Point of view in picture books and animated movie adaptations

Introduction

The new Australian Curriculum in English to be adopted or adapted by all Australian states, in its statements of expectations for students from the very early years of schooling, makes prolific reference to learning about variation in narrative point of view and the impact of this variation on interpretive possibilities of literary narratives. For example, in Year 3 it is expected that students will:

*Identify the point of view in a text and suggest alternative points of view … recognising that there is more than one way of looking at the same event and that stories seen through the eyes of one character privileges some aspects of the story over others (ACELY1675).*

And in Year 5 students will:

*Recognise that ideas in literary texts can be conveyed from different viewpoints, which can lead to different kinds of interpretations and responses … examining texts written from different narrative points of view and discussing what information the audience can access, how this impacts on the audience’s sympathies, and why an author might choose a particular narrative point of view (ACELT1610).*

Point of view: focalisation and rear view images in Shaun Tan’s The lost thing

Learning about analysing transmedia narratives will enable students to develop greater explicit knowledge of how semiotic resources of image and language make meaning, and will equip them with the skills needed to interpret and construct multimodal texts.

**Shaun Tan’s website**

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In teaching about point of view we need to provide students with extensive experience of engaging, enjoyable narratives that enable them to appreciate the visual construction of variation in point of view, and simultaneously, we need to ensure that they develop a consistent metalanguage for describing the options that are available for constructing different points of view. I would suggest that one excellent source of enjoyable texts for this purpose is the increasing number of what I will refer to as transmedia narratives, that is, literary narratives that exist as hardcopy and digital multimedia versions. In the following section of the paper I will briefly draw attention to some different forms of these transmedia literary narratives before providing an outline of Shaun Tan’s picture book, *The lost thing* (Tan, 2000), and the animated movie version (Ruhemann & Tan, 2010), which will be the main focus in this paper.

In the subsequent section I will illustrate from *The lost thing*, a systematic account of options for the visual construction of point of view and compare the use of these options in the book and movie versions.

The next section will discuss rear view images in *The lost thing* and how the use of these in segments of the animated movie contributes to the substantial difference in interpretive possibilities between those segments and the corresponding story segments in the book.

In concluding, I will suggest that the exploration of point of view in interpretive responses to multimodal narratives can also inform the development of students’ multimodal composing, especially with the increasing availability of high quality 3D animation software suitable for student use.

**Picture books and transmedia narratives**

The experience of ostensibly the same story in paper and digital media formats is a substantial and increasingly routine aspect of literary culture for a broadening age range and social spectrum in the community, as some stories are now composed for the digital moving image format, such as *The fantastic flying books of Mr Morris Lessmore* (Joyce, 2011). A number of picture book authors are simultaneously producing book and digital media versions of their stories such as *The heart and the bottle* and its corresponding iPad app (Jeffers, 2009), and as a multimedia re-versioning of established literary works that bridge into popular culture.

For many decades, well-regarded literary picture books in English have been reproduced as animated films. Perhaps the best and longest known of such films are those produced by Weston Woods in the USA. Books such as *Rosie’s walk* (Hutchins, 1968) soon appeared as an animated movie (Deitch, 1970) as did Maurice Sendak’s classic picture book (1962) *Where the wild things are* (Deitch, 1973).
The lost thing
In 2011, Shaun Tan and Andrew Ruhemann received an Oscar at the Academy Awards in the United States for the best animated short film The lost thing (Ruhemann & Tan, 2010), from the original picture book by Shaun Tan (2000). This is a humorous story about a boy who discovers a bizarre looking creature while out collecting bottle-tops at a beach. Having guessed that it is lost, he tries to find out who owns it or where it belongs, but the problem is met with indifference by everyone else, who barely notice its presence. Each is unhelpful; strangers and parents are all unwilling to entertain this uninvited interruption to day-to-day life. Even the boy’s friend is unable to help, despite some interest. The boy feels sorry for this helpless creature, and attempts to find out where it belongs. Eventually they find a kind of utopian haven, inhabited by other such bizarre creatures, and the boy and the lost thing part company.

The book and movie versions are, of course, the same story, with the content being almost identical and with only modest changes in the verbal narration. Both versions use essentially the same minimalist style of drawing characters — minimalist in the sense of not being realistic or naturalistic, but using simple dots and circles for eyes and not being concerned to have correctly proportioned head size or body parts — and the characters look very much the same in the book and the movie. What is strikingly different is the deployment of the interpersonal aspects of the images that construct the interactive relationship between the represented participants and the viewer. This is particularly so with the social distance and the nature of the contact achieved by the gaze of the characters directly at the viewer (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), as well as difference in point of view (Painter, 2007; Painter, Martin et al. in press; Unsworth, in press).

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Other classic literary picture books, such as Beatrix Potter’s The tale of Peter Rabbit have been made into animated television series (Jackson, 1992). A substantial number of well-known picture books have been produced as animated versions in CD-ROM format. These included stories such as George shrinks (Joyce 1985 & c1994), Stellaluna (Cannon, 1993; Random House/Broderbund, 1996) and The polar express (Van Allsburg, 1985 & 1997).

More recent years have seen the frequent appearance of movie versions of established literary picture books as box office successes — highly celebrated within broad popular culture — as was the case with the recent movie versions of (i) Where the wild things are (Jenze, 2009), (ii) Fantastic Mr Fox (Anderson, 2009) from the picture book by Roald Dahl (1974), (iii) The polar express (Zemeckis, 2004) from the well-known picture book by Chris Van Allsburg (1985) and (iv) Hugo (Scorsese, 2011) from the Caldecott medal winning, illustrated story, The invention of Hugo Cabret by Brian Selznick (2007).

Exploring choices from a system of options for point of view in images in The lost thing
Usually, the issue of who is telling the story is determined by reference to the verbal text only, but the question of who sees, or from whose point of view we experience the story, can apply to both the verbal text and the images. The images can position the viewer to assume different viewing personas. One option is to position the viewer as an outside observer, but the viewer can also be positioned as having the same perspective as one of the characters in the story, or as having a visual perspective that was not identical with, but nevertheless similar to that of a character, so that the viewer sees along with the character. Painter and her colleagues identify three methods by which viewers can be positioned as if they were one of the characters in the image (Painter, 2007; Painter, Martin et al. in press; Unsworth, in press).

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the viewing position for the image could only be that of the character casting the shadow. This method of positioning the reader to have the point of view of one of the characters is inscribed in the actual form of the image depiction.

In the book version of _The lost thing_, after the boy has taken the creature home and hidden it in the shed, there is a one page depiction of him feeding it, as shown in Figure 1. The image shows the boy as active in feeding the lost thing, which is depicted as the passive recipient. The text at the bottom of the page also constructs the boy as active and does not indicate any action by the lost thing:

_I hid the thing in our back shed and gave it something to eat, once I found out what it liked. It seemed a bit happier then, even though it was still lost._

In the movie, the narration maintains the idea of hiding the lost thing in the back shed and it seeming happier after eating, but the intervening information about giving it something to eat after finding out what it liked is all rendered, in the movie, through images only, and there is a much more detailed and comprehensive portrayal of this sequence of events. What is significant is that we see the ladder being positioned against the side of the lost thing, looking down on the ladder and seeing only the ends of the large front claws of the lost thing — as they would be seen by the lost thing when carrying out this action — so the viewer is positioned as if s/he were the lost thing, as shown in Figure 2. In this case, point of view is inscribed because it is constructed directly by what is depicted visually. As viewers we are certainly not remote observers of the action but are actually constructed into the action of one of the characters. Note also that in the movie depiction the lost thing is far from passive and is actually the initiator of the feeding event.

The second method of positioning the viewer as one of the characters is achieved through the sequence of successive images. In the first image, the focalising character looks out from the page or screen gazing directly at the reader, so it is clear that the character is looking at something, and this is depicted in the subsequent image. This has the effect of positioning the reader to see the second image from the point of view of the focalising character (see Painter et al. in press, for examples of such image sequences from picture books). A similar effect is achieved by using the angle of view across a sequence of successive images. In the first image, the focalising character is looking at something, or is about to see something, but at this point we do not know what. Then the next image depicts the focalised participant, but from the same viewing angle as that depicted for the focalising character in the previous image. In these two methods the positioning of the reader/viewer to have the point of view of one of the characters is inferred from the relationship between the successive images, it is evoked rather than being inscribed in the actual form of the image as occurs in the first method.

In the book of _The lost thing_, the boy notices in the newspaper a small advertisement for _The Federal Department of Odds & Ends_, which will accommodate _Things that just don’t belong_. The full page image showing this advertisement appears on the left of one double page opening. In the movie, the advertisement...
is on a television. We see the boy sitting in a chair watching television. The image is a mid-to-close view of the boy's upper body and head, with his head tilted slightly forward towards the television set, of which we see one rear corner. The angle is slightly oblique, so that he is not quite facing out to the viewer. We see him move his head closer to the television set, and then in the next shot we see the television screen. So from this combination of shots the inferred or evoked mediated point of view is that of the boy, and the viewer is positioned as the boy watching the television.

It is also possible for the reader to share a character’s point of view rather than being positioned as the character. The reader's view subsumes that of the character. The reader sees the character, or part of the character, while also seeing what the character sees from that character's perspective. This is achieved by having the reader view what is depicted along with or over the shoulder of the focalising character. The over the shoulder view can be achieved by positioning the reader’s point of view as being from slightly to the rear and to one side of the focalising character. This is frequently utilised in the movie of *The lost thing* through a close-up foreground image of the right side and rear of the boy's head and shoulder, constructing our point of view as over the shoulder. In fact this occurs within the first minute of the story, as shown in Figure 3, when the boy stoops to pick up a bottle top for his collection and locate the specimen in his collector's catalogue.

In the book, the images position the reader predominantly as an outside observer. There are only two occasions when it is possible to infer that the reader is positioned to have the point of view of the boy. The first is in relation to the newspaper advertisement mentioned above. The full page image showing this advertisement appears on the left of one double page opening. The text on the bottom on the previous page reads: *I was wondering what to do when a small advertisement on the last page of the newspaper happened to catch my eye.* On turning the page the reader sees the advertisement in the full page image of the newspaper. While there is no image of the boy associated with the newspaper, the first person narrative on the previous page, and then the appearance of the advertisement fully occupying the next page, does suggest the visual-verbal collaboration in evoking the boy's point of view.

The second example occurs later in the story when the right side of the double page spread depicts the boy's arm and hand about to press a door buzzer, and the text reads: *I pressed a buzzer on the wall and this big door opened up.* The subsequent page shows the bizarre characters and happenings inside that door, again strongly evoking the boy's point of view.

There is a very substantial contrast to the book in the point of view options employed in the movie. The movie involves many occasions when we are positioned to have a point of view synonymous with that of the boy and a number of occasions when we are positioned as the boy or as the lost thing. There are almost no such occasions in the book. This, combined with the predominance of long distance, observe images in the book compared with plentiful close-ups and a number of contact images in the movie, construct the engagement of the reader with the story in book format as an appreciative, somewhat detached observation, but in the movie as empathetic, and more like standing in the shoes of the characters (Painter, Martin et al, in press).

Rear view images in the movie of *The lost thing*

As mentioned above, the over the shoulder view can be achieved by positioning the point of view of the reader/viewer as being from slightly to the rear and to one side of the focalising character. But it can also be achieved by positioning the reader/viewer directly behind the focalising character, which may be seen as a stronger alignment with the focalising character's point of view (Unsworth, 2006, pp.95-97). The option of contact is obviously not available for

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rear view images since there can be no gaze from the represented participant; choices from other simultaneous systems, such as social distance, are available (Painter, Martin et al. in press). Such choices can significantly influence the interpretive possibilities of the rear view image. For example, if the image is a close-up view it is likely that the rear view will construct the point of view as being along with the focalising character depicted from the rear. On the other hand, if the image is a long shot, depending on how remote the social distance is, it may be less likely that the point of view is regarded as being along with the character and more likely that the character becomes focalised, with the point of view being that of the viewer, unmediated by any viewpoint from inside the narrative.

The back view is briefly mentioned by Kress and van Leeuwen as complex and ambivalent with possible interpretations such as maximally confronting, trust and abandonment (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, pp.138–139), but they do not discuss the back view in relation to focalisation. In children’s literature, this is very important in establishing alignment between the reader and the point of view of the focalising character. For example, in Anthony Browne’s (1983) Gorilla there are four back view images of the Hannah main protagonist alone, four of Hannah and the gorilla, and one of Hannah and her father. Early rear views of Hannah tend to align the reader with Hannah’s perspective on the events of her life, and then those with the gorilla on how she imagines her life should be.

The final rear view of Hannah and her father focuses the readers’ view on the togetherness of father and daughter as they walk hand in hand into the future. In the story of The lost thing we will now look at three episodes to show how the more frequent use of the rear view in the movie provokes greater empathy for the boy and suggests a stronger affective bonding between the boy and the lost thing, especially in the departure scene.

Seeking help for the lost thing
In the movie, as the boy approaches the lost thing on the beach, the boy says, Nobody else seemed to notice it was there. The mid-distance rear view image (Figure 4) clearly positions us along with the point of view of the boy as he says this, and we see from almost the same perspective what he sees, except that we see a mid-to-close rear view of him as well. The image reinforces the effect of the verbal Nobody else ... in drawing attention to the boy’s perspective and inviting empathy with him.

This does not occur in the book. The narration is the same, but it is positioned above a large image on the second double page spread — an observe image in the foreground — that shows all of the upper body of the boy, apart from his legs (Figure 5). The oblique angle shows the boy from a slightly rear, right profile, on high steps sloping gradually down to the beach, and looking out to a distant view of the beach on which can be seen the small depiction of the lost thing and very small depictions of people. Of course, the fact that the narration is coupled with such a view may also emphasise the singularity of the boy’s noticing the lost thing from such a distance, while those in close proximity to it on the beach are not noticing. The point is that this image/language coupling does not invite empathy with the boy in the way that the coupling of the narration with the mid distance rear view image does in the movie.
Following this scene, the boy proceeds to ask others for help in finding out about the lost thing and where it might belong. As narrator in the movie he says,

I asked a few people if they knew anything about it ...

As he says this we see a long distance rear view of him, which does not have the same aligning effect as in the previous scene in the movie. At the moment when we see the rear view of the boy we see the whole length of his body taking up only about one third of the frame, so he appears quite far away. The long distance in this case seems to diminish the empathetic impact of the rear view and the boy is seen more as the focalised than the focaliser. There is somewhat more alignment with the boy in the movie as a result of this fleeting rear view, compared with the double page spread in the book where four separate vertical panels of illustration take up the full length of the page accompanying the narrative text, which is positioned below the second panel:

The first panel is a bird’s eye view, from a great height, of the boy and the lost thing on the beach. The remaining three large panels show long distance observe images of the lost thing and the whole body of the boy in profile positioned as interacting with different characters in the distance. These images strongly maintain the more distanced appreciative, rather than empathetic, relationship.

The Department of Odds & Ends

In their quest for a place where the lost thing might belong, the boy and the lost thing arrive at the Department of Odds & Ends. In the movie, the mid distance rear view of the boy in this scene occurs just before the small creature touches him, warns him not to leave the lost thing in the Department and gives him a card with a sign on it. The narration in the movie at this point recounts,

I was looking around for a desk, when suddenly I felt something touch my elbow.

The boy is touched on the elbow from behind and, at this mid-distance view, with the upper body of the boy and the rear of his head in view, it is very much the case that the viewer feels some empathy with the boy, knowing he is about to be startled from behind. In the book however, this scene is depicted as an oblique long distance observe view of the full body of the small creature, with the boy and the lost thing all visible, and the creature passing the card to the boy on his right. The narration in the book reads,

I was looking around for a pen when I felt something tug the back of my shirt.

The narration in the book and the movie are only inconsequentially different. Verbally, there is strong inferred alignment with the character of the boy as the audience empathises with being unexpectedly touched from behind. In the movie, the rear image of the boy intensifies this empathy. In the book, the oblique distance observe view in the image diminishes the empathetic impact of the narration and moves the reader’s stance at this point to one of appreciation.

Saying goodbye

The parting of the boy and the lost thing is depicted minimally in the book through the one observe image of the boy and the lost thing in profile facing each other and waving goodbye, as shown in Figure 6.

In the movie, the entire goodbye scene is conveyed only through the images and there is no narration at all, but there is greater visual commitment to the depiction of the actions that occur immediately prior to this scene. There is also greater commitment in the movie to the actions that occur immediately following this common waving scene. This is where we see the full rear view of the boy parallel to the frontal plane of the viewer, with the boy facing the door of the sanctuary as the lost thing departs through it, as shown in Figure 7.
In this case, although it is a long distance view, the rear view image does indeed position the audience view along with that of the boy. Engagement with him is increased through this distance rear view image because of the impact of the intensified involvement and contact images that have preceded this scene. The camera lingers on this rear view of the boy for some seconds, and as the sanctuary door closes, the boy’s head is tilted to one side so that he can maintain his view through the remaining opening, as seen in Figure 8. This second rear view with the head tilted also intensifies the involvement and empathy of the viewer with the boy and suggests the emotional nature of the parting for the boy.

Conclusion and implications for multimodal authoring pedagogy

Animated movies of literary picture books are an important site for investigating the nature and extent of a metalanguage for multimodal literacy development at different stages of schooling. It has long been recognised that, for children now growing up in an online multimedia world, their experience of a great deal of literary narrative is such that they take the multiplicity of media and versions for granted (Mackey, 1994, p.19), and that discussing children’s literature in terms of paper media texts alone ignores the multimedia expertise of our children (Mackey, 1994, p.17). However, while work with new media forms of literary texts in classrooms is crucial (Mackay, 1999; Mackey, 2001; Unsworth, Thomas et al. 2005; Unsworth, 2006), it cannot be simply assumed that experience of multiple versioned stories equips students to know how they work and to understand how interpretations are shaped by different media. Despite a very significant proportion of young people being highly adept at using digital media for creative expression, research and social life, they are not necessarily correspondingly adept in understanding how multimedia affordances influence the interpretive possibilities of the texts they are negotiating (Jenkins, 2006; Kellner & Share, 2007; Luce-Kapler, 2007).

While contemporary curriculums such as the new Australian National Curriculum can mandate such outcomes through the requirement for Year 9 students to, for example, Explore and explain the combinations of language and visual choices that authors make to present information, opinions and perspectives in different texts (ACELY1745), the pedagogy needs to draw on systematic semiotic accounts of how meaning is constructed jointly by language and images in different contexts.

Experience in researching the initiation of teachers and students into digital animated narrative movie making, suggests that while movie making affordances such as different camera angles and close-up or distance views are either well-known, or awareness is quickly acquired, what is essential is to build an understanding of how these influence narratives and to acquire, over time, a common metalanguage for describing and discussing images (Chandler, O’Brien et al. 2012; O’Brien, Chandler et al. 2010) (Figure 9).

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A pedagogic advantage of animated movies of picture books like *The lost thing* is that the meaning-making resources of the animated images are also substantially available to students who are using animation software such as *Moviestorm* or *Muvizu* in constructing their own movies. For example, the minimalist depiction style in representing the characters in *The lost thing* (Tan, 2000) and *The little prince* (de Saint-Exupery, 2000) — which exists as both an interactive CD-ROM and a film (Donen, 2004) — means that systems of meaning-making resources for the representation of facial affect (Welch, 2005; Painter, Martin et al. in press) can be taught and can then be deployed by students using the software that makes these simple variations in facial features possible. The changes in camera positioning and shot choice that construct differences in point of view are also able to be taught and deployed in much of the readily accessible animation software, facilitating the teaching of systems of options for the construction of point of view (Painter, 2007; Painter, Martin et al. in press).

The advantage of learning about these systems through close analysis of transmedia narratives is that they frequently provide alternative perspectives on ostensibly the same story situation, so students are able to develop a critical understanding of the interpretive difference that can result from different semiotic choices. As students develop greater explicit knowledge of how semiotic resources of image and language make meaning independently and in collaboration, they will be better equipped to discern the interpretive possibilities of the multimodal texts they encounter and also to deploy such resources in constructing the interpretive possibilities in the multimodal texts they compose. Animated movies of well-established picture books such as *The lost thing* can provide a most enjoyable context for students and teachers in pursuing systematic development of multimodal comprehension and composition in the English classroom.

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