Innocence lost: picturebook narratives of depravity

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Abstract

Unlike children's books by Beatrix Potter and Janosch, which implicitly undermine the semantic harmony between the illustrations and the text, and thus ironically challenge widespread assumptions about the transparency of the narration, the picturebooks by Jon Klassen and by Roberto Innocenti and Aaron Frisch exemplify a striking symbiosis between the verbal and visual narrative modes. Klassen's *I Want My Hat Back* and Innocenti and Frisch's *The Girl in Red* convey a genuinely terrifying vision of human relationships and offer an extremely bitter, not to say latently apocalyptic diagnosis of contemporary western culture. While each book relies on different aesthetic modes and makes use of different tension-building narrative strategies, they both immerse their readers in the experience of horror, offering spectacles of inescapable violence, disguised and unpunished. The artists effectively expose what they see as human indifference to evil and injustice. Alarmingly, however, they also uncompromisingly mock humanistic ideals and unscrupulously impose their cynicism on the reader. Residing in the text and the illustrations, or in gaps between them, the narrative mockery effectively constructs the nihilistic message of the stories and creates an overwhelming vision of the triumph and impunity of the powerful.

Résumé

A la différence des livres pour enfants de Beatrix Potter and de Janosch, qui, implicitement, compromettent l'harmonie sémantique entre les illustrations et le texte et, ce faisant, contestent ironiquement l'idée très répandue d'une soi-disant transparence de la narration, les livres illustrés pour enfants de Jon Klassen et de Roberto Innocenti et Aaron Frisch présentent une étonnante symbiose entre les modes narratifs verbal et visuel. *I Want My Hat Back* de Klassen et *The Girl in Red* de Innocenti et Frisch présentent une vision fondamentalement terrifiante des relations humaines et offrent un diagnostic extrêmement acerbe, pour ne pas dire implicitement apocalyptique, de la culture occidentale contemporaine. Bien que chaque livre s'appuie sur des modes esthétiques différents et recoure à des stratégies narratives différentes pour susciter la tension, tous deux plongent le lecteur dans une expérience de l'horreur en lui offrant le spectacle d'une violence déguisée et impunie à laquelle nul ne peut échapper. Ces artistes dénoncent par là ce qu'ils perçoivent comme de l'indifférence au mal et à l'injustice. Plus grave encore, ils se moquent aussi cruellement des idéaux humanistes et imposent sans scrupules leur cynisme au lecteur. En se logeant ainsi à la fois dans le texte et dans les illustrations, ou dans les interstices entre les deux, la satire narrative élabore le message nihiliste des

histoires et suggère de façon écrasante le triomphe et l'impunité des puissants de ce monde.

Keywords

compassion, cynicism, disillusioned storyteller, doom, dystopia, ethical education, ethical judgements, ethical sensibility, ironic counterpoint, mockery, picturebook narratives of depravity

In a story from the remarkable collection *He (Shey)* by Rabindranath Tagore, a young jackal aspires to become a man. To achieve the goal, he dutifully follows the human advice of the Society for the Improvement of Jackal Behaviour. First, he agrees to have his name changed, then he learns to walk on two legs, and finally, with great reluctance, he decides to sacrifice his tail and fur. Unfortunately, his hope to astonish and impress the jackal community fails him; he is doomed to live a solitary life, mourning his lost identity. As the girl who is listening to her grandpa's tale is devastated by the jackal's plight, her friend, the eponymous character Shey, thus scolds the grandfather: "Stop being so old. Here you are, ageing, but you've yet to mature in childishness … You wrote it purely in jest, out of cockiness of your advanced years" (23). The insistence "to mature in childishness" appears oxymoronic, yet it is actually very consistent: not only does it consciously invert hierarchies implied in perceptions of age, but it also carries a powerful ethical call to all storytellers, warning them against infecting their stories with the cynicism that may come with age or embitterment.

Shey continues with words that strongly resonate with the content and form of many other emotionally disturbing works of art. The remark addressed to the grandfather, "You think you're being funny, but when your humour gets under the skin, it grates like a scrubbing stone" (24), further emphasizes the storyteller's ethical responsibility for the shape of the story. Through the voice of his narrator, Tagore makes his readers aware that storytellers have enormous power, which only some of them see as a responsibility: if they choose to do so, they can become spiritual teachers to their readers, but with their ability to manipulate language and mood in the narrative, they can also, in a Machiavellian fashion, turn the story into a painful, visceral experience, detrimental to one's body and soul.

In her thought-provoking study on the significance of compassion, in a chapter on the role of arts in ethical education, Martha C. Nussbaum argues convincingly that young readers can and should become acquainted with literary depictions of human tragedies through "stories that enlist [the reader's] participation, convincing her of the urgency of their perception of importance. No mere recital of facts can achieve this" (428). Nussbaum reminds her readers of the importance that ancient Greeks attached to the educational value of tragic drama. While for adult spectators tragic performance enables a reinforcement of their experience and a deeper understanding of ethical codes, for younger audiences it is a particularly crucial lesson on the suffering they may not yet have experienced themselves. The crucial point which Nussbaum makes in reference to the narrative structure of tragedy is that it presents distressing issues "in a way that makes the depth and significance of suffering, and the losses that inspire it, unmistakably plain – the poetic, visual and musical resources of the drama thus have moral weight" (428). Compassion can arise because the hero is portrayed "as a worthy person, whose distress does not stem from his own deliberate wickedness" (428).

Furthering her argument, the author of *Upheavals of Thought* insists on extending imagination beyond social, racial and other barriers. Compassion must not be selective, Nussbaum warns, resorting to the example of young Germans in Nazi Germany, trained in compassion for their classical literary protagonists, but indoctrinated to perceive Jews as subhuman and abhorrent creatures (430). It is more difficult to acknowledge the suffering and even the humanity of groups that are deemed "other"; therefore Nussbaum finds it particularly important to highlight those works of art that make the audience "capable of inhabiting, for a time, the world of a different person, and seeing the meaning of events in that world from the outsider's viewpoint" (431). The crucial point is to render the suffering meaningful, to show its sources and seriousness, which can help readers

develop authentic concern and make appropriate ethical judgements.

However dramatic they may be, artistic visions of social maladies and abhorrent deeds should eventually foster understanding, breed empathetic thinking and suggest ethical solutions. It is not wise to simply display evil, or to afflict readers with images of torment in great quantities or for too long, even if the author's intentions are morally sound. Resorting to glaring depictions of depravity and violence does not achieve the goal, as such portrayals do no more than overwhelm readers with grief and helplessness.

To investigate this aspect of storytelling further, my analysis focuses on two recently published picturebooks that have received considerable attention from the critics due to their subversive form and themes: *The Girl in Red* by Roberto Innocenti, the Italian illustrator, and Aaron Frisch, American children's and young adult author; and *I Want My Hat Back* by the Canadian writer and illustrator Jon Klassen.[1] The books convey a metaphorical vision of human relationships, offering an extremely bitter, if not to say latently apocalyptic diagnosis of contemporary western culture. The narratives share their radical, nihilistic message through the interanimation of text and image[2] – through their mutual dependence.

To define what counts as controversial and scandalous in visual literature is a demanding task, as Janet Evans's edited volume has shown (2015); nor is it easy to make definitive judgements about the ethical value (or lack thereof) in children's literature, as indicated by a number of authors in the collection edited by Claudia Mills (2014). What Perry Nodelman finds astounding, with reference to popular children's books, is that their potentially scandalous compliance with prevailing ideologies often goes unnoticed because it is taken for granted (47–8). *I Want My Hat Back* and *The Girl in Red* have been widely recognized as controversial, but their calculated disregard for the ethics of storytelling has not been sufficiently examined, although it may also be considered scandalous.

While Janet Evans and Sandra Beckett rightly argue that there is no need to be fearful of picturebooks with disturbing themes (2015), it is essential to distinguish between those books that expose evil with the underlying aim of evoking compassion (Maurice Sendak's books are a case in point) and those whose narrative construction is deliberately devoid of this element. *The Girl in Red*, which so unscrupulously ridicules the sense of good and honesty and overwhelms its readers with an almost unbearable vision of evil, has raised concerns from prospective teachers, as Elizabeth Marshall's research has revealed (170–74), but *I Want My Hat Back* is almost unanimously defined as a children's book with a twist, probably because it is a more convoluted form of macabre. However, in both cases the books' potential to overwhelm, and leave a lasting mark on younger and older minds is enormous.

Cynicism in pastel colours: Jon Klassen's trilogy

I Want My Hat Back was Klassen's first picturebook, published by Candlewick Press in 2011. The book was an instant success: it was a runner-up for the American Geisel Award (books for beginning readers) and was shortlisted for the 2013 Greenaway Medal. Its follow-up, *This Is Not My Hat* (2012), won both the American

1 As Jon Klassen has published two other picturebooks relying on a similar theme and formula, I will briefly address their conceptual framework in the section below.

2 The concept of the interanimation of text and image in picturebooks comes from Margaret Meek's study (1992). It was expanded by David Lewis in a chapter devoted to the ecology of picturebooks. See Lewis, 2001, 35–7; 46–60.

Caldecott Medal and the British Kate Greenaway Medal for children's book illustration. *I Want My Hat Back* is recommended as a story for young children by Greenaway judges. However, I see the book as a form of camouflage, achieved primarily through its visually pleasing aesthetics, through the use of animal characters standing for human types, and through its structure, which relies on visual and verbal repetition, typical of children's nursery rhymes and songs.

The author, who consistently relies on deceptive understatement, uses modest means to tell the story: a few colours, a few characters in similar postures, similar question-answer dialogue with the use of direct, short phrases. The front cover features a bust of a bear on a vanilla-coloured background whose static figure will continue to appear throughout the book on a verso of several doublespreads. Klassen thus explains his idea of the book: "*I Want My Hat Back* was written as a kind of play and the animal characters are all really bad actors. I treated these books as mini-operas and gave all this operatic weight to the story. It's like the bear is reading his part: he has tunnel vision and he's not listening to the answers."[3] Indeed, the world illustrated by the artist is intentionally designed as bizarre – every scene looks similar; the animals are depicted as static and indifferent, like puppets. They resemble toys or dummies: their mouths are not visible as if they were mute; their coats are of similar colour and texture; they do not maintain eye-contact, either with each other or with the reader.

The story focuses on the bear, who is searching for his red hat until he realises on whose head he has seen it and (supposedly) takes his revenge. In the first part of the book he continues asking other animals: "Have you seen my hat?", and receives casual, very short negative answers. He always responds with a polite thank you, no matter what the answer is. The lack of meaningful interaction between the characters becomes blatant especially when one of the creatures interrogated by the bear asks in return: "What is a hat?" The bear does not bother to explain; instead, he automatically replies with his ritual phrase: "Thank you anyway." Strikingly, one animal, a rabbit wearing a red hat, says more than the others in response to the bear's question, and only his bizarre, nervous reply is typed in red font. The bear seemingly notices nothing and keeps searching for the hat.

Initially, the bear seems to be an embodiment of Everyman, the naive, good-willed victim of a robbery. Still, his conventional politeness and his peculiar body language indicate that he may act according to the same rules as the creatures he meets on his way. It is not difficult to predict that tragedy is inevitable once the others' lies reach his consciousness. The moment when the bear is struck by a memory of his hat on the rabbit's head is a climactic one. We are confronted with the animal in rage, signalled visually by the red background around him. The silent doublespread that follows portrays the bear returning to the culprit; all the animals passively observe him running, their faces retaining the same blank expression. The close-up scene, in which the rabbit and the bear are exchanging glances, is the only explicit act of mutual attention in the book. The next opening features the bear wearing his red hat like a crown and saying "I love my hat". There is no sign of the crime. In the final opening, we become witness to a dialogue that sounds strangely familiar, when the squirrel asks the bear, who tellingly looks in the opposite direction, about the whereabouts of the rabbit. The pact of dishonesty, indifference and silence continues.

Both the text and the ambiguous visual design are laden with meaning: they reveal the corrupt character

3 The artist explains his concepts in "Hats off to the storytelling master: Jon Klassen's visual narratives", http://www.inismagazine.ie/features/entry/hats-off-to-a-storytelling-master-jon-klassens-visual-narratives.

of social relations, deprived of empathy and concern for the other. The bear effortlessly transforms from the victim to the culprit. It is easy to understand the reason for his rage, his fury, at the cold cynicism of his community, but his subsequent wearing of the red hat like a trophy also signifies a beastly mentality. The ending confirms that the bear becomes the perfect product of his environment: his silence and lack of remorse follow the amoral rules agreed on by this atomised community. The text goes hand in hand with the images: the red hat is a warning, a symbol of corruption and dishonesty; the colour red, appearing in other elements of the illustrations, connotes rage and violence, the dreadful consequence of the deficit in the communal spirit.

The narrative's ending, rather alarmingly, uncritically sanctions violence inflicted on others in revenge. Klassen may have been inspired by the convention of animal fables or cautionary tales, but his work does not resemble either of these in one important aspect: the presence of the moral behind the story. In this book, there is no hope or way out of the moral swamp, where amorality is contagious. Hypocrisy is naturally incorporated in the story. With the laughter being principally on the part of the disillusioned storyteller and those who find his cynical logic appealing, the story parallels the narrative about the miserable jackal.

The optics endorsed by both *I Want My Hat Back* and *This Is Not My Hat*, its follow-up, legitimises vicious conspiracy and questions the validity of compassion for the weaker offender. In the follow-up volume, a little fish steals a hat from a big fish, who finally traces the thief and gets the hat back. The focalised narrator in the text reveals the little fish's naive hope, sustained until the very last pages of the book, that he will not be found. The illustrations reconstruct the subsequent stages of the big fish's effective hunt, with the crab – the witness – readily and actively helping the pursuer. The appeal of the narrative, apart from the eye-pleasing, animation-like charm of the otherwise ominous illustrations, lies in the ironic counterpoint, in the narrative incongruity between the little fish's gullibility reflected in the text and the actual events depicted in the visual story. The authorial irony has its source in the incongruence between the growing sense of tension accompanying the developing narration and a sense of quiet emanating from the final openings, in which we see the darkness of the underwater setting and the idyllic image of the big fish drifting away serenely with the hat on his head. The crime becomes doubly silenced, being both inaudible and invisible.

The story is often taken as an example of dark humour,[4] and indeed, its form, the clear tongue-in-cheek concept and the assumed familiarity with the first book's formula convincingly classify the book as a joke, although its implications are still revolting. The demoralisation of the little fish is obvious, as he admits: "I know it's wrong to steal a hat ... But … it was too small for him anyway." This attitude does not encourage readers to sympathise with him, but a sense of shock and injustice comes naturally once readers become aware of what happened behind the mass of water plants. Lisa Rowe Fraustino's comparative study of *Swimmy* (1963) by Leo Lionni and *This Is Not My Hat* reveals how the books' reliance on anthropomorphism, and the aesthetic and narrative analogies between the two narratives guides them, nevertheless, in opposite directions. The socialist message about the potential of solidarity and communal action in *Swimmy* is contrasted with "each fish out for himself" ideology in *This Is Not My Hat* (157). The author questions the literal reading of *This Is Not My Hat* as a comic acknowledgement of the natural food chain, recognizing its metaphoric layer

4 The books are described as "very funny" and "tough", and are recommended for readers in the age range 4–8 by *Publisher's Weekly*; *Kirkus Review* comments on *This Is Not My Hat* that Klassen "delivers no small measure of laughs in another darkly comic haberdashery whodunit". See http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-7636-5599-0 and https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/jon-klassen/not-my-hat/.

which, for Fraustino, has deeply disturbing political undertones (158).

Interestingly, the changes in the two companions to *I Want My Hat Back* suggestively indicate that the artist perhaps has ultimately decided to "play it safe". The plot of the book *We Found a Hat* (2016), which completes the trilogy, seems to deviate from the previous two even further, because, surprisingly, no one ever gets eaten. The dust jacket informs: "Two turtles have found a hat. The hat looks good on both of them. But there are two turtles. And there is only one hat." The simplicity of language may evoke associations with books for young readers, yet the developing storyline elucidates its real theme and audience.

If some readers initially fail to see through the artist's provocative gesture, the illustrations leave no doubt as to the tongue-in-cheek character of the story. The book's form alludes to the convention of the Western genre: it consists of three parts, each with a title on separate openings ("Finding the hat", "Watching the sunset", "Going to sleep"). The iconography confirms the humorously transmedial character of the story: it takes place in the wilderness, whose salient metonymic signs are huge phallus-like cacti. The white hat that resembles a sombrero, for which the turtles secretly long, alludes to the typical Western fights and duels – something that the turtles perhaps desire, too, due to the evident monotony of their life in the desert. The solution that the protagonists find for the one-hat-two-turtles problem is to "leave the hat here, and forget that we found it". The decision has unsurprising consequences: neither is able to forget the attractive object. The unsatisfied desire makes them both phony, and although their brief conversations never officially betray them, the images imply that their friendship is at stake. The crisis reaches an apogee when one of the turtles attempts to steal the hat while the other appears to be asleep.

The turtle that exhibits self-restraint helps his companion resist temptation by means of storytelling. In his account of the dream that he is supposedly dreaming they both have hats. It is apparently the redeeming power of the story, imagination and friendship that resolve the crisis. But the turtle's words can also be a form of convoluted warning, a signal that he is watchful and not exactly asleep. The book remains unclear about the motives behind the culprit's decision to move back and leave the hat intact. It may be connected with the shaken conscience but has arguably more to do with anxiety about being caught red-handed. Far from being a narrative of ennoblement, the book is a wry vision of barely, even if successfully, restrained instincts. The seemingly benign plot exposes (male) competitiveness, greed and cold calculation behind the façade of courtesy, verbal manners and declared bonds. Klassen retains the visual form and the strategy of the visual and verbal understatement not only to satirise human foibles, but also to toy with the readers and their expectations. Again he does not hesitate to test his readers' intelligence, as if to see if they are able to recognize the ugliness behind appearances. The construction of the narrative implies that belief in the possibility of being driven by noble motives arises from naive refusal to acknowledge the bitter truth.

No room for innocence: Roberto Innocenti and Aaron Frisch, *The Girl in Red*

The Girl in Red by Innocenti and Frisch retells the classic Red Riding Hood story in a dystopian vision which features the young protagonist in a bleakly portrayed contemporary urban environment. One of the ways to read the book's anti-aesthetic visual convention and its contemporary setting is to see it as an uncompromising critique of modern urban ills: family disintegration, the omnipresence of new technologies, the destructive

power of mass media, and the emergence of a new social idol – insatiable consumption, responsible for social degeneration.[5] The book's very title is ominous, as the reference to the colour red reverberates with its associations with passion, female sexuality and blood. Inspiration from the cyberpunk convention manifests via the depiction of the urban reality, metaphorically presented as a wild forest in which the weak ones are doomed to be violated and murdered.

In her feminist analysis of *The Girl in Red*, Elizabeth Marshall provides a thorough background for the story as an example of a "fractured fairy tale". In her view, it also resonates with contemporary tendencies, defined by Brian McNair and other critics as "pornosphere" and "striptease culture", in which children's, and especially young girls', bodies are sexualized in popular imagery (166). The author further points out that in Innocenti's illustrations the border between the world of childhood and that of adulthood is constantly – and dangerously – blurred. One example of this strategy is the illustrations' portrayal of women's fragmented bodies, scattered in the urban setting's omnipresent advertisements, which, according to the author, mirrors contemporary media trends and is a sinister projection of the young protagonist's fate (166).

This in-depth analysis could be extended – productively, I hope – by a discussion of the universal meanings of the book, which can be read as an allegory of the fall of humanity, and by a commentary on the ostensible lack of ethical sensibility in Innocenti and Frisch's vision. It is somewhat surprising to learn that *The Girl in Red* has been recommended as a book for readers above the age of eight by *Kirkus Reviews* and *Publishers Weekly*, although the age thirteen has been suggested as the minimum age for the same book by *School Library Journal* (Marshall 169). The *leitmotiv* in the text and in the illustrations alludes to the themes of sin and fallibility, portrayed in their very material form through the visual metaphors of defilement. What makes the reading profoundly unsettling, however, is perhaps not so much the theme of moral corruption, violence and premature death, but the way in which the story is conveyed and what is implied through the meanders of visual and verbal narration.

The dreadful ending can be anticipated by the book's front cover, which communicates the upcoming horror explicitly via the visual allusions to human savagery. The dilapidated houses and the dustbin suggest uncleanliness and poverty; the graffiti on the brick wall, of gigantic eyes and a face with bared teeth, imply that someone is watching the girl's every step. The black cat, the skeleton of a fish, the plate featuring a snapping dog function as signifiers, conveying the camouflaged message about the meaning of the story inside. In the context of the storyline, the erotic and violent connotations of visual motifs related to insatiable hunger can be read as a terrifying vision of human nature.

When the book's dust jacket is removed, another detail of the visual narration becomes clear. The front side of the hardcover reveals a seemingly insignificant strip from the visual story inside the book, the illustration of the girl crossing the street. The rest of the scene is abruptly cut off, as the majority of the front cover's space consists of the additional thick layer of brownish cardboard paper with the title inscribed in a red font. The girl looks as if she is about to fall into this mute space, which will turn out to be the inferno. On the back side of the hardcover, the same monochrome space is accompanied by a flashback from the same scene. The invisible

5 I showed how the elements of contextualised social critique are combined with a universal theme of dehumanisation and the pessimistic implications of the mock happy ending in my initial reading of the book. See *Świat pogrążony w mroku. Czerwony Kapturek w wielkim mieście* (*The World Immersed in Darkness: The Girl in Red*), "Zeszyty komiksowe" nr 22, Instytut Kultury Popularnej and Biblioteka Uniwersytecka 2016, pp. 105–108.

rider's motorcycle has just run over a passer-by's foot. The screaming victim directs his gaze at the cardboard space as if looking back. Equipped with the knowledge of what happened in the Red Riding Hood story, readers may see the scream as imbued with additional meanings, as a human reaction to the horror hidden inside the book, behind the opaque silence of the cardboard. The interpictorial affinities between Hieronymous Bosch's art and Innocenti's bring to mind the sense of horror emanating from Bosch's visions of the Last Judgement. However, Innocenti takes inspiration from the work of the Dutch artist not to make a comment of a religious or philosophical nature, but to mock the very sense of redemption and to overwhelm his readers with a visceral visual narrative of evil's triumph.

The illustrations effectively construct a sense of the inevitability of the doom through the symbolism of colour and texture, and through the overwhelming effect of the multiplicity of visual and verbal detail blended in many openings. The details magnify the sense of chaos and excess, and create an auditory sensation of deafening noise. The rough texture and dark hues in images of the urban space speak metaphorically about dirt and ugliness which "infect" the environment like a plague. The bodies of the anonymous inhabitants of the city in their distorted, grotesque incarnations expand the metaphorical potential of the illustrations, being a poignant comment on human fallibility. The visual characterisation of both the animate and inanimate elements of the environment shows the world steeped in sin, disgraced and mutilated. The artist not only evokes visually the idea of the ugliness of evil but also effectively appeals to readers' embodied memory and elicits disgust to convince them of the omnipresence of moral corruption and depravity.

Among the most explicit signals of nihilism permeating the narration is the specific treatment of interpictoriality and intertextuality. In Innocenti's revisionist version of the Red Riding Hood story, urban imagery abounds in the ominous images of cold, piercing eyes, sharp teeth, and liquid-like substances that resemble bodily fluids; it also features the metonymically used images of women's bodies, displayed in the obscene or threatening context of advertisement representations. Although the book's modern retelling of the tale evokes the cultural repertoire of mythical or folk narratives that feature children or young women cannibalized (or/and sexually consumed) by the male oppressor, it is, sadly, devoid of the symbolic qualities that those unthinkable feasts in most myths and fairy tales have. The heinous act implied in the narrative is not counterpointed by any hope for renewal and regeneration; unlike its narrative predecessors, which were "allegories of time and resignation" and which narrated a lesson about "the overtaking of age by youth" (Warner 77, 65), *The Girl in Red* is pure (although thinly disguised) horror. The artist spares readers the vision of the crime, yet he does not spare them the sense of utter helplessness and overwhelming grief.

Both the writer's and the illustrator's intentions are clear: the slowly developing verbal narration written in a disheartening tone parallels the gradually unveiled ugliness of the world depicted in the illustrations and the mocking attitude of the illustrator. Aaron Frisch's text relies on the ironic discrepancy between the connotative power of the storyteller's identity, the narrative tone, and the content of the message. The verbal narrator is the archetypal Mother Goose, portrayed in the illustrations as a miniature, silver-haired, knitting lady. This inconspicuous storyteller has murky intentions, however: she adopts a preacher-like tone, pretending to offer her young listeners hope where she only imposes horror. In a mocking twist, the narrator combines the familiar reassuring role of the elderly female storyteller and the authoritative role of a spiritual leader, but the storytelling gradually deprives readers of faith and hope to eventually inspire distrust and breed despair.

The diabolic aspect of the narration involves positioning the reader in a way that offers no alternative but to adopt the cynical attitude of the narrator. The ironic use of the name "Sophia" for the eponymous character automatically brings to mind the wisdom-stupidity opposition, as we know that the protagonist is bound to be doomed by her lack of experience. The narrator deliberately refers to Sophia as "a good girl" in a context that indirectly imposes on her the responsibility of falling victim to the man perversely referred to as the "hunter". The latter expression blurs the boundary between the animal hunter and the human hunter from the Brothers Grimm and other German versions of the tale. In the familiar plots, the huntsman or the woodcutter saves the girl and kills the wolf. In *The Girl in Red*, the reassuring boundary between good and evil is non-existent. The words that seem innocuous in fact mock Sophia's youthful innocence and force the reader to identify with the deviant perspective of the murderer.

Similar to the visual narration, the verbal narration unscrupulously imparts the knowledge of the heroine's dreadful future to readers, thus including them in the ugly conspiracy. The narrator comments on the protagonist's behalf: "What big teeth he has. Dark and strong and perfect in his timing. Sophia tells him of her grandmother and her little home. Of the biscuits and honey." Those sensitive to the nuances of verbal narration will inevitably be torn between the narrator's tone and Sophia's intuition; they will know they are being mocked by the focalised narrative perspective. Once her story reverberates in the hunter's presence, Sophia should realise that what she holds dear – the values of love, bonds, concern for the other – the man sees as sheer stupidity and naivety. Even more cynically, both the text and the illustration reveal the girl's fascination with the stranger, thus implicating her as partly responsible for her own doom. The storyline – revoltingly enough – implies that even those most innocent happen to be prone to corruption and promiscuity. The girl should know better and understand before it is too late that she is bound to be the hunter's biscuits and his honey; but only the readers are alerted.

Perhaps the most unsettling and dangerously clever gesture on the part of the illustrator-writer duo is their metafictional joke, at the reader's expense, in the last opening. The visual and verbal narratives implement the fairy-tale wolf's familiar tactics: the narrator's words seem to be consolatory and compassionate in tone, bestowing upon the reader an alternative ending, illustrated by Innocenti in the last spread. If we remain blind to the narrator's condescending tone, we can be tricked into believing that the girl's survival is a viable option, although both the verbal and visual signals ostensibly deny it. The peculiarity of the police officers' facial features, which ominously resemble those of the hunter and his jackal hooligans, evidently rules out an optimistic reading. Elizabeth Marshall interprets the presence of the two endings as a recognition of Charles Perrault's and the Brothers Grimm's different versions of the tale, suggesting that the presence of the double ending offers a choice to the reader (168). While this is a reading that most readers would wish was a possibility, this mock ending is a blatant and hair-raising example of narrative cynicism. The author and the illustrator pull the wool over readers' eyes only to turn their vicarious hope into a mockery.

Conclusion

Klassen, Innocenti and Frisch act through their art as tricksters: they disguise evil either through innocuous aesthetics or by suggesting the possibility of a happy ending. But this is a cynical game in which the reader can never leave unhurt or without a sense of guilt. The artists effectively expose what they see as human

indifference to evil and injustice, but they also uncompromisingly mock humanistic ideals and unscrupulously impose their cynicism on the reader. The specific conventions of storytelling in all the discussed books equate hope with gullibility and situate the reader in the position of the helpless, devastated, passive observer.

The works examined above are relatively rare examples of visual literature that rule out any possibility of genuinely compassionate engagement on the reader's part. It is possible that the works originated from their authors' profound concern with the policies endorsed by those who hold political power. But if this is the case, the artists do no more than expose their own sense of helplessness. In Klassen's stories the small culprits may be justified in their acts of stealing if we assume that there is no other way to challenge the well-established forms of power; but it is difficult to empathise with the weaker characters if they are portrayed as infantile, naive, and just as corrupt as their oppressor. In Frisch and Innocenti's work the oppressed protagonist is deprived of a voice and depicted exclusively from the cynical and mocking perspective of the narrator, who clearly (athough perhaps involuntarily) shares the perpetrator's nihilism. The readers are not only coerced into adopting the narrator's attitude towards the girl, but they are also themselves interpellated (by the narrator's condescending final address) into the position of gullible victim rather than that of compassionate agent.

Rabindranath Tagore wisely advises, through the voice of his protagonist, that writers should abstain from storytelling conventions that deprive the readers of hope. In the already quoted passage, Martha C. Nussbaum observes equally perceptively that if literary works depict tragedy, they should reveal the "depth and significance of suffering", they should have "moral weight" (428). Only such works make readers aware of the human misery in the world and breed the kind of compassion that can inspire people to act. Perhaps, as Claudia Mills observes, there is no need to be overcautious and make radical moral judgements about all books which "anthropomorphize too heedlessly, glorify war too readily, or portray prejudice too seductively" (10). Children's literature ought to introduce difficult themes and challenging aspects of human experience, and the authors should not be restrained in their choice of artistic and expressive means, as long as they do not leave readers unarmed and traumatised. Klassen, Innocenti and Frisch depict the bleakness of a world they see as devoid of humanism, yet their books' form and content only exacerbate the trends they seem to be exposing and accusing. Cynicism is contagious; the artists have competently created in their books a sense of omnipresent moral dirt, where there is no place for hope.

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