

¡EL HILO DE LA GLORIA! DEL HUMOR A LA POESÍA EL SILENCIO COMO ESTÍMULO PARA LEER Y HABLAR

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Resumen

Este artículo se centra principalmente en dos álbumes franceses en los que las palabras son sustituidas por un hilo, coloreado o no: el primero de Robert Scouvard (Magnard, 1990) con el significativo título de *Historia de un hilo*, muestra cómo un simple hilo puede representar mágicamente a los personajes. El álbum ofrece un interesante ejemplo del proceso de distanciamiento a través de un estereotipo. En la segunda parte del artículo, se considera *Tienda Tic Tic*, de Frédéric Clément (Albin Michel Jeunesse, 2018) como una descripción poética hábilmente introducida por la influencia abierta de las *Aventuras de Alicia en el País de las Maravillas* sugerida por la imagen del conejo blanco parado frente a un reloj y parpadeando sobre un globo terráqueo en la primera página. El álbum muestra cómo un hilo mágico puede de manera inesperada y poética tener una «voz de oro» durante un «largo minuto de silencio del Big Ben». Una producción original que ilustra perfectamente la afirmación de Sandra Becket de que «las cualidades 'interactivas' y 'cinemáticas' de tales producciones [...] las convierten en libros para la 'era digital'» (2012, p. 99).

Palabras clave : el hilo mágico, álbum sin palabras, *Historia de un hilo*, *Tienda Tic Tic*, humor, poesía.

LE FIL EN GLOIRE ! DE L'HUMOUR À LA POÉSIE LE SILENCE COMME UN ENCOURAGEMENT À LIRE ET À PARLER

Résumé

Cet article porte plus particulièrement sur deux albums français dans lesquels les mots sont remplacés par un fil, coloré ou non : le premier de Robert Scouvard (Magnard, 1990) au titre significatif, *Histoire d'un fil*, montre comment un simple fil peut magiquement représenter des personnages. L'album offre un exemple intéressant du processus de mise à distance par un stéréotype. Dans la seconde partie de l'article, sera considérée *Boutique Tic Tic*, de Frédéric Clément (Albin Michel Jeunesse, 2018) une description poétique habilement introduite sous l'influence ouverte des *Aventures d'Alice au pays des merveilles* suggérées par l'image du lapin blanc installé devant une montre et clignant des yeux sur un globe dans la première page. L'album montre comment un fil magique peut d'une manière inattendue et poétique avoir une « voix d'or » pendant une « longue minute de silence de Big Ben ». Une réalisation originale illustrant parfaitement la déclaration de Sandra Becket, selon laquelle « les qualités “interactives” et “cinématiques” de telles productions [...] en font des livres de “l'âge digital”. » (2012, p. 99)

Mots clés : le fil magique, album sans mots, *Histoire d'un fil*, *Boutique Tic Tic*, humour, poésie.

KEEP THE THREAD UP! FROM HUMOUR TO POETRY SILENCE AS A SPUR TO READ AND SPEAK

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to proceed with a semiotic examination of several picture-books focused on the use of a thread. Considering that it is the visual picture which first and foremost prompts the meaning in iconotexts, we shall deal with it more particularly through the examination of two French picture-books: the first one by Robert Scouvard, *Histoire d'un fil* (*The Story of a Thread*, Magnard, ISSN:2605-0285

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1990) shows how a single thread can magically delineate different characters introduced in an alluring play on words. The book will offer a distanced staging of the reading process through a humorous use of stereotypes close to those resorted to in comic strips. In the second part of my presentation we shall deal with *Boutique Tic Tic, (Shop Pop Pop)* by Frédéric Clément, (Albin Michel Jeunesse, 2018) a poetical description introduced under the clear influence of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, as suggested by the picture of the white rabbit winking from inside a globe on the book cover. The book, in the end, tells how a magic thread can unexpectedly and poetically have a "golden voice" for "a long minute of silence of Big Ben", an original achievement fully illustrating Sandra Becket's statement that "the 'interactive' and 'cinematic' qualities of such productions [...] make them books for the 'digital age'." (2012, p. 99)

Keywords: the magic thread, wordless picture-books, *Histoire d'un fil*, *Boutique Tic Tic*, humour, poetry.

In their presentation *How Picture books Work, Children's Literature and Culture*, (2015) Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott argued for a reassessment of the interplay in picture-books between the apparent static aspect of the pictures and the specific dynamics of the story. Taking their approach into account, my purpose is to proceed with a semiotic examination of several "wordless" picture-books focused on the use of a thread, but in a way differing from that of Tord Nygren's *The Red Thread* (1987), which our colleagues have analysed. As a starting point of this article however, let me add that I shall not be following Sandra Becket, who, in her noteworthy essay *Crossover Picturebooks: A Genre for all Ages* (London Routledge, 2012), noted that "given there are some words in every book, either in the images or as paratext, 'wordless narratives' might be a more accurate description than 'wordless picturebooks'." (p. 121) Considering that it is the visual picture which first and foremost prompts the meaning in iconotexts, I shall rather take side with Evelin Arizpe who gave a significant title to her 2013 essay *Meaning-making from Wordless (or Nearly Wordless) Picturebooks: What Educational Research Expects and What Readers Have to Say*. And so leaving aside any argumentative niceties, I'll stand by "nearly wordless picture-books" for the books studied in my paper.

We shall deal with the use of a thread more particularly through the examination of two French picture-books; the first one by Robert Scouvard (Magnard, 1990) has a significant title: *Histoire d'un*

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fil (*The Story of a Thread*).

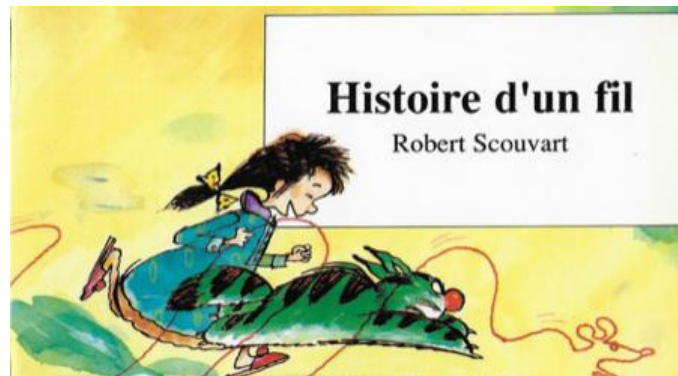


Image 1 de couverture

It shows how a single thread can magically delineate different characters introduced in an alluring play on words by the humorous sentence presented on Scouvar's book jacket: "C'est le déroulement d'un fil qui file le long des pages et donne du fil à tordre au chat. L'histoire ne tient qu'à un fil" ("It is the unwinding of a thread which runs from page to page and drives the cat round the twist. The story hangs only by a single thread."). The book will offer a distanced staging of the reading process through a humorous use of stereotypes close to those resorted to in comic strips.

In the second part of my paper, I shall deal with *Boutique Tic Tic* (*Shop Pop Pop*) by Frédéric Clément (Albin Michel Jeunesse, 2018), a poetical description introduced under the influence of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, as suggested by the image of the white rabbit winking from inside a globe on the book cover.

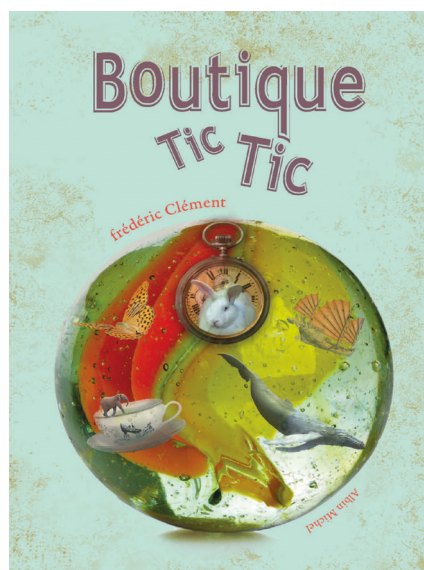


Image 2 de couverture

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The book, in the end, tells how a magic thread can unexpectedly and poetically have a “golden voice” for “a long minute of silence of Big Ben”, an original achievement fully illustrating Sandra Becket’s statement that “the ‘interactive’ and ‘cinematic’ qualities of similar productions (...) make them books for the ‘digital age’.” (2012, p. 99) The number of wordless or ‘nearly wordless’ picture-books is quite impressive, as shows the list of 248 children’s books of this kind published in “Good Reads” on the Web.



Image 3 de deuxième page du livre précédent

Line or thread: experimenting the mental space

As a technical introduction to this paper, I will now deal with the semiotic links between thread and line in several significant modern picture-books. This will involve a reflection on technical or more generally cultural codes and on aesthetic representations contrasting different geometrical forms.

This will be the case first with the picture-book *Ligne 135* (*Line 135*, La joie de lire Genève, 2012) introduced by a horizontal line drawn under the title. This line runs on the second huge double-spread in the Italian format (a large white expanse of 20 x 34 cm typically used for landscape illustrations): on it one can see, at the right end, two small characters, a girl and a woman represented as a protecting adult, since she’s holding the little one’s hand. The two are apparently walking along what looks like a long thread across the white vacant space. Is this line a path? It leads right to a railway station, as a second picture suggests: we can see a small figure sitting in a train carriage.

The following double-spreads show the different stages of a journey on various levels corresponding to the moods of this traveller and end with a representation similar to the first one: the only difference is that the girl is now walking with a woman who is holding a stick in one hand. The girl has been

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travelling to her grandmother's and pondering all the time over the sense of her destiny, her frights or desires made visible through different fantasies, such as that of a monster drawn with a twisting line. The picture book is not wordless, but it is quite difficult to read the text under some of the pictures, as it is written in subdued, almost invisible, as though silent, colours.

Another line or thread used as a sign showing antithetic worlds is the equator which happens to rule the universe of another curious and not really 'nearly wordless' picture book *Ceux d'en haut et ceux d'en bas* (*Those up high and those from below*) by Paloma Valdivia (trad. La Joie de lire, Genève, 2013). It gives the viewpoint of so to speak tight-rope walkers from the northern hemisphere standing on a string or rope, as the picture on the front page shows, but only the giraffe hanging from it in the southern hemisphere is able, with her twisted long neck, to be friend with a bird from the northern areas. The satire is supposed to be completed by reading or walking the thread the other way around...

But it is the transformation of straight lines into curved threads which characterizes most surprisingly the changing world of a third picture book *Au pays des lignes* (*In the Country of Lines*) published by Victor Hussenot (La Joie de lire, Genève, 2014, 2019). The story takes us from a rough and unfriendly abstract geometric universe, in which the two represented characters (one male, blue, and one female, red) have gone rambling, to the genial home of the girl, who has been saved by the boy, the colours of the landscape reflecting those of the participants. The scenery first is made of arid cone-shaped mountains, sometimes truncated and without any really visible vegetation, except for two impressive trees, but it evolves towards chiselled circular streams of tufted half-circles of what could be some abstract grass, through which the heroes of the story fight their way. These two dominating shapes seem to coalesce into chaotic drifting banks and turbulent twisted braids on which the two characters have to progress finally before reaching the jungle where the home of the girl is and where her parents are waiting. The happy end is symbolised by a final kiss, when the boy takes his leave. The only words found are onomatopoeias "paf" "pac" "plouf" written when the two amateur mountaineers have dramatic falls. Reading here proves to be a real guessing game through the twirls and twists of the threaded landscape and of human passion...

The story of another red thread or spinning a yarn

Going back now to the cover of Robert Scouvard's picture-book, one may have noticed that the hilarious girl and the green cat represented are running, actually almost flying, as the feet of the child and the bounding animal seem to be off the ground. A green tuft slanting toward the left hints at their supposed speed suggesting the impetus of their flight and its impact on the vegetation. The reader's surprise no doubt will be aroused by the unexpected picture of the game they seem to be chasing namely a mouse delineated by a simple red thread!

The Story of a Thread 1



Image 4 de *Histoire d'un fil*

The starting point of this fantastic rush is explained on the following page, as we can see the girl throwing a red ball of wool (or shall I say a ball of yarn?) so to speak under the nose of her dumbfounded and petrified cat, with its mouth down. A red feather marked with four dots above its head, its ears slanting backwards, its bulging eyes express stunned astonishment, as it sees the thread unwinding after the ball. The girl is no longer on the next double-spread which reveals the change brought about by a sensational fancy, as the yarn actually has the shape of a flying mouse. The nine dots on the feather above the cat's head show its surprise, immediately triggering a greedy smile, and prompting an immediate determined hunt, tail up and with only one dot on its feather, as the mouse seems to escape through the red door.

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Image 5 de *Histoire d'un fil*

A central loop of the red thread on the next double-spread suggests that the cat is blocked in its rush by a mental reservation on the value of this frantic hunt. Three dots above its head punctuate the break of a possible decisive jump on the mouse and this backlash is materialized by the shape of the huge roaring dog assumed by the thread on the left. Has the cat been induced to doubt about the legitimacy of its desire? Or is this dog a fantastic projection of its own fears in a similar situation?

Yet the increasing strength of this panic attack reaches a new degree on the following double-spread with the thread picturing the phantasm of a woman coming through the door and brandishing a menacing rolling pin in one hand. The central character is now a real rat hilariously mocking the frightened cat which loses its balance in the chase, its tail almost bitten by the dog. The tracked and tracking animal resumes its flight, as the real rat is facetiously shown enjoying the scene on a plane. Then a crow, a clamorous police car and a huge monster join the chasing team in the culminating scene, eliciting a self-saving reaction from the cat, which stops, turns back with clenched teeth and pulls on the thread to break this fantasy: six stars seem to spurt out from the clash.

Image 6 de *Histoire d'un fil*

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And the thread, so to speak, seems to have the last word, as its shapes delineate the word “Clac” (or “snap” in English). Safe but dumbfounded, the animal can just look back at the messy jumble of red thread with a resplendent red feather and six dots above its head. The reader playing with the cat’s represented unconscious has been involved in a fantastic comedy!

Frédéric Clement’s *Boutique Tic Tic*: “tactical silence” underlying the links between thread and voice

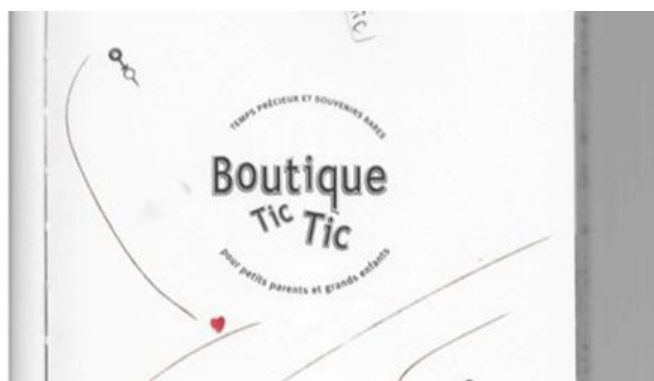


Image 7 de *Boutique Tic Tic*

In the next picture book, my purpose is to show the links between thread and voice when the play on words is introduced on an international level and when a supposed drama is heightened by the problem of translation. “Tactical silence”, as described by Michel de Certeau in *L’écriture de l’histoire* then, as we shall see, is at the heart of the aesthetic enigma. The chosen picture-book in this case is not “nearly wordless”, but rather overtly talkative and resorts to a linear representation of words to suggest the physical flow of time. As one will see, the links with Lewis Carroll’s celebrated tale suggested by the picture on the cover of Clément’s picture-book will come up as a technical pattern or transfer from word to picture.

In fact the story is that of the old keeper of a souvenir shop Monsieur Madeleine (a name reminding us of Victor Hugo’s hero Jean Valjean who, in the novel *Les Misérables*, uses a fake name to hide his criminal past) The man tells how a young girl Rose, the daughter of a seamstress or needlewoman (as one can see a hidden thread is going to be stitched and looms ahead of our critical prospect) is coming to his shop to buy gifts for her friends. After different deals which one can skip (for instance that of “un crin de pégase” (a hair from Pegasus) “un fil de fer blanc” (a tin wire) and of a “labyrinthine library”), she is looking for an extraordinary gift for the birthday of her no less extraordinary friend Miss Alys.

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Image 8 de *Boutique Tic Tic*

The case is difficult as Alys is “une marchande de merveilles” (“a marvel-monger”). The hidden links now can be established with the spirit of Lewis Carroll’s fantasy. Frédéric Clément here is practising “Tactical silence”, what Michel de Certeau calls “a process of poaching on the territory of others.” For Monsieur Madeleine tells Rose how he has been given a silver needle by a young bedouin from the Abu Dhabi desert. As the boy had found the magic object by the light of the moon, a caravan of twelve camels issued from the eye of the needle and “hanging out behind the last camel hung a thread like a thin reedy voice... the thread was muttering a far off song, a song issuing from immemorial times.” (Clément, p.48)

Image 9 de *Boutique Tic Tic*

And more details are given: “The voice was of gold, the needle was of silver And the thread of silk”. (p. 51)

As the next page shows, different deals are concluded between Monsieur Madeleine and Mademoiselle Rose. The girl gives back the old merchant of wonders a grain of sand and, planning to go for a trip around the world, he promises “to lay the sandstone between the teeth of

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Big Ben:
 Who
 Will stop for a long
 Long
 Long
 LONG
 Minute of silence
 In memory
 Of the memories
 Which spin along
 Spin along
 Spin along (p. 57)

Here the happy reader no doubt will be reminded of Lewis Carroll's "Long Tale" of the Mouse in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, Macmillan, 1865, p. 36) when the written lines twist like a tail through a play on words.

morning I've
 nothing to do.'
 Said the mouse
 to the cur,
 'Such a trial,
 dear Sir, With
 no jury or
 judge, would
 be wasting
 our breath.'

Frédéric Clément's picture book is ending on a desultory twist of the thread of thought, and on one last malicious understatement founded on this unexpected play on words that:

Spin along
 Spin stories
 Able to make the Earth and heads spin
 To spin pages
 Merry-go-rounds
 girl dresses
 and balls
 On the boy's fingers (Clément, 2018, p.59)

The red thread in such books leads to the knowledge of something new as in the picture book *Le Fil d'Ariane* (Ariadne's Thread) by Jan Bajtik. The thread is an archetype for the search of truth and

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love facing the dark forces and the secrecy of unconscious powers. Graphic poetry thus resorts to understatement and to implied knowledge and we hope that this aesthetic trend has been largely shown in the preceding pages.

Our Ariadne Thread



Image 10 couverture du *Fil d'Ariane*

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