

# Investigating point of view in picture books and animated movie adaptations

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**A**s a valued, cherished and enduringly popular part of our culture for many generations, a significant number of highly acclaimed picture books, like other great literary works, have a long and strengthening tradition of adaptation as movies. Among such early adaptations are the Weston Woods animated movies of books such as *Rosie's walk* (*Rosie's walk*, 1970; Hutchins, 1968) and *Where the wild things are* (*Where the wild things are*, 1973; Sendak, 1962). More recent animated adaptations include such well-known titles as *The bear* (*The bear*, 1998; Briggs, 1996), *Granpa* (Bunningham, 1984; *Granpa*, 1994) as well as contemporary works such as *Lost and found* (*Lost and found*, 2008; Jeffers, 2005). A number of picture books have also been adapted as live action movies such as *Jumanji* (*Jumanji*, 1995; Van Allsburg, 1981) and the Jonze (2009) movie of *Where the wild things are*. In some cases both the language and images of the movie versions are very different from the books, as in the Jonze (2009) 'Wild things' movie and the animated version of Roald Dahl's (1974) *Fantastic Mr Fox* (*Fantastic Mr Fox*, 2009). But in a significant number of animations the language is identical to, or only minimally different from, the book version and the animated characters are dynamic versions of the original static images. In such movies subtle changes in focalisation, distant or close views and angle of depiction from static to moving image can effect significant shifts in the interpretive possibilities of what is ostensibly the same story. Since the experience of literature for children growing up in today's world is increasingly that of living 'in a world of versions' (Mackey, 1994, p. 15), rather than conflating the experience of story as a picture book and as movie, it is important to explore the narrative art and interpretive impact of this 're-versioning' (Mackey 1998, 1999, 2001a, 2001b, 2002) as part of the joy of close engagement with picture books, their movie adaptations and their significance for understanding cultural, social and human values (Martin, 2006, 2008; Mickenberg 2005; Unsworth, 2014, in press).



This chapter will firstly note the requirement in the *Australian Curriculum: English* (ACARA, 2014d) to develop students' explicit knowledge of the meaning-making resources of image and language and the impact of how these are deployed on the interpretive possibilities of texts and on audience response. Then some key aspects of how still and moving images make meaning will be outlined drawing on the Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, 2006) grammar of visual design and extending recent research on point of view in images in picture books (Painter, Martin & Unsworth, 2013) and animated movie adaptations (Barton & Unsworth, 2014; Unsworth, 2013a, 2013b, 2014b). The new research reported here shows how greater empathy and alignment with characters is evoked in the movie versions through different constructions of point of view and greater commitment and access to the depiction of characters' affect. This is demonstrated through a comparative analysis of corresponding segments of the book and animated movie versions of *Where the wild things are* (*Where the wild things are*, 1973; Sendak, 1962), *Felix and Alexander* (Denton, 1985; *Felix and Alexander*, 1992) and *The lost thing* (Tan, 2000; *The lost thing*, 2010). These analyses indicate a basis for developing classroom teaching and learning experiences that progressively introduce students to the system of options for constructing point of view and interactive meanings in images, enabling them to use this knowledge of 'visual grammatics' (Unsworth & Macken-Horarik, in press) to explore interpretations of multimodal narratives, consistent with requirements in the relevant content descriptions in the *Australian Curriculum: English* (ACE).

## A functional 'grammatics' of images in the *Australian Curriculum: English*

The *Australian Curriculum: English* firmly places knowledge about the meaning-making resources of images alongside knowledge about language as requirements for student literacy learning (ACARA, 2014d).

(Please note that the codes in the extracts from the curriculum refer to the content descriptions of the *Australian Curriculum: English* (ACARA, 2014d), which describe what students are expected to learn. For ease of reference in this chapter ACE is the *Australian Curriculum: English*; LA refers to language content descriptions; LT to literature; and LY to literacy.)

For example, in Year 3 it is expected that students will...

**Identify the effect on audiences of techniques, for example shot size, vertical camera angle and layout in picture books, advertisements and film segments**



noting how the relationship between characters can be depicted in illustrations through: the positioning of the characters (for example facing each other or facing away from each other); the distance between them; the relative size; one character looking up (or down) at the other (power relationships); facial expressions and body gesture; observing how images construct a relationship with the viewer through such strategies as: direct gaze into the viewer's eyes, inviting involvement and how close ups are more engaging than distanced images, which can suggest alienation or loneliness. **ACELA1483**

In Year 4 it is expected that students will be ...

Examining visual and multimodal texts, building a vocabulary to describe visual elements and techniques such as framing, composition and visual point of view and beginning to understand how these choices impact on viewer response. **ACELA 1496**

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. **ACELT 1610**

Such content descriptions and those referring to picture books are extensive in the ACE through to the junior secondary school curriculum (Unsworth, 2014a, 2014c; Unsworth & Macken-Horarik, in press). The following section outlines the concepts underpinning some key elements of these content descriptions.

## Interactive meanings, focalisation and audience alignment

### Interactive meanings

The depiction of interactive relations between the viewer and image participants has been described by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). Their systems of visual meaning-making options include: INVOLVEMENT, CONTACT, and SOCIAL DISTANCE. INVOLVEMENT is concerned with positioning viewers to feel to a greater or lesser degree involved with the depicted participants. This is influenced by the horizontal angle (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 133ff). If the depicted participants are presented facing the viewer 'front on', there is a maximum



involvement with them. On the other hand, if the participants are depicted at an oblique angle, this positions the viewer to be more detached from depicted participants. The greater the oblique angle the more detached is the viewer.

The system of contact distinguishes between images where a character gazes directly at the viewer and images where there is no such gaze. Kress and van Leeuwen refer to images where the character gazes directly at the viewer as 'demand' images, and where there is no such gaze as an 'offer'. Painter et al. (2013), refer to such images as either 'contact' or 'observe' images, and this terminology is preferred here.

The system of social distance (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 124–9) is realised by the 'size of frame', which means that the image participants may appear as head and shoulders only, and hence appear close-up to the viewer, or perhaps only their face or part of their face is visible, so they appear to be at a quite intimate social distance. If the entire body of the participant is visible, the character appears distant, and if the participant's whole body is depicted in the background, the character appears remote. These extremes are commonly referred to as a 'close-up' or 'long shot' with 'mid shot' indicating commonly accepted interactive social distance.

## Focalisation

Images can position the viewer to experience the image from an external, unmediated viewpoint, or from a point of view similar to that of one of the characters in the image, or indeed, as if the viewer were one of the characters in the image (Painter, 2007; Painter et al., 2013; Unsworth, 2006).

Painter and her co-writers (Painter, 2007; Painter et al., 2013) identify three methods by which viewers can be positioned as if they were one of the characters in the image. The first is by depicting just part of the body from an angle that could only represent the sight line of focalising character (such as the hands or feet out in front of the unseen body), positioning the viewer as if s/he were the focalising character (see also Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 143–4). A similar effect is created when only the shadow or partial shadow of the focalising character is included in such a way that the viewing position for the image could only be that of the character casting the shadow. The second method occurs across a sequence of two images. In the first image the focalising character gazes directly at the reader, so it is clear that the character is looking at something, and what s/he is looking at is depicted in the subsequent image, so the viewer sees the second image from the point of view of the focalising character. The third method is achieved by using the angle of viewing across two images. In the first



image the focalising character is looking at something (or 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.

It is also possible for the viewer to share a character's point of view rather than being positioned as the character. The viewer sees the character (or part of the character) while also seeing what the character sees from that character's perspective. This 'over the shoulder' view involves positioning the point of view as being from slightly to the rear and to one side of the focalising character or directly behind the focalising character (Unsworth, 2006, pp. 95–97).

## Audience alignment – pathos

The system of pathos describes different possibilities for reader alignment, or stance towards the characters in the story, of which character drawing style has been regarded as a key signifier (Painter et al., 2013). The drawing style can be 'minimalist' as opposed to 'generic' or 'realist' (Painter et al., 2013; Welch, 2005). The minimalist style for a human character is one that uses circles or ovals for people's heads, with dots or small circles for eyes, and does not need to maintain accurate facial or body proportions. Painter et al., (2013) suggest this indexical of what they refer to as 'appreciative' engagement of the reader with picture books that provide social commentary, where the appropriate reader stance is one of relative distance from the story characters, with limited emotional involvement and a focus on lessons to be learned. While the key signifier is the minimalist depiction style, the more detached observer stance for the reader is also prompted by the use of relatively long shots and frequent oblique angles, together with 'observe' rather than 'contact' interaction choices. Examples of picture books of this type include *Not now, Bernard* (McKee, 1987), *Granpa* (Bunningham, 1984), *Black dog* (Allen, 1991) and *The snowman* (Briggs, 1978). The generic drawing style is more realistic than the minimalist style but not as naturalistic as a colour photograph. The generic style is associated with an 'empathetic' role for the reader, expecting child readers to 'be' /and 'do' in the protagonist's role. Picture books using this style include *You'll soon grow into them*, *Titch* (Hutchins, 1985), *Uncle David* (Gleeson & Greder, 1992) and *Zoo* (Browne, 1994). The naturalistic drawing style supports a 'personalising' engagement of the reader, responding to the characters not as types but as real complex individuals with individual personalities and needs and complex circumstances. This style is found in picture books such as *Drac and the Gremlin* (Baillie, 1991), *Grandpa* (Norman & Young, 1998), *Lucy's bay* (Crew & Rogers, 1993) and *The deep* (Winton, 1998).



## Maintaining or modifying appreciative stance in animated movies of picture books

*Where the wild things are* (Sendak, 1962) is about a young boy named Max, who, after dressing in his wolf costume, wreaks havoc through his household and is disciplined by being sent without supper to his bedroom. Max's bedroom undergoes a mysterious transformation into a jungle environment, and he eventually sails off to an island inhabited by large monster animals known as the 'Wild Things'. After taming the Wild Things and being made their king, Max decides to return home, to his bedroom, where his supper is waiting – and is still hot.

Point of view in the book and the animated movie (*Where the wild things are*, 1973) is always that of an outside observer and the viewer is never positioned as or along with one of the story characters. In the book all images are distant views – there are no close-ups or mid shots. Nearly all of the images are in profile or from oblique horizontal angles with only one image where the represented participant is facing the viewer 'front on', which is also the only 'contact' image in the book (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

The only 'contact' image of Max in the book



As well as maintaining the 'unmediated' point of view in images the movie sustains the profile or oblique horizontal angle, and the choice of almost all 'observe' rather than 'contact' images. What does change is the social distance – with many more mid-shots showing a head and upper body view of Max. While the images



are all 'observe', the social distance of the mid-shot brings the observer into the interpersonal space of Max and these closer views also mean that the depiction of affect is more obvious and more salient (see Figures 2a and 2b).



**Figure 2a**

Distance view of Max in the book

**Then all around from far away across the world  
he smelled good things to eat  
so he gave up being king of where the wild things are.**

The additional visual commitment to affective meanings in the movie gives more access to the emotional world of the character affording a more empathetic viewer orientation. This can be seen at the beginning of the story where Max is 'making mischief of one kind or another'. In the book there is one image showing Max chasing the dog and brandishing the fork (Figure 3), whereas in the movie there are additional images showing different expressions of affect (Figure 4).



**Figure 2a**

Max at a closer social distance in the movie version



**Figure 3**

The only image of Max making 'another' kind of mischief in the book



Similar examples of additional affect depiction occur in the movie, such as when Max orders the beginning of the wild rumpus.

In both book and movie the pathos is 'appreciative': the reader/viewer is a detached observer or spectator, notwithstanding the one contact image in both book and movie. While in the book the spectator is also distanced from the characters, in the movie the spectator's view is closer, making the characters' depicted affect more readily discernible.

**Figure 4**

Additional images in the movie to show '... mischief of one kind an another'



## Mediated focalisation and the shift from appreciative to empathetic stance

*Felix and Alexander* (Denton, 1985) is a story of friendship. Since Alexander was not allowed to have pets in his apartment, he has Felix, a toy dog. One day, Alexander does not return home promptly and Felix sets off to find him. Felix is somewhat traumatised by his trip into the real city, but eventually he finds Alexander, only for them to discover that they are both lost. In leaving the apartment however,



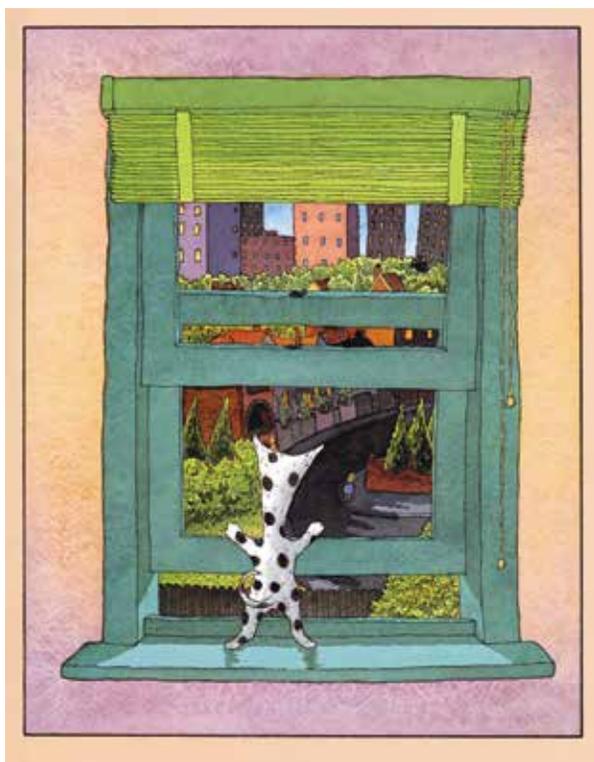
Felix suffered a slight tear in his side and his stuffing leaked from his cloth body for his entire route, so Felix and Alexander were able to trace their way home following the trail left by Felix.

In the book the images are all long distance views with only few that might involve contact if they were not so distant, and the consistent choice of focalisation positions the viewer as a remote spectator. The movie involves not only more contact images and more images at a closer social distance to the viewer, but also the focalisation choices where the viewer is positioned to have the point of view of the character. In both the book and the movie the audience sees the rear view of Felix when he watches through the window as Alexander departs. In the book this rear view is from a distance (Figure 5), but in the movie it is a much closer view (Figure 6).

In the movie, however the next shot shows the view of Alexander that Felix has from the window (Figure 7), so the audience is positioned to have the same point of view as Felix.

**Figure 5**

Felix watches Alexander depart



**Figure 6**

A closer view of Felix at the window in the movie version



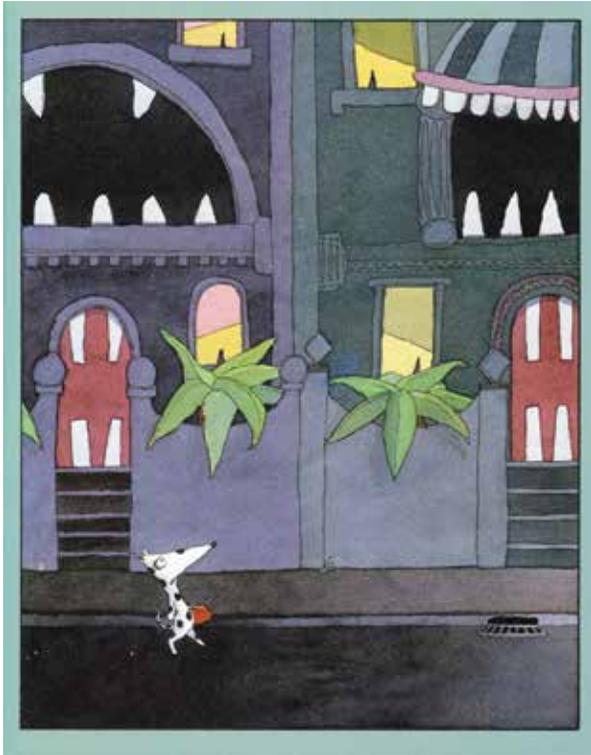
**Figure 7**

Alexander as viewed by Felix from the window from movie



When the narration indicates that Felix became very worried when Alexander did not return from his walk, the movie commits a contact image of Felix depicting his worry (Figure 8), which is not provided in the book.

The closer social distance of images in the movie also makes the depiction of affect more discernible and prominent than in the book, as can be seen by comparing the image of Felix in the book experiencing fear among the enormous houses in the street (Figure 9) and the depiction of this in the movie (Figure 10).



**Figure 9**

'Felix felt scared and very small' – as shown in the book



**Figure 8**

Contact image of Felix depicting negative security from movie



**Figure 10**

'Felix felt scared and very small' – as shown in the movie

The movie clearly shows a shift in pathos to the 'empathetic' from the prototypical 'appreciative' stance in the book. Since the movie maintains the minimalist character style of the book, this shift is due in part to the increased incidence of contact images and the closer social distance and consequent access to depiction of affect, but principally to the focalisation choices – 'along with' and 'as' the depicted characters in the movie.

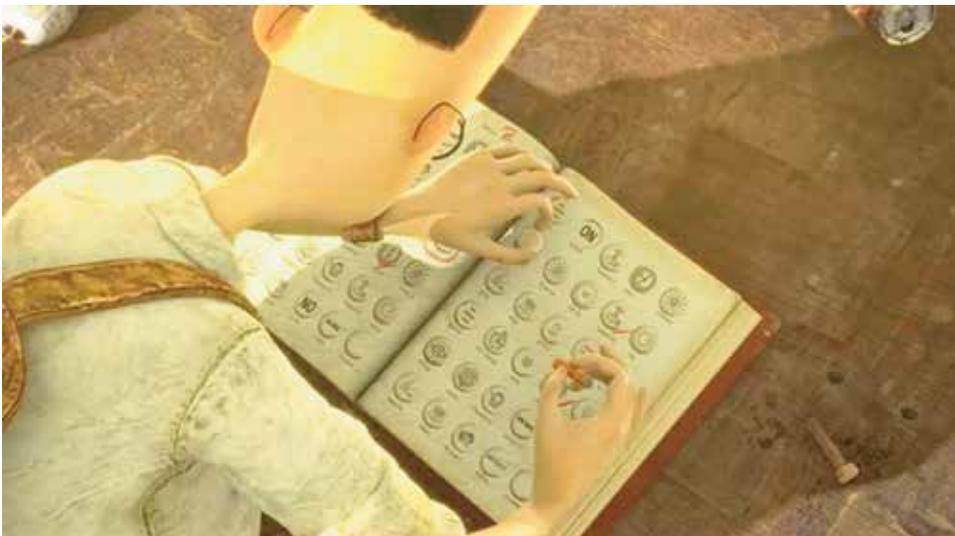


## The shift to empathetic stance and thematic interpretive impact

*The lost thing* (Tan, 2000) is about a boy who discovers a bizarre-looking creature while out collecting bottle tops at a beach. Believing it is lost, he tries to find out where it belongs, but the problem is met with general indifference. Strangers, parents all show no interest. Even his friend is unable to help, despite some interest. The boy initially hides the creature in his parents' back shed and eventually finds a place where it seems content to stay in the company of other bizarre creatures.

The minimalist character depiction style in the book includes no contact images. Nearly all of the images are long distance views with only three middle distance views and no close-up views. The visual point of view is overwhelmingly unmediated observation – viewers are positioned as detached outside observers. In the book the pathos is clearly 'appreciative', with no emotional interactive contact with the characters, and the reader positioned as a remote observer.

In the movie (*The lost thing*, 2010) there are many occasions when the viewer is positioned to have a point of view along with that of a character. For example, in the early scenes the focalisation choice has the viewer looking along with the boy at this bottle top catalogue (Figure 11).



**Figure 11**

Viewing his bottle top collection along with the boy in the movie of *The lost thing*

Later, the viewer inspects the lost thing on the beach along with the boy when he is inspecting (Figure 12).





**Figure 12**

Viewing the lost thing along with the boy in the movie of *The lost thing*

These 'over-the-shoulder' views are clearly selected so that the viewpoint of the audience is very close to that of the boy. The social distance is very close and, although the horizontal angle is somewhat oblique, this does not seem to diminish the over-the-shoulder effect of viewing along with the character. There are many such examples throughout the movie of viewer being positioned to see 'along with' the boy and notably at the end of the movie when the boy is in the train reflecting on his encounter with the lost thing:

I still think about that lost thing from time to time, especially when I see something out of the corner of my eye that doesn't quite fit. You know, something with a weird, sad, lost sort of look.

As the first sentence is spoken by the narrator, the creature with the light bulb head comes into view on the platform, and the camera zooms in, first to show the audience viewing along with the boy (Figure 13) and then zooms out as the boy turns to face the camera just as the second clause is spoken (Figure 14).

**Figure 13**

Something that doesn't quite fit



**Figure 14**

Something with a weird, sad, lost sort of look



There are several occasions where, through inference, based on the shot, reverse-shot sequence, the audience is positioned as having the point of view of the character – as if the audience were looking through the character’s eyes. The first of these occurs when the boy is inspecting the lost thing on the beach. Firstly the audience views the boy from a high angle obviously looking up at the lost thing (Figure 15).

Subsequently the audience views the lost thing from a low angle (Figure 16), and although the lost thing does not have a face or eyes, the fan approximates this appearance and hence it appears to the audience that they are viewing the lost thing as if they were the boy.

The audience is also positioned as the character of the lost thing when the boy is carrying the box of food towards the lost thing in the back shed (Figure 17). This particular view of the boy and the lost thing’s pincers is only possible from the top centre of the lost thing and so the viewer is positioned to have the point of view of the lost thing.

There are many close-up views of the boy, several contact views and views where the boy’s frontal plane is parallel with that of the viewer. These image choices in combination are concentrated in the final part of the story where the lost thing and the boy say goodbye to each other, emphasising close involvement and interaction between the audience and the characters (Unsworth, 2013b). Such choices as well as the frequent focalisation choices constructing the audience point of view ‘along with’ or ‘as’ the character are clearly indicative of the ‘empathetic’ option within the pathos system, in contrast with the obvious orientation of the book to an ‘appreciative’ stance. But what is also significant is the direct influence of these interactive



**Figure 15**  
The boy looking up at the lost thing



**Figure 16**  
Looking at the lost thing as if from the viewpoint of the boy



**Figure 17**  
Point of view as of the lost thing



and focalisation choices in privileging particular interpretive possibilities in the movie that are not privileged in the book version. This can be seen, for example, in the final images of the 'goodbye' scene.

The parting of the boy and the lost thing is depicted minimally in the book through the one, distant, observe image (Figure 18).

The text above the image reads:

I didn't know what to think, but the lost thing made an approving sort of noise. It seems as good a time as any to say goodbye to each other. So we did.  
(Tan, 2001, unpagged)

And below the image is the single sentence:

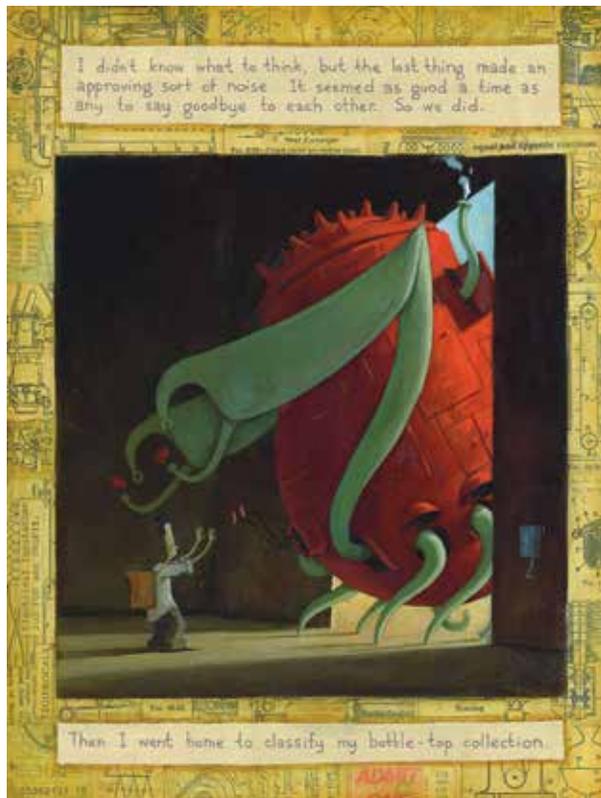
Then I went home to classify my bottle-top collection. (Tan, 2001, unpagged)

In the movie the entire 'goodbye' scene is conveyed only through the images and music with no narration, but there is greater visual commitment in the movie to the depiction of the actions that occurred immediately prior and subsequent to the goodbye scene shown in the book. This is where we see in the movie 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 (Figure 19).

This rear view positions the audience to see along with the boy. The camera lingers on this view 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 (Figure 20), intensifying the involvement and empathy of the viewer with the boy and suggesting the emotional nature of the parting for the boy. This is in stark contrast with the goodbye scene in the book, which conveys a much more dispassionate, unemotional departure, not lamented in the least by the boy.

**Figure 19**

Saying goodbye in the movie – aligning with the boy



**Figure 18**

The boy and the lost thing say goodbye as depicted in the picture book





**Figure 20**

The last parting glance – empathy with the boy in the movie

There are several such episodes where the visual depiction in the movie subtly re-orientates the interpretative possibilities of the corresponding book segments. For example, in Figure 14 there is direct contact between the audience and the boy, and the audience can also see through the tram window the orange creature with the light-bulb head, raising the question of which of these characters has the 'weird, sad, lost sort of look'. So, in contrast to the book, in the movie the visual construction of image/viewer relations of social distance, contact, and point of view implicate the boy quite directly in relation to issues of 'looking out of place' or not seeming to 'quite fit', and appearing to have 'a weird, sad, lost sort of look'.

## Conclusion and implications for classroom work

While a minimalist character depiction style may be indexical of an 'appreciative' stance in picture books, this is not necessarily the case in animated movies. In movies that maintain a fairly close approximation to the minimalist depiction style of the books, what influences the shift towards the empathetic viewer stance is partly the closer social distance of images and increased access and commitment to affect and more involvement through images with a frontal angle parallel to the frontal plane of the viewer, but more particularly, it is the shift in focalisation choices from unmediated observer to the positioning of the viewer along with the characters or as one or more of the characters in the story.



Exploratory classroom work comparing picture books and animated movie versions can be used initially to introduce students to visual grammatics concepts such as the distinction between 'contact' and 'observe' images and focalisation 'as' or 'along with' characters in still and moving images (Painter et al., 2013). Such introductory work would necessitate teacher-modelled and then guided comparison and explicit teaching of the options for constructing interactive meaning and focalisation in images. Students would also be learning these aspects of visual grammatics as tools for exploring the contribution of images to the construction of the narrative and developing their 'text analyst' role as interpretive readers (Freebody & Luke, 1990). While enjoyable and productive learning focusing on picture books and movie versions can be undertaken in primary and secondary school classrooms, the visual grammatics introduced here can also be applied to similar comparative explorations of movie adaptations of novels, a number of which now also appear as plays and graphic novels. One popular such novel is *Coraline* (Gaiman, 2002) and students could compare short selections from the book with the corresponding segments from the movie (*Coraline*, 2009) and/or the graphic novel (Gaiman & Russell, 2008). The teacher could model comparative analysis and a report of one segment, scaffold student work with the teacher using another segment and then provide the opportunity for independent student work on a subsequent segment. Such work may provide a basis for following up with approaches to transformed learning through multimodal authoring tasks such as exploring the possibilities of filmic adaptation of selected segments from picture books such as *Way home* (Hathorn & Rogers, 1994), *Grandpa* (Norman & Young, 1998), *Hiram and B* (Caswell & Ottley, 2003) and *In my father's room* (Crew & Scott, 2002), where suitable casting of characters and accessible appropriate set locations for actual filming would be practicable.

In today's world, where multiple versions of established and emerging literary works in different media formats routinely, and increasingly immediately co-exist, and where many students derive pleasure from the re-versioning of literature completely disconnected with their school experience (Thomas, 2007; Unsworth, 2006), there is an opportunity to enhance our broader cultural appreciation of literary narratives in multiple modes through classroom work. This work would enable further exploration of the semiotic means by which audiences are differently positioned as well as the interpretive possibilities afforded by book and movie versions of long established literary works such as *The little prince* (de Saint-Exupery, 2000a, 2000b), more contemporary innovative novels such as *The invention of Hugo Cabret* (Hugo, 2011; Selznick 2007) and current picture books such as *Lost and found* (*Lost and found*, 2008; Jeffers 2005). It is hoped that this chapter will help to foster such enjoyable classroom explorations.

