "illustrated stories" (p. 4).[1] Some studies of the picture book

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[1] Not all picture books within these "two extremes" (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001, p. 8) are narratives, of course.

examine children's, adults', and children and adults' reading practices, how readers engage with, respond to, and make meaning of such texts, and the 'talk around text' typical of adult-and-child joint-reading (e.g. Torr, 2004; Williams, 1998). Others take a more text-analytic approach, investigating certain linguistic and visual characteristics, and the affordances, complementarities, and divergences of the two modalities (e.g. Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001; Nodelman, 1988). While acknowledging the importance of pedagogic and ethnographic approaches to the study of picture books, it is within this second set of studies, with a focus "on the text itself rather than its child or adult readers" (p. 4), that Painter et al. position themselves, alongside (but in distinction to) other recent and related social-semiotic work by Lewis (2001) and Serafini (2010). Although not mentioned in this particular section, Painter et al. also acknowledge in the Preface early influential work by a then-bachelor student at the University of Sydney, Talia Gill.

In addition to this brief introduction to the field of children's picture books, *Reading Visual Narratives* provides a similarly succinct, four-page account of systemic-functional theory. In this section, Painter et al. introduce the reader, who may not be familiar with SFL, to some of the main tenets of the theory. These include the concepts of metafunction, system and meaning potential, structure and instantiation, various formalisms associated with system networks and the labeling of systems, features, and functions, and the importance of typological and topological categorizations.

A Metafunctional Approach

Although not necessarily a given in social semiotics (see, for example, van Leeuwen, 1999, on sound), Painter et al. take the metafunctional approach common to SFL and other influential social-semiotic studies (e.g. Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; O'Halloran, 2008; O'Toole, 1994). They dedicate a chapter to each of three metafunctions. These chapters (chapters 2–4) are organized in more or less the same manner. Each begins with a short description of how the specific metafunctional meaning relates to children learning to make sense of picture books and, more generally, the world around them. This is followed by comment on current social-semiotic descriptions, primarily Kress & van Leeuwen (2006), and the extent to which these descriptions apply (or not) to the narrative structure of children's picture books. What this amounts to is an interesting critique of *Reading Images*, in which Painter et al. variously adopt, adapt, or reject Kress & van Leeuwen's (2006) proposed systems, and highlight ways in which, in the rest of the chapter, their investigations of children's picture books lead them to new categorizations. These new categorizations, or systems of meaning, form the bulk of the three metafunction-focused chapters, in which the authors carefully present, discuss, and exemplify the systems—and their instantiations and realizations—at increasing levels of delicacy, across a variety of picture books. Each chapter concludes with a metafunction-specific application of these systems on an entire book, including in-depth discussion and tabled summaries of the analyses.

Briefly, chapter 2, "Enacting Social Relations," examines visual interpersonal meaning, introducing the systems of FOCALIZATION, PATHOS and AFFECT, AMBIENCE, and GRADUATION.[2] These are presented as complementary to Kress & van Leeuwen's (2006) SOCIAL DISTANCE, INVOLVEMENT, ORIENTATION, and POWER.

Interestingly, in the case of AFFECT (cf. the appraisal subsystem of the same name; Martin & White, 2005), no specific system network is given. Instead, the authors argue that "affect will be 'read' from the facial and bodily postures shown by the artists in conjunction with contextual and intermodal support, with the naturalistic style offering the potential for the greatest complexity and subtlety in depiction" (p. 32). This "naturalistic style" is one of three scalar styles of character depiction expressing engagement—minimalist, generic, and naturalistic—and is part of Painter et al.'s PATHOS system. The authors note that minimalistic depictions, like those in Raymond Briggs' *The Snowman* (1978) and David McKee's *Not Now, Bernard* (1980), tend to be favored in books for younger readers, generally affording a somewhat limited palette of affect and "requir[ing] us to be relatively detached observers" (p. 32). At the other end of the reader-engagement scale, naturalistic depictions like those found in Gary Crew and Gregory Rogers' *Lucy's Bay* (1992) or Lilith Norman and Noela Young's *Grandpa* (1988) are generally favored by books aimed at more advanced readers, dealing with potentially more complex themes and allowing for a greater range of affect and a [personalizing] rather than [appreciative] form of engagement. This is an interesting observation, and, as the authors note, one that appears to be at odds with the levels of literacy needed to decipher the relative abstraction of minimalist depictions compared with more personalized generic and naturalistic styles. Moreover, as suggested by Painter et al.'s interpersonal analysis of Raymond Briggs' *The Tin Pot Foreign General and the Old Iron Woman* (1984) at the end of chapter 2, minimalistic and generic depictions may also be the favored styles for certain forms of satire and social comment (see, for example, the works of comic-book artists such as Chris Ware and Marjane Satrapi). For younger readers in particular, then, the emotional engagement engendered by different character styles may need to be co-constructed with the help of more experienced readers.

Color is an important meaning-making resource in children's picture books, and one that carries ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen 2002, van Leeuwen 2006). Painter et al. acknowledge this in their introduction to AMBIENCE (p. 35), in which they devote some 10 pages to the emotional effect of color through the core systems of VIBRANCY, WARMTH, and FAMILIARITY. It seems a pity, though, that, in subsequent chapters, the significance of color for ideational and textual meaning is not dealt with any further. Painter et al.'s treatment of visual meaning-making resources in children's picture books may not be exhaustive (p. 9). However, if, as the authors suggest, their book is partly intended as a toolkit for educators and analysts (p. 2), this somewhat restrictive account of color may give the impression of it being a primarily interpersonal resource.

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[2] For brief descriptions of these and subsequent systems and their features, see Fryer (2013).

Chapter 3, "Construing Representations," deals with visual ideational meanings. Painter et al. build here on the familiar SFL configuration of process, participant, and circumstance. *Reading Visual Narratives* extends Kress & van Leeuwen's (2006) "representational" categories to account for the relations between successive images. These include the participant systems of CHARACTER MANIFESTATION, CHARACTER APPEARANCE, and CHARACTER RELATIONS, the process system of INTER-EVENT RELATIONS, and the circumstance system of INTER-CIRCUMSTANCE RELATIONS. Chapter 3 concludes with an analysis of Gary Crew and Gregory Rogers' *Lucy's Bay* (1992), which elegantly demonstrates the unfolding ideational relations between successive images as the protagonist Sam takes a walk to revisit the scene of his sister's death.

Despite the potentially "greater 'transparency' of experiential visual meaning" (p. 54) compared with interpersonal visual meaning, chapter 3 highlights the complexities of decoding visual ideational resources, particularly for younger readers. Excerpts from Torr (2008) on the 'talk around text' between adults and children demonstrate this beautifully. The example on p. 54 shows a double-page spread from Helen Cooper's *The Baby Who Wouldn't Go to Bed* (1996), in which the main character of the story is depicted as driving away from his mother in a child's fire engine. The double-page image shows two moments in the same action of 'driving away from mother.' Yet this seemingly simple sequence may present challenges when, for example, the two images of the child in the fire engine are not perceived as two separate points in time but as two simultaneously occurring events. "Oh, wow look, he's got two engines" (p. 58), says a child reader in Torr's example. Again, the relevance of joint reading, in this case in successfully decoding and distinguishing spatial and temporal meanings, may be critical.

Chapter 4, "Composing Visual Space," explores visually encoded textual meaning ("compositional meaning" in Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) and includes an account of verbal components and their integration not as units of linguistic meaning (this is dealt with in chapter 5), but as visual elements within a compositional whole. These layout-related options form Painter et al.'s INTERMODAL INTEGRATION system. Other systems introduced in this chapter are FRAMING and FOCUS. Here, and particularly in the case of the latter, the unit of analysis shifts from the page and double-page spread to generally smaller units, or focus groups (cf. tone groups), constituting pulses of information that are "apprehended at a glance" (p. 109) and that are understood as being in some direct compositional relation to each other. Such focus groups are generally seen as centered, or [centrifocal], i.e. placed in or around a central point on the page, or [iterating], comprising repeated ideational and/or interpersonal elements. An example of the former includes a [centered: triptych] focus group in an image from Anthony Browne's *Piggybook* (1986) (p. 95). The latter, in the form of an [iterating: aligned] focus group, is nicely exemplified in a double-page spread from Ian Falconer's *Olivia* (2000) (p. 112).

The chapter concludes with an analysis of the visual textual meanings in Mem Fox and Julie Vivas' *Possum Magic* (1989/2004). In this section, unlike the concluding sections of chapters 2 and 3, major emphasis is placed on how patterns of textual meaning redound with different generic stages of the story, a

story that Painter et al. describe as having "a classic narrative structure" (p. 120), with its Orientation, Complication, Evaluation, Resolution, and Coda. Genre and generic structure are not conceptualized in *Reading Visual Narratives*, but the reader is referred to Martin & Rose's *Genre Relations* (2008) "for a linguistically based taxonomy of story types" (p. 4) and a "discussion of story structures" (p. 56). The emphasis on genre in chapter 4 of *Reading Visual Narratives*, and in chapter 5 with regard to 'phasing' and bimodal textual synchrony (see below), seems to assign genre a primarily textual role. This may not be surprising given the book's focus on the sequentiality of images. Moreover, such a reading would be in line with Halliday's treatment of generic structure within the framework of register (Halliday, 1978, p. 134) and, more specifically, as an aspect primarily of the mode of discourse, i.e. one that determines the selection of certain textual meanings (ibid., pp. 144-145).[3] However, this perspective differs from that of Martin & Rose (2008)—and Martin (1992) and Martin & Rose (2003)—in which context is stratified into register and genre (and ideology). Given that "field, tenor and mode [are] resources for generalising across genres, from the differentiated perspectives of ideational, interpersonal and textual meaning" (Martin & Rose, 2008, p. 16), more emphasis could have been placed on the contributions of ideational and interpersonal meaning in the generic structure of visual-verbal narratives. A greater emphasis on genre in general might also have provided an interesting and much-needed intersemiotic contribution to the wider discussion of how to conceptualize genre and/or generic structure within systemic-functional theory.

Intersemiosis

Chapters 2–4 provide much of the groundwork for one of the most interesting and innovative parts of *Reading Visual Narratives*. Chapter 5, "Intermodality: Image and Verbiage," combines the visual meaning systems developed in chapters 2–4 with the verbal meaning systems of Halliday & Matthiessen (2004) and Martin & Rose (2007). In order to study the relative contributions and the relations of these two semiotics in children's picture books, Painter et al. examine how options in visual and verbal meaning systems are instantiated in individual texts. Two concepts—'commitment' and 'coupling'—form the basis of this examination. 'Commitment' (adapted from Hood, 2008, inter alia) refers to the relative amount or degree of meaning potential taken up from a particular system in a particular text. 'Coupling' refers to "the repeated co-patterning within a text of realisations of two or more systems […] within or across metafunctions" (p. 143), and within or across semiotic modes.

For commitment, Painter et al. propose a set of 'key narrative domains,' organized by metafunction: 'affiliation' and 'feeling' for interpersonal meaning systems; 'action,' 'character,' and 'setting' for ideational meaning systems; and 'prominence' and 'phasing' (see discussion of genre above) for textual meaning systems. By examining contributions to these key narrative domains, Painter et al. demonstrate how the "semantic load" (p. 141) is shared in different ways across the two modalities. For example, in David McKee's *Not Now, Bernard* (1980), "image and verbiage commit very similar meanings" (p. 141) in the key

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[3] Halliday (1978, p. 145) notes, of course, that genres also have implications for other, i.e. ideational and interpersonal, components of meaning.

interpersonal narrative domain of 'affiliation.' However, for the domain of 'feeling,' Painter et al. state that "[w]hile there is some degree of commitment of every visual meaning system [AMBIENCE, AFFECT, JUDGEMENT, and GRADUATION], there is no commitment at all of any complementary verbal one ['TONE,' ATTITUDE, AFFECT, and GRADUATION]" (p. 141). These incongruities in visual and verbal commitment may be a source of amusement for readers, serving in this particular example to underscore the self-absorption and distance of the adult characters, on the one hand, and the mischievousness of Bernard, the protagonist, on the other.

The couplings of choices across systems are described in terms of their convergence or divergence. Again, *Not Now, Bernard* is used to exemplify some of these intermodally. For example, while there is generally interpersonal divergence in the domain of 'feeling' (because of differences in commitment; see above), textual systems tend to converge. New episodes, for example, are signaled both verbally and visually by a convergence of realizations in verbal New and in the major focus groups.

Painter et al. summarize their analyses of commitment and coupling in *Not Now, Bernard* by noting that, because of the young audience, much of the ideational meaning is carried by the visual modality. Visual and verbal interpersonal meanings are at times incongruous, creating a humoristic effect, and also "requir[ing] readers to make their own ethical judgements of the characters" (p. 146). Textual meanings, on the other hand, are synchronous across the two modalities, helping to scaffold the story for its young and perhaps inexperienced readers. Neither the verbal nor the visual carries the full meaning of the text. To appreciate the book's humor and its "implicit commentary on dysfunctional nuclear family roles and relationships [...] requires negotiating the gap between the two modalities and thus arriving at a new meaning not available from the 'face value' of either words or pictures" (pp. 146-148). Painter et al.'s use of commitment and coupling makes clearer what is at stake if such meanings are to be understood, and, at least implicitly, how this gap might be negotiated with the help of more experienced readers.

Chapter 5 concludes with an account of the visual-verbal choices in Libby Hathorn and Gregory Rogers' *Way Home* (1994). The book, which centers on the experiences of the homeless protagonist Shane, is intended for more advanced readers than *Not Now, Bernard*, and much more meaning is committed verbally. However, as Painter et al. show, differing degrees of commitment and convergent and divergent couplings within and across the visual and verbal modalities "[keep] the readers slightly off balance, as we are invited to empathise with Shane's situation while simultaneously kept at a distance from it" (p. 149).

The authors conclude by briefly summarizing the chapter and reiterating the claim made at the start of chapter 1: "Books like these ['literary' picture books] are not only enjoyable and engaging for young readers, but offer a very important 'training' in becoming sensitised in how to read narrative texts (including monomodal ones) in ways that are educationally valued" (p. 156).

General Comments

Reading Visual Narratives will certainly be of interest to those working in systemic-functional theory, social semiotics, and/or multimodal discourse analysis, regardless of the material they might be working with. It will also be of value to literacy educators and children's literature specialists, particularly those with an interest in the texts themselves "rather than [their] child or adult readers" (p. 4). However, even those with more pedagogic, ethnographic, or contextual concerns should find the book relevant. Despite the focus on text analysis, one cannot, to paraphrase Malinowski (1935, p. 8), meaningfully divorce the picture book from its context of action and situation, and there are several sections in *Reading Visual Narratives*, such as the openings of chapters 2–4, in which Painter et al. discuss children's picture books as important sites for learning.

In addition to its theoretical contributions, *Reading Visual Narratives* lends itself well as part of an appliable toolkit, on its own or, depending on the analyst's needs, as a complement to Kress & van Leeuwen (2006), Halliday & Matthiessen (2004), and/or Martin & Rose (2007). Chapters 2–4 could work as standalone models for visual analyses. Chapter 5, however, requires a certain level of familiarity with Halliday & Matthiessen (2004) and/or Martin & Rose (2007), and it is unfortunate that more space has not be given to describing some of the relevant meaning systems from these sources, particularly since they form an integral part of Painter et al.'s analyses in chapter 5.

Despite any reservations voiced in this review, *Reading Visual Narratives* is a fascinating book, and one that raises a host of interesting questions of relevance not only for the analysis of narrative in children's picture books but also, more generally, for the development of social semiotics and systemic-functional theory. Painter et al. have produced a fine analytic work, one that will no doubt be widely discussed, and tested and contested, theoretically and empirically.

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