Telling Stories using Children's Visual Language
A Unique Approach in Picture Books with Case Study from Indonesia and Korea

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Abstract

Children have their own unique way in telling stories visually. By their intuition, somehow they manage to invent various methods which are unique. The way they draw does not fit the aesthetic values and logic that is seen through adult's eyes, especially the perspective theory. They would naturally emphasize on how to deliver they stories to others. The medium in which this fact could be clearly seen is through children's drawing.

Primadi Tabrani, professor from ITB, Indonesia, had conducted extensive research regarding the children's drawing and the way to read the message within. Tabrani described this phenomenon as children's visual language. Furthermore, Tabrani researched the relation between children's drawing and visual language of the world. He concluded that many ancient art artifacts from artist from the Eastern part of the world had the same approach in conveying their message with children's drawing and visual language. Tabrani described this finding as the Eastern Visual Language.

The same approach nowadays could be found in various illustrations in children's picture book. Adapting drawings that emphasize on stories with visuals that resembles children's drawing make these picture books more suitable to their target audience. Furthermore, they create a unique visual storytelling that carries the ancient tradition from the Eastern world to the present day.

Focusing on picture books from Indonesia and Korea, this paper is intended to analyze how present day illustrators managed to adapt this distinctive visual language and how to read their drawings using children's visual language, by looking through their works.

Keywords: picture book, children's drawing, visual language

1. Introduction

Wisdom says that a picture can tell thousands of words. Therefore, besides communicating using verbal languages, people also use visual –in the form drawing and illustration- to communicate with others or to express their thoughts. Visual has the advantage of delivering the message faster and going straight to our comprehension [1]. One particular application of this practice could be seen through children's activities.

Children love to draw. And by looking to their drawings, we could see that somehow the children's drawings are different than the adults. By their intuition, somehow they manage to invent various methods which are unique. They do not emphasize on the aesthetics value of their drawing, but more on the communication aspect. The term of aesthetics value refers to picture that eternalize nature as it is [2], which judges the value of a picture according to its correctness as seen by human eyes, such as the ideal human proportion and the perspective view. Even though children's drawing would not fit the aesthetics values judged by adults, the drawing itself is full of stories. Through

their drawing, they would naturally emphasize on how to deliver stories to others. Primadi Tabrani, professor from ITB, Indonesia, described this phenomenon as children's visual language. This creates a unique method of telling stories visually which is could be applied by adults as well.

This practice nowadays could be found in various illustrations in children's picture book. Adapting drawings that emphasize on stories with visuals that resembles children's drawing make these picture books more suitable to their target audience. Furthermore, they create a unique visual storytelling that carries the ancient tradition from the Eastern world to the present day

2. Method
2.1. Reading the Children's Drawings
According to Tabrani, the way children see and draw is related with their development and integration of senses, imagination, nerves and reflexes, and the way of thinking. When they are drawing, intuitively the children would integrate their emotion, experiment, expression and creation, believing that whatever they draw or create is really happened and not just as an ordinary assignment. They do not only draw what they see, but as a result of collaboration between all of their senses, thoughts and imagination that is expressed through the drawing. The process of drawing is more important than the drawing itself [3]. Therefore, children's drawing is not merely to capture scenery but it also captures the mood, the story and the children's expression within. No wonder that children's drawing contains so many meanings and stories.

Children's drawing along with pre-historic primitive painting, traditional drawing and avant-garde artists stands within the Space-Time-Plane (STP) [4]. The STP system is a visual system that could represent multiple angles, multiple distances and multiple moments within one picture. It captures not only what is being drawn as one still picture but as a sequence which consists of several scenes that moves in the time and space. The picture became a sequence since it had a time dimension and can consist of several scenes. Therefore, it does not only describe what images of what objects are drawn but it can tell a story and an expression, it becomes a visual language, just like word language [5]. The STP system is different with the other system what Tabrani called Naturalistic-Perspective-Moment opname (NPM). The NPM System works like a camera, introduced by Western domination and the accelerated process of globalization [6]. It captures nature as it is, drawn from one particular angle, one particular distance and one particular time, producing a descriptive picture in one, single scene [7] (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Drawings using the STP System (left) and NPM System (right).
Note that in the picture on the left, that in one drawing; it does not only represent the
scenery of a house and its environment but also what is inside the house as well.
Source: Tabrani (1993); Ahmad (2006)

Through out extensive researches by relating children's drawing and visual language of the world, Tabrani then concluded that many ancient art artifacts from artist from the Eastern part of the world had the same approach in conveying their message with children's drawing and visual language. Tabrani described this finding as the Eastern Visual Language. One particular sample for the Eastern Visual Language is the STP system.

2.2. The Vocabulary of Children's Drawing

Since the children's drawing used the STP system, to read the message within we could use the vocabulary of the STP system which related to the way to draw a picture. Tabrani called the way to draw a picture as Image Way [8]. There are many modes in Image Way, which several of them are:

1. *The layering image*: an image in the background layer happens earlier, while an image in the foreground layer happens later. In each layer, every image has a chronological time and place according to 'the way to see' the picture.
2. *Multiple objects to represent sequence*: in each layer, an object can be drawn more than once. If an object is drawn with dynamic and expressive contour, this means that the object is a moving object and the picture describes its movement in sequence.
3. *Size to describe the role of an object*: If an object is important, then it will be drawn bigger than the surrounding.
4. *Characteristic view*: if an object is important to be recognize, than it will be drawn from the most characteristic view.
5. *The X-ray view*: if an important object is placed inside another object, then the outer object would be drawn as a transparent one.
6. *Dream time*: a mixing of various scenes from different time and space in one scene in order to tell the story related to all of them. It can happen anytime, everywhere.
7. *Outer space*: objects are drawn as seem they are flying in the sky in various positions, even upside down.

These modes would be use to read the visual language of several picture books from Indonesia and Korea in the following part.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Applying the Language of Children's Drawing into Picture Book

Since the children have their own unique way in telling stories, so when we create medium for them it is safe to use their own language as the main method of communication. One of the medium is the picture book. Picture book is an art form that combines visual and verbal narratives in book format and generally considered as the best literature and mostly aimed for young children. Picture book tends to have two functions in the lives of children: it is first read to young children by adults and then the children read it themselves once they begin to learn to read.

While the STP system seems more suitable to tell stories visually for children, most of the picture books in Indonesia tend to choose illustration that resembles realistic and naturalistic picture or the NPM system. However, lately they are several picture books that use the STP system to tell the story.

3.2. Case Study from Indonesian Picture Books

Beginning in 2007, Gramedia Pustaka Utama (GPU), one of the big publishers in Indonesia began its line of picture books entitled "Sejuta Warna Pelangi" or Thousands Colors of the Rainbow. The series consist of nine picture books written by Clara Ng and illustrated by four different illustrators: Emte, Eddie, Martin and Marina. The picture books illustrated by Emte and Martin tend to adapt children's visual language or the STP system within, although they still combined the visual style with naturalistic approach. The influence of the STP system could be analyzed through the books titled "Aku Bisa Terbang (I Can Fly)" illustrated by Emte and "Pesta Kostum Tengah Malam (Midnight Costume Party)" illustrated by Martin. Then in 2008, GPU expands its line of picture books with a series entitled "Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar" or As If the Earth Stops Spinning. These series consist of five books, all written by Clara Ng and illustrated by Emte. For the illustrations, Emte tends to adapt children's drawing as his inspirations, not only the visual style but also the visual language as well. From the five titles of the series, two of them ["Seribu Sahabat Selamanya (Thousands Friends Forever)" and "Yang Paling Istimewa (The Most Special)"] use the children's visual language (the STP system) quite extensively.

The following part would try to explain several applications of children's visual language in these picture books by focusing on what the message of each particular scene and how to read each of them and they convey the message to the readers. The books entitled "Aku Bisa Terbang" and "Yang Paling Istimewa" would be used as a sample.

3.2.1 Scenes from "Aku Bisa Terbang"

"Aku Bisa Terbang" tells a story of Andre, a young hippopotamus who wish to fly. Even though everybody tells him that only birds can fly, Andre insists that he can fly. His stubbornness pays off when his grand father tells him that every body can actually fly as long as they are happy.

For this story, Emte drew the illustrations using magical and imaginative approach. The characters and backgrounds were drawn in flat manners, combining fresh and warm colors to express the story's magical nuance. Emte also applied several modes of the STP system, most notably the characteristic view, outer space and multiple objects.

Figure 2. Aku Bisa Terbang, page 2-3
Source: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2007

In these pages, we could see two figures of Andre, on the left and the upper right. These figures does not mean there are two Andre but to tell in sequence what Andre does while spending his free time walking in the bright sunshine. First he meets a bird while walking on an open field, and then he plays with another bird in the bushes. To show that he is a hippopotamus, Andre is drawn using characteristic view, emphasizes on the shape of the head with two big teeth. No matter his gesture and position is; his head looks the same that enables the readers to differentiate Andre with another character (see figure 2).

In pages 20-21, we could see that Emte implies characteristic view on every character with every animal was drawn using their most distinctive look. Even though the visual style is flat and some animals have unusual colors, the readers could still identify which is which. This scene also feature the Outer Sky mode, with the animals are posed in various position (see figure 3).

Figure 3. Aku Bisa Terbang, page 20-21
Source: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2007

3.2.2 Scenes from "Yang Paling Istimewa"

"Yang Paling Istimewa" is a story about a boy named Rico who finds the difficulty to accept that his sister is different due to her crippled leg. During the course of the story, Rico begins to learn that despite the physical differences, a person is judged mainly by their actions and achievements. This book also features the most extensive use of the STP system through out the illustrations from the entire series, featuring modes of the X-ray view, the layering image, characteristic view, size to describe the role of an object and dream time.
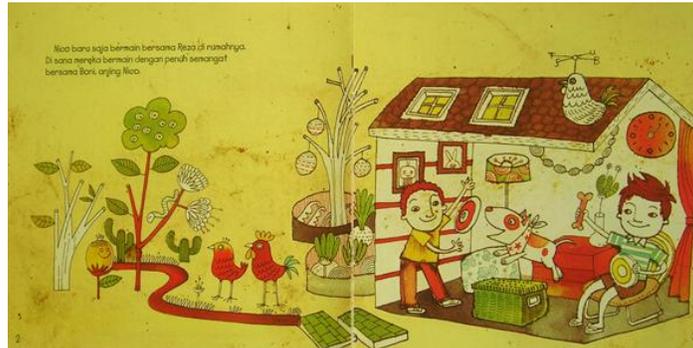

Figure 4. Yang Paling Istimewa, page 2-3
Source: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2008

Pages 2-3 show the application of the X-ray mode. While the written text only mentions that Nico went to Reza's home to play with him and Nico's dog, the illustration itself tells more than that. Using the X-ray view, what is inside Reza's home, what kind of game they are playing and around what time Nico is playing with Reza and his dog could be seen. Nico, Reza and Nico's dog play important role on the scene, therefore they are drawn bigger in size and do not have the same scale and proportion from the house. The characteristic view enables us to see that there are two chickens which are drawn from the side view to differentiate between the hen and the rooster. The trees are drawn from side view, however because the form of the leaves is quite specific, then the leaves are drawn from top view (see figure 4).

Figure 5. Yang Paling Istimewa, page 4-5
Source: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2008

In pages 4-5, the characteristic view again are used to express that Nico has something serious in his mind that even several delicious meals do not even attract his appetite. For this reason, the meal being served plays an important role and had to be shown. Therefore, while the most objects in the dining room are drawn from side view, the table including all the food served there is viewed from above so all the food is seen. These two different camera angles then are combined together in one frame, resulting in the richness of the story beside what are written from the text (see figure 5).

Figure 6. Yang Paling Istimewa, page 6-7
Source: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2008

In page 6-7, the text describes that after Nico's sister Mia entered the dining room, Nico's face became gloomier. Their mother, after exchanging look between the brother and sister then found out what is bothering Nico. Emte concise all the sequence into just one frame, combining all using the layering image mode. The reader could begin reading by looking at the figure of Mia on the center (act as the first layer), and then proceed to Nico (as the second layer) and their mother (as the third layer). Since the scene also mixes three scenes from different time into one, the dream time mode then also apply here.

In addition, Nico and mother are drawn bigger than Mia, because in this scene, Nico's reaction regarding his sister plays as the key role for the story. The mother then would act as a story mediator to deliver the complete message of this book to the reader (see figure 6).

3.3. Case Study from Korean Picture Books

There are picture books from Korea that also apply the STP system as well to deliver the story. However, due several limitations, only one Korean picture book would be used as a sample: "응가대장 동이 (Dongi and the Big Intestine)".

Dongi and the Big Intestine tells a story of a boy named Dongi and his mother during their trip to the beach, written by Cha Bo-Geum and illustrated by Park Mi-Ae and published by Samsung Books. The illustration itself is quite different, using collage technique that mixes various objects and images to create pictures. The book also applies several modes of the STP system to deliver its story: the characteristic view, layering image, outer space, dream time, X-ray view and multiple objects to represent sequence.

Figure 7. Dongi and the Big Intestine, page 4-5
Source: Samsung Books, 2006

In page 4-5, the scenery of Dongi's room are taken using different camera angles, in order to capture the characteristic view of each object. The floor is seen from top view, while the wall is from side view. The bed is seen from the side view, but to visualize the pillow and blanket, the top view is used because it is easier to recognize the pillow and blanket that way. The same approach is also applied to the book and Dongi's clothes while Dongi himself is visualized using the side view, because he has distinctive hair style if he is seen from the side view (see figure 7).
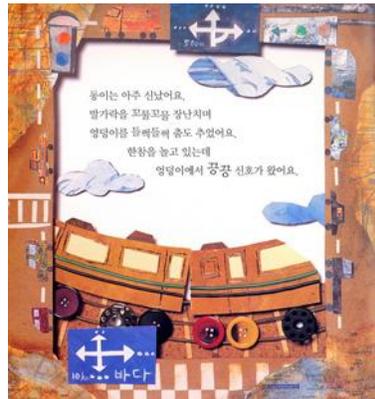

Figure 8. Dongi and the Big Intestine, page 6
Source: Samsung Books, 2006

In page 6, to show the long journey to reach the beach, characteristic view, dream time and outer space modes are used. The scene combines different scene from different time and space, showing various traffic signs and vehicles that Dongi and his mother meet during their trip. Various vehicles are drawn circling the outer layer; several cars are drawn upside down while the train that Dongi and his mother take is put in the inner layer, combining different scenes into one. Most of the vehicles are seen from side view, while the zebra cross on the left is seen from above (see figure 8).
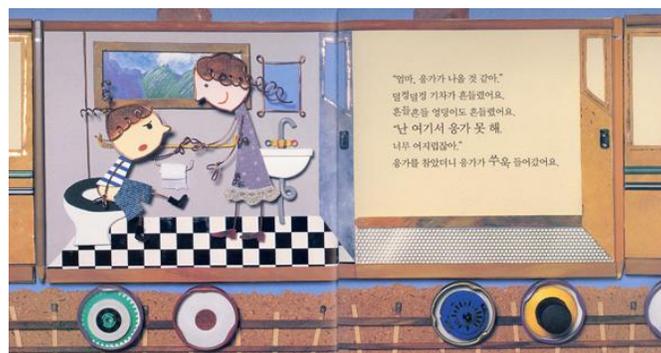

Figure 9. Dongi and the Big Intestine, page 8–9
Source: Samsung Books, 2006

In page 8-9, when Dongi is in the bathroom, the interior of the train is visualized using the X-ray view mode while keeping the information that the bathroom is located on the train. The interior scenery also combines characteristic view, because while Dongi, his mother and bathroom appliances are seen from side view, the floor is seen from above, might be to emphasize on the black and white tiles (see figure 9).

In page 26-27, Dongi's mother realizes that Dongi is missing from their tent and frantically goes outside looking for him. To represent sequences, Dongi's mother is drawn three times with three different sizes. This might be meant that it takes a while to explore the beach to find Dongi. However, to create more sense of time and sequence, the illustrator decides to use frames (see figure 10).

Figure 10. Dongi and the Big Intestine, page 26 -27
Source: Samsung Books, 2006

4. Conclusions

Human communicates through images. To communicate, we use particular language to deliver our thoughts and ideas to others. Since the communication is delivered using visual, therefore the visual language is established, one of them is what Tabrani called the Space-Time-Plane system (STP). The STP system is a visual system that could represent multiple angles, multiple distances and multiple moments within one picture. It does not only describe what images of what objects are drawn but it can tell a story and an expression. The application of the STP system could be clearly described by looking at children's drawing. Children do not only draw what they see, but as a result of collaboration between all of their senses, thoughts and imagination that is expressed through the drawing. No wonder that children's drawing contains so many meanings and stories

The ability of children's drawing to express various ideas and stories within one picture seems to inspire adult as well. These influences could be seen in the works of several illustrators from Indonesia and Korea in children's picture book. By collaborating between the STP system and the more common NPM system, their works managed to visualize not only what is written by the accompanying text but also to give additional stories and information to the reader, for them to get a more complete and rich experience in reading the picture books. In addition, these picture books boast a unique visual storytelling that carries the ancient tradition from the Eastern world to the present day. These findings would open a fresh approach and many possibilities in visual communication, especially in the field of picture book.

5. References

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