"Let's Get Puppeting": Rethinking Reading with a Young Child as Multisensory Engagement

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Abstract

This article examines reading with young children as a multisensory, embodied process of engagement. Drawing on Robin Bernstein's concept of "the scriptive thing" – an object that invites meaningful bodily behaviours that its maker may or may not have envisioned – it analyses *The Gruffalo Puppet Book* (2021) by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler, alongside a video of five-year-old Ela reading the book. The article compares the puppet book with the original *The Gruffalo* (1999) in order to explore how the young reader's multisensory engagement with the book's script rescripts the book as both a narrative and a material object. By bringing multimodal composition into dialogue with multisensory engagement, the article argues that interactivity is a key facet of reading – or, more broadly, of engaging with – material and cultural objects, affording readers the agency to rewrite their scripts.

Keywords: picturebooks, multisensory engagement, multimodality, embodied reading, materiality, children's literature, *The Gruffalo Puppet Book*

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MAUREEN HOSAY[1]

"When I think of books read in childhood …
they glow somehow with an almost supernatural intensity of life
that no adult book could ever effect."
Anne Carson, *Decreation* (2005)

Introduction

In a 2011 interview, acclaimed picturebook author Julia Donaldson was vocal about turning her picturebooks into eBooks: "if everyone just says yes to there being an ebook of everything, there is a danger they could take over" (Rustin 2011). It may come as a surprise for an author who has built an empire of uber-successful picturebooks, adaptations and merchandise items. This begs the question of how exactly eBooks stand out in this multimedia landscape. Donaldson herself elucidates this in a later comment made on the *Alice in Wonderland* eBook:

> There's a button the child can press to make [Alice's] neck stretch, and I thought, well, if the child's doing that, they are not going to be listening or reading … they're just going to be fiddling with this wretched button. (Rustin 2011)

It is clear from Donaldson's comment that she does not take kindly to such "reading" practices, which she deems parasitic. However, they seem to me an integral part of a child's reading experience, one that we – if we search our memory – probably all have. I was around six-years old when I came across a Batman illustrated sound book on my cousin's bookshelf. One of the buttons featured the face of the Joker and, once pressed, let out a high-pitched and menacing laugh. Back

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then, I barely read the story or looked at the illustrations, busy as I was pressing the button over and over again, feeling in equal parts terrified and fascinated. Was this the expected way of engaging with the book? Likely not. But it was mine. For the six-year-old that I was, "fiddling with the wretched button" ended up being a lasting reading experience, one that – by suggesting the threatening presence of the Bat's antagonist – successfully instilled a lasting sense of fear in me.

This anecdote illustrates the tension between picturebooks as scripts for a performance, or "scriptive things" after Robin Bernstein (2011, 71–72), and the audience's idiosyncratic, unpredictable and unruly engagement with them. In this article, I examine this tension in terms of multimodal scripts on the one hand, and of multisensory engagement on the other. Picturebooks are multimodal scripts for performances insofar as they make meaning through the combination of more than one semiotic resource, or "mode" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001), such as illustrations, text, moving parts, textures and sounds. Despite these rich and diverse modalities, much of the scholarly focus remains on text-image combinations (see, for instance, Sipe 2012; Nikolajeva and Scott 2001; Painter et al. 2013). As a result, scholars such as Macarena García-González and Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak (2020), Margaret Mackey (2016), Natalia Kucirkova (2024), and Radel Gacumo et al. (2024) lament the neglect of materiality in the field of children's literature, which still sees texts as predominantly discursive, "that is, in terms of their coded meanings and not as material elements of the world that produces [sic] and participates [sic] in processes and relationships involving the human and non-human" (García González and Deszcz-Tryhubczak 2020, 48). In that respect, I adopt Natalia Kucirkova's innovative "multisensory engagement" framework, which seeks to "transcend […] the print-digital reading dichotomy" and highlight senses that benefit from less scholarly attention in spite of their key role in early education, such as olfaction and gustation (2024, 95; Gacumo et al. 2024).

The starting point of my analysis is *The Gruffalo Puppet Book* (Donaldson and Scheffler 2021), based on *The Gruffalo* picturebook (Donaldson and Scheffler 1999), and a YouTube video of a young reader's engagement with it. In my analysis, I first provide a comparison between how the picturebook and the puppet book convey the feeling of fear. Then, I carry out a close reading of the puppet book focusing on the discursive and material elements involved in the creation of fear. I follow this by observing how a young reader, Ela, engages with the puppet book as a discursive and material object. I specifically zoom in on her engagement with the parts of the book conveying fear and unpack how her idiosyncratic cognitive and physical engagement proposes an alternative reading of the book. Through this case study, I demonstrate the benefit of a more holistic approach to picturebooks, one that joins two complementary approaches – the picturebook as a product and

the picturebook as a process – and that includes the audience's body and agency in order to gain a deeper understanding of how they work.

Picturebooks as Multimodal Scriptive Things and Multisensory Processes of Engagement

In her monograph *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011), Robin Bernstein defines a "scriptive thing" as follows:

> A scriptive thing, like a playscript, broadly structures a performance while allowing for agency and unleashing original, live variations that may not be individually predictable. Items of material culture script in much the same sense that literary texts mean: neither a thing nor a poem (for example) is conscious or agential, but a thing can invite behaviors that its maker did and did not envision, and a poem may produce meanings that include and exceed a poet's intentions. To describe elements of material culture as "scripting" actions is not to suggest that things possess agency or that people lack it, but instead to propose that agency emerges through constant engagement with the stuff of our lives. (Bernstein 2011, 12)

Scriptive things, therefore, invite or prompt a performance rather than impose it. In the case of picturebooks, they propose a script for a reading(-aloud) performance that includes gestures, facial expressions, and voices. However, the audience is free to disregard the proposed script and instead, to come up with new ways of engaging with the picturebook. What makes picturebooks a particularly interesting site for the study of scripted engagement and audience engagement is their multimodal dimension.

Literary scholars have argued that there is no such thing as a monomodal text (Gambier 2006; Gibbons 2012; Adami and Ramos Pinto 2020), substituting the monomodal-multimodal binary for a scale, as "some […] works are certainly more multimodal than others" (Tomalin 2020, 137). As a case in point, even texts that are "ostensibly purely linguistic" possess a distinctive layout and typography (Kaindl 2013, 257). In that context, picturebooks are highly multimodal products, combining written text, images, speech (when they are read aloud). They also present unique material features that shape the reading (e.g. flaps, tabs, pop-up elements). Their scripts, therefore, arise from the combinations of these modes. For instance, the layout of a picturebook page combining written text and illustrations can script a certain reading pace:

> Depicting at least one moment on the verso and one on the facing recto compresses the progression of time so that the reader moves along from one moment to the next in the space of one doublespread. On the other hand, art that crosses the gutter creates the perception of expanding a given moment in time as it invites the reader to linger on the larger picture. (Dowd Lambert 2018, 29)

While this may encourage the audience to pace their reading in a certain way, the scripts are not imposed. Some readers may, therefore, disregard the expansion of time created by the layout and read the lines quickly.

The multimodal quality of picturebooks means that the engagement of audience members will call on and be processed through different sensory channels (e.g. sight, hearing, touch) and combine into a multisensory experience. In the context of children's literature, the emphasis on senses and materiality is particularly important. For a young audience, especially one that cannot yet read, picturebooks are a material object before they are a discursive one: they will feel, move, smell, taste, hear, and see the book before they will be able to decipher its written content.

Even when focusing solely on picturebooks, "reading" entails a variety of actions that involve the reader's entire body. In a 1982 study on the "early development of literacy", Margaret Meek finds that infants will primarily engage *around* the book, which includes such activities as

> turning pages of board books, squealing and slapping a favorite picture with enjoyment, initiating a story-time by climbing into a caregiver's lap with book in tow, carrying favorite books about, unhurried enjoyment of a story-time with caregiver, rocking or bouncing to the rhythm of poems or nursery songs. (Meek qtd. in. Herb and Willoughby-Herb 1985, 86)

In light of that, Lian Beveridge's broader definition of "reading" picturebooks as "engaging with the words, the pictures, the concepts, or the physical nature of the book" (2017, 19) accounts for what actually goes on when we read with a young audience. Such a definition also dispels the belief according to which literacy is exclusively a cerebral and visual act. In defining "literacy", D.W. Tuttle proposes that reading "could be defined better as the recognition, interpretation, and assimilation of the ideas represented by symbolic material, whether it is displayed visually, tactilely, or aurally" (Tuttle qtd. in Rubery 2016, 18). This broadened definition of "literacy" finds echo in Paul Duncum's concept of "multiliteracy," a term that he coined in order "to unpack contemporary visual culture, to incorporate other communicative modes" (Duncum 2004, 253). In that way,

multiliteracy accounts for the audience's multisensory engagement with multimodal products (including, but not limited to, picturebooks).

Reading understood more largely as engagement better accounts for the multisensory and embodied experience of children with picturebooks. In that context, Kucirkova's "sensory reading" (and more largely "sensory engagement") approach is particularly useful. She defines sensory reading as a "hybrid reading through readers' sensory engagement with texts", thus decentering "dominant reading modes (particularly the linguistic and visual modes) in early childhood" (Kucirkova 2024, 95). Mackey, in her study of the Peppa Pig franchise, explains:

> A child who takes a plush Peppa Pig to bed every night will have a haptic and proprioceptic sense of the character to add to available visual information. Similarly, a child who manipulates the plastic Pig family will have a strong muscle memory of fitting them into their vehicles, but with a different set of tactile associations. To a lesser degree (perhaps depending on the child), wearing Peppa Pig clothing may also alter the child's kinesthetic sense of the story. (Mackey 2018, 181)

This example illustrates how multimodal products of children's literature offer a wide range of multisensory engagement to their audience, inviting haptic and kinesthetic explorations alongside cognitive engagement. In the section that follows, I examine the multimodal scripts of *The Gruffalo Puppet Book* through the lens of the audience's multisensory engagement and their ability to rescript the scripts through it.

The *Gruffalo*, scripted and rescripted

To illustrate how the script of a picturebook may be rescripted through the audience's engagement, I propose to examine a young reader's reading of *The Gruffalo Puppet Book*. "The Gruffalo Puppet Book read by Ela," is an almost 6 minute-long YouTube video posted on the account "Ela and Bella" on 25th October 2021. In it, Ela, a 5 year-old girl, is filmed by her mother reading the *Gruffalo Puppet Book*. The aim of the video, as stated in its description, is for Ela to share her journey of learning to read with other children her age.

Examining a young reader's multisensory engagement with a picturebook provides valuable insight into how multimodally constructed meaning is received. Ela's reading is better described as a multisensory engagement through which she gains and enacts agency. Such an analysis provides

a more complete understanding of how picturebooks work "in action," as products involved in a dynamic multisensory process of meaning-making and meaning-taking.

In the discussion below, I first describe the puppet book and salient features in more depth, then address Ela's reading of the picturebook, focusing specifically on the "instruction" portions of the book, that is to say when the reader is instructed to interact with the Gruffalo puppet.

The picturebook as a scriptive thing

The Gruffalo is a 1999 picturebook written by acclaimed British author Julia Donaldson and illustrated by her long-term partner-in-crime Axel Scheffler. The story introduces the reader to a little brown mouse taking an idle stroll through the deep, dark wood. On her way, she meets three deceivingly sympathetic predators: the fox, the owl, and the snake. As each one of them invites her to a lunch of which she might very well be the main ingredient, the mouse manages to escape by mentioning that she already has lunch plans with the made-up "Gruffalo". She then proceeds to describe the Gruffalo in the scariest possible terms, effectively scaring each predator away. As if repeating its name three times had summoned him, she ends up coming across the abovementioned creature halfway through the story. Once again, the mouse narrowly escapes her fate by pretending that *she* is the scariest creature in the wood. Skeptical at first, the Gruffalo nonetheless agrees to follow the mouse through the forest and see for himself, as each of the three predators recoil at the sight of the giant monster standing behind the little mouse.

The narrative of the picturebook is built in a symmetrical manner: the mouse first encounters each animal once by herself, lies about the Gruffalo to protect herself, describes the Gruffalo to the animal, and scares him away. Once she has come across the Gruffalo, they both meet each animal once more (in reverse order), who runs away, terrified at the sight of the Gruffalo. Even though the Gruffalo is verbally and visually presented as a scary and dangerous creature at first, he turns out to be gullible and cowardly. Deceived by the mouse, he runs away in a panic, convinced that she will eat him. The story ends like it started, with the mouse wandering in the wood. The picturebook has remained a fan-favorite of read-aloud sessions thanks to the playful rhymes and rhythm of the text, and bold colorful illustrations.

The Gruffalo Puppet Book, which came out in 2021, is an abridged and rewritten version of the story that features a hand-size puppet of the *Gruffalo* poking out of the middle of each page, including the front cover. This central material feature has repercussions on the narrative: while the Gruffalo in the picturebook only appears in person halfway through the story, he is present from the start of the story in the puppet book, thus undermining the anticipation building up to

his reveal. In this version, each double spread focuses on *his* encounter with one animal (fox, owl, snake), whom he scares away with one of his monstrous features (e.g. terrible claws, orange eyes, poisonous wart). The book is much shorter: it consists of only five pages. In the first three, the text follows the same structure: [Animal] is frightened/afraid/scared of [Gruffalo feature] + instruction to interact with the feature + Away you speed/fly/slide [animal]!

Unlike in the picturebook, none of these lines of text are indicated between quotation marks in the puppet book, thus suggesting that they are all uttered by the narrator. This means that the puppet book doesn't script lines for the Gruffalo, rendering him mute and undermining his potentially threatening presence. Though the puppet book text does not rhyme like the picturebook text does, it retains a somewhat playful quality, for instance in the words related to fear creating near alliterations: fox is frightened, owl is afraid, and snake is scared.

Throughout the story, the book addresses the readers six times. Five times to give them instructions related to the puppet: "Can you wave the Gruffalo's arms?", "Can you scratch the Gruffalo's nose?", "Can you tickle the Gruffalo's purple prickles?", "Can you make the Gruffalo shiver and shake?", and "Give him a cuddle". And once to ask them whether or not they are afraid of the Gruffalo. These instructions suggest that the audience plays a larger role in the progression of the story than merely turning the pages, as the picturebook script interactions between the audience and the Gruffalo puppet. The puppet being front-facing literally and figuratively breaks the fourth wall, thus further merging the space of the book and that of the audience.

Zooming in on the instructions to the audience, two out of the five invite the readers to act *as* the Gruffalo (wave and shake) and the remaining three invite the readers to act *towards* the Gruffalo (scratch, tickle, cuddle). In spite of frightening the fox, the owl, and the snake with his supposedly scary features, none of the related instructions are threatening: the arms do not reach out or grab, they wave. The nose is touched, thus downplaying the threat of the poisonous wart. His back is tickled, suggesting that the prickles are neither sharp nor prickly. The way in which the audience is instructed to interact with the Gruffalo is more akin to an interaction with a pet than with a scary creature. This pet-like quality is reinforced by its soft material, which further tones down the threat he represents: his claws, teeth, horns, and prickles, which are supposed to be sharp and terrible, are soft and bendable. By nature, the puppet also does not have legs, rendering the Gruffalo unable to move past a limited radius. Because of its texture, the puppet will over time acquire a familiar smell, just like a cuddly toy or comfort blanket would. This creates a contrast between the Gruffalo as a threatening creature and the Gruffalo as a friendly and familiar companion.

The puppet book, therefore, through its narrative and material qualities casts the Gruffalo as a fairly tame and passive character. The role reversal of the Gruffalo from scary monster to tame creature is further solidified by the final question to the audience: "Are you afraid of the Gruffalo?" to which they are encouraged to say a loud and clear "NO!" The audience is then told to give the Gruffalo a cuddle, completing the role reversal and presenting the Gruffalo as friendly and non-threatening, and the audience as brave and fearless.

By virtue of its nature and design, the puppet allows the audience to have a direct and embodied experience of the Gruffalo and of his supposedly scary features. When the picturebook showed these features, the puppet, designed with different types of material for different features (e.g. felt claws and teeth, synthetic hairs, soft body), encourages a tactile exploration. In this way, it bridges the physical distance between the audience and the character, replacing fear with playfulness, complicity, and even intimacy. The instructions further invite the audience to play an active part in the narrative, both as the Gruffalo and as a character in their own right. The material and discursive rewriting of the book into a puppet book, therefore, accentuates the readers' fearlessness, bravery, and compassion.

Ela's reading



YouTube video of Ela reading *The Gruffalo Puppet Book*.

In her reading video, Ela, 5 years old, is filmed by her mother reading *The Gruffalo Puppet Book*. Ela seems to understand that the video is filmed for a YouTube audience, as suggested by her addressing them as "everyone" and "guys" a few times, and referring to the comment section. The camera stays on Ela for most of the video (in a middle shot, except for one zoom in on the book cover at the end), and her mother is never seen (but heard twice, to help with difficult words). Ela is sitting on a small chair against a pink wall (presumably in her bedroom or play room; see figure).[1]

Ela reads the title of the book first, noticing and acknowledging that it is a "puppet" book. She places an emphasis on it through her rising pitch and enthusiastic tone of voice. As she turns

[1] I would like to thank Ela and her mother. Ela's mother gave written consent for the screenshot to be used in this way and was supportive of my study of Ela's reading.

the book around to show the hand opening for the puppet, she tells the camera: "This is a puppet, and you might notice … the word puppet in … the story name, yeah, so let's get pupping! I mean puppeting the story." This statement indicates that Ela is aware of the particular feature of this Gruffalo story, and that her reading will involve more than deciphering words: it will also involve "pupping/puppeting" the story, that is to say act it out with the puppet.

Because Ela is learning to read, her reading sometimes involves breaking down words into letters or syllables. When she is more comfortable, however, her reading presents a lot of pitch and tone variations, as she puts emphasis on some words, even sings some, and speaks as the characters. Though her reading is interesting and informative in more ways than one, I will primarily focus on her responses to the instructions the book provides in relation to the puppet and the scripts related to fear.

Upon receiving the instruction to "wave the Gruffalo's arms", Ela immediately adopts a cheerful tone, turning the book towards the camera and smiling, exclaiming: "He's gonna say 'hi' to you!" She then looks at the puppet (which is still facing the camera) and, in a high-pitched voice, speaks as the Gruffalo: "Hi everyone, my name's Gruffalo". Within the narrative, the instruction to wave the arms of the Gruffalo aims at showing off his claws, causing the fox to run away. The text on the double spread reads:

> Oh help! Oh no!
> Who's afraid of the Gruffalo?
> Fox is frightened of those terrible claws.
>
> Can you wave the Gruffalo's arms? Away you speed, Fox.

However, Ela understands the instruction as a greeting sign, and makes the Gruffalo wave at the audience and introduce himself. This already casts the Gruffalo as more friendly than expected based on the script of the puppet book.

Ela then gets back into her reading position with the book on her lap. Upon reading "Away you speed, Fox," she waves the Gruffalo's arms some more, this time to mimic his attempt at grabbing the fox, understanding the "wave" motion differently after reading about its consequence. The position of the fox illustration directly under the puppet reinforces this association. She then turns the book back towards the audience and says: "Let's try to catch him, guys watch if I can catch him, oh my hand, arrr, got him!" as she moves the puppet's hands downwards at the fox illustration. She concludes this interaction with: "Got him to my yummy tummy, yum, yum yum",

gesturing the puppet hands towards the Gruffalo's belly. While the Gruffalo scares the fox away in the story, Ela initially understands the instruction as waving (greeting the audience), then – after reading further – as reaching-catching (the fox), and belly patting (eating the fox). She first establishes a friendly connection between the audience and the Gruffalo, then includes the audience as witnesses and accomplices in the catching of the fox (using "we"). This results in the Gruffalo going from a friendly creature to a threatening monster in one breath.

Before she reads the next page (featuring the owl), Ela notices that the default mode of the puppet is to look towards the reader. She engages with this material feature by interacting with the Gruffalo puppet as herself, playfully making the Gruffalo look at her then look away. She glances towards the camera with a pout of surprise on her face, asking "Why is he looking at me?" In doing so, Ela breaks the fourth wall (as scripted by the position of the puppet), acknowledging his presence beyond the bounds of the book and isolating the puppet as a toy that can be moved and interacted with regardless of the picturebook in which it is embedded. She then makes the Gruffalo look at her and away a few more times in quick succession before announcing "'kay I just talk the book",[2] and returning to her reading.

When the time comes to scratch the Gruffalo's nose, Ela interprets the second instruction ("Scratch the Gruffalo's nose") as being directed at the puppet, like the first one was. As a result, she struggles somewhat to make the Gruffalo scratch his own nose because "his arms can't reach it, his arm's too short", instead of scratching it with her own fingers, like the text suggests. She finally presses the Gruffalo's hand down on his nose and shows the camera "he's touching it, he-he". In a similar fashion, to the instruction "tickle the Gruffalo's back", Ela tries to make the Gruffalo puppet tickle its own back, instead of doing it herself: "Guys let's see if he can touch it, he's trying … he's trying both hands … he did it with both hands I think, see". She then corrects this statement, in the Gruffalo's voice (this time, in a low-pitched voice), stating: "it's actually one hand, not both", to which Ela asks: "Are you sure?" making the Gruffalo nod in reply, commenting "See, he says yes to us".

Perhaps because the first instruction is to be carried out *as* the Gruffalo and because the puppet has moveable arms, Ela assumes that the other two also ought to be. This makes the Gruffalo more active in her own performance than scripted in the picturebook (in which the Gruffalo is mostly the passive recipient of the audience's actions). Ela's decision to carry out the action as the Gruffalo doing something to himself as opposed to Ela doing something to the Gruffalo creates a fertile ground for interactions between her and the character, in which she

[2] This part is not entirely intelligible, but Ela presumably indicates that she is done playing with the puppet, as she promptly returns to her reading.

comments on his actions with the audience, and reacts as the Gruffalo to what she is saying. This establishes a parallel story, in which Ela and the Gruffalo interact fairly independently from the picturebook's narrative.

During his encounter with the mouse, the Gruffalo is made to shiver and shake. Ela moves him around before asking the audience to vote in the comments[3] whether he should shake forcefully or gently, producing both movements as illustration. Her question draws attention to the interpretative potential that the puppet book offers through its interactive dimension. Ela has already shown a degree of departure from the picturebook script, and shows that an individual's interpretation of the story – both as how they understand it and how they perform it – can rescript the story. She makes this choice explicit in this passage of the video by asking the audience how they would want the Gruffalo to perform the shivering.

On the final page, on which the audience is asked whether or not they are afraid of the Gruffalo, Ela reads the "NO!" loudly and emphatically as scripted by the font size, capitalization and exclamation mark. To the instruction to give the Gruffalo a cuddle, Ela says "He's gonna cuddle me, no I'm not gonna cuddle him", thus rejecting the book's script and proposing an alternative in which the Gruffalo is, once again, more active. She proceeds to bring the book close to her face, and says: "See guys, I told you", thus making it look like the Gruffalo is hugging Ela('s face) rather than the other way around. Just like with the two prior instructions, Ela performs as the Gruffalo rather than as herself, giving him more agency and a more active role. In doing so, she also carves a space in the narrative to interact with him in more extensive, meaningful and playful ways than scripted in the picturebook. She eventually carries this playfulness outside of the story: after closing the book, Ela waves the camera goodbye, then makes the Gruffalo wave and say "Bye, I'll miss you" as the camera zooms in on him, thus returning to the Gruffalo's initial friendly disposition when he waved the audience "hello" at the beginning of her reading. In doing so, she also establishes a bond and a familiarity with the story, incentivizing a return to the Gruffalo who will miss "us". This return to friendliness also foregrounds the playful nature of the story told by the book and retold by Ela: this is all an act, a performance that arises through the engagement of the reader with the book's narrative and material dimensions.

[3] Ela says "below" and points down to refer to the YouTube comment section, likely inspired by other YouTubers doing so. However, the comment section is automatically turned off on YouTube Kids.

Conclusion

Books for children are highly multimodal insofar as they tell stories visually, aurally, as well as through their material features. In doing so, they underscore the importance of each mode in the creation of meaning. This renders hierarchy between modes and binary frameworks (e.g. verbal-paraverbal, verbal-non-verbal) obsolete, as they do not adequately address the rich modal interplays within picturebooks. A multimodal framework also acknowledges but goes beyond the common focus on the text-image relationship in picturebooks by drawing attention to modes of meaning making that remain understudied such as smells and textures, as well as by treating the book as both a discursive and a material object.

Reading, especially with and as a young child, involves a variety of cognitive and material acts. The short study of Ela's engagement with the Gruffalo puppet book confirms Bernstein's hypothesis that multimodal scripts suggest rather than impose ways of engaging with items of material culture such as picturebooks. In that respect, the young audience's multisensory engagement with picturebooks provides valuable insights into the audience's multisensory engagement with multimodal products, as well as their cognitive and physical patterns of engagement, thematic and ideological preoccupations and sensory experiences.

Understanding multimodal composition and multisensory engagement as two sides of the same coin contributes to a more holistic approach to picturebooks, one that does not establish hierarchies between modes of meaning, and that highlights both the cognitive and the embodied quality of reading with a child. While the video of Ela's reading is one example of audience engagement, it underscores the relevance and necessity of approaching picturebooks not only as scripted multimodal products, but also as dynamic processes of audience engagement in order to better understand reading as a process that goes well beyond deciphering words on a page and that encompasses a broad range of sensory experiences.

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