



Universidad de Valladolid

TEORIA DE LA ARQUITECTURA
y PROYECTOS ARQUITECTONICOS
Avd. de Salamanca 18 tlf 983 42 34 56
47014 VALLADOLID fax 983 42 34 25

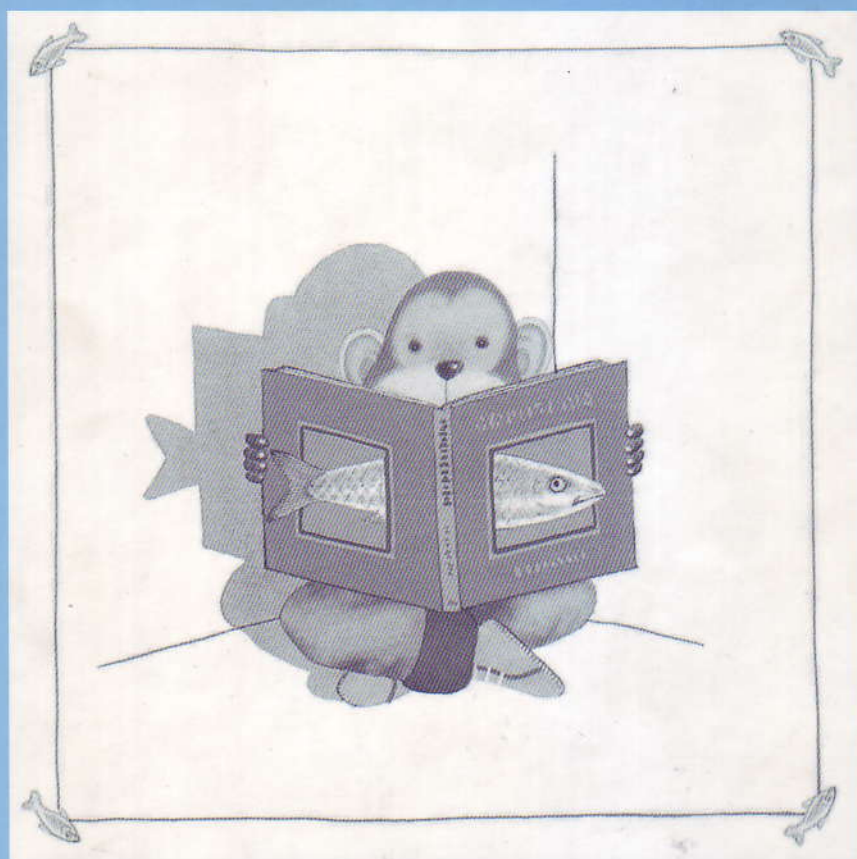
Fernando Zapaín Hernández
Profesor Titular de Proyectos Arquitectónicos
zaparin@arq.uva.es

ZAPARAÍN Fernando

"Off-Screen: The Importance of Blank Space" (capítulo XII)

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EDITED BY TERESA COLOMER,
BETTINA KÜMMERLING-MEIBAUER,
AND CECILIA SILVA-DÍAZ

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Chapter Twelve

Off-Screen

The Importance of Blank Space

Fernando Zaparaín

Picturebooks are comprised, initially with text and images as *represented sequential enunciation*. These, however, are achieved using *graphic ellipsis*: this refers to that related to enunciation, which representation avoids, due to the selective nature of the *frame* and the discontinuity between images required for serialization. *Off-screen* is a spatial ellipsis which excludes a scenic portion (characters, decoration, sound or atmosphere) which is significant for the story (e.g., Gómez 2003). Strictly speaking, any unframed reality would remain *off-screen* with regard to the selected one; however, in this case the concealment of the known or knowable that can have a relationship with the story is the only aspect of interest. As such, it would be more appropriate to speak of a process of *metonymy* with regard to the representation of the whole with one part, since in *off-screen* the blank space in itself is not used but rather how it relates to what has been selected. In addition to verifying the succinctness of means obvious throughout the selection, an attempt will be made to define *off-screen*, to ascertain how it is established and to determine under what conditions it has greater narrative effect.

Blank Space and Connotation. Definition of Off-Screen

The capacity of the blank space to add tension to and form the plastic object was theorized by Heidegger during the small conference in 1969 entitled *Die Kunst und der Raum* (Heidegger 1970). It was there that the Aristotelian concept of *space* as *place* was taken up again, generated by the relationship between shapes (an issue already experienced by cubism), compared to

platonic previous space and then Cartesian space in which things are located (e.g., Van de Ven 1981). It was emphasized that *space* means *creating space*, opening a clearing in the forest in order to live, generating a vacuum where relationships take place. It was stressed that it is the absence¹ which, paradoxically, allows that something is possible there, which realizes what is missing and what is not, of the tensions between things just as a bridge evokes the other riverbank even if we do not cross over to it. These reflections can be applied to the *off-screen* inherent in visual narration because this *scenic absence* generates expectations and, as a partial representation, invites diegetic progress, just like the girl in Dyan Sheldon's and Gary Blythe's *The Whale's Song* (1991) promises infinite horizons of adventure when she gazes beyond the page.

On the other hand, blank space and absence are conveyed in the image by their very existence.² As revealed by Barthes in his seminal study *La chambre claire* (1980),³ image is quite precise in its *denotation* of reality by functioning as its *analogue*. However, at the same time, the image is partial and imprecise because it can be interpreted in various ways (*polysemy*) or because there may be many signs for reflecting the same reality (*metaphor*). As such, in order to guarantee the narration, the sequence of images is not sufficient and a text is required, at least implicitly, which annotates the interpretation. As a result, picturebooks work within this limit between *polysemy*, which makes the image suggestive, and *connotation* which the image receives from the context into which it is inserted and from the text it accompanies. *Ellipsis*, and with it *off-screen*, are intended to reduce information to a maximum to leave the reader with space however without depriving him of the minimum information required to make the story work. Absences, by emphasising expectation, push the story to the forefront.

Cut. Establishing Off-Screen

The processes of visual selection and the subsequent narrative exploded view require the reality to be segmented. Given that we cannot cover the continuity of what is real, with the *ellipsis* of the *representation* we choose the minimum number of fragments which allow reconstructing a story however without the meaning of the story being lost. In our mental discourse there is a need to proceed in parts, a division prior to the physical cut which is typical of the medium (Virilio 1998). In picturebooks, the establishment of a *frame* or *window* is the founding act through which the representation chooses the significant portions and confronts them with those rejected. It consists of a *cut* with its subsequent *montage*, either when creating the page with the frame (*internal montage*) or when sequencing various pages (*external montage*) (Sánchez-Biosca). This immediately generates the *shot* of the selected portion that in turn leaves the rest *off-screen*. This action, initially spatial and paradoxical, goes beyond mere scenic segregation and achieves subjective, temporal and

narrative effects as is clearly shown in a page of Anthony Brown's *Voices in the Park* (1998) the frame of which includes Charles who looks beyond the left-hand margin where a future friend is suggested and who is now only recognisable from some pieces of clothing. Many pages later this friend, Sunshine, will continue *off-screen*, however, her presence will become clear because we will see the inverse angle of the previous scene with her eyes.

Frame and Phantasmatic Cube. Off-Screen Modalities

The *frame* segregates and generates a *virtual* space, which does not only include what is shown however what is suggested as well (Rowe 1978). Through a spatial *ellipsis*, *off-screen* allows building settings which do not exist without actually implementing them physically (Espuelas 1998). The important spatial contribution of the *frame* or *window* is that by dividing, it reunites four realities dialectically: the understood *object*, the hidden *object*, the *subject* perceiving it, and the *mechanism* employed to enclose the world (to *rationalize* it). As such, an artificial system superimposes the real one until analysing it and repurposing it subjectively. There is a transition from mere observation to the narrative. The visual experience generates the so-called *phantasmatic cube* (Burch 1985), which is a focal pyramid originating from the observer, with six sides to which a seventh could be added: the sound in *off* (Vila 1997). The different narrative points of view existing in this scenic exploded view are summarized in the *general perceptive scopic diagram* here enclosed.

The most *objective* area is the *shot* that is included in the selection. The *external off-screens* are created by comparison, i.e., areas that have not entered inside the frame however about which we are informed and which would appear if the framing were varied sufficiently. The *objective external off-screen*, is comprised of the elements nearest to the *shot* itself, or the parts of it which do not fit in the window. Moreover, since we are aware that there is an observer; his non visible world presents itself in the *subjective off-screen*. If we move further back from the observer, the *mise en abyme* appears, associated with the omniscient narrator who can observe the observer and what he is looking at in order to perform a *making off* and reveal the complete production mechanism. However, even in the *shot* itself there may be areas which are not visible which we will refer to as *internal off-screen*, suggested by the *square within the square* (windows, doors, books or mirrors) or hidden by other objects in the *shot* depending on their *depth*.

This entire mechanism is, for example, conveyed well in *Las Meninas* of Velázquez. The *shot* is the room; however some areas remain in the *external objective off-screen* such as the walls which we partially see. The mirror reflects the *subjective off-screen*, which is the area of the kings in which we should also appear. The windows, doors and squares conceal other possible

horizons, thus creating an *internal off-screen*. Moreover, everything is subjected to *mise en abyme* through the inclusion of the painter himself and the canvas frame.

In picturebooks, in addition to the *off-screen* inside the *frame*, another *interstitial off-screen* must be considered due to the *sequence*. It is the blank paper and the turn of the page which separates two consecutive images.

All of the aforementioned can be summarized into the following classification:

frame	external off-screen	between shot and off-screen	objective	what is not seen of the observed
			subjective	what is not seen of the observer
			abyss	what is not seen of the system
	internal off-screen	within the shot		what is not seen of the shot
	sonorous off-screen			what is not seen but is heard/read
sequence	interstitial off-screen	between shot and shot		the shots which are not seen

Once the various modalities of the *off-screen* are narrated we can examine how they are used in the particular language of the picturebooks.

External Objective Off-Screen

It is what is not seen of the observed either because the scene does not refer to it, or because it is momentarily off-scene or because it leaves one part outside the scene. Firstly, it responds to succinctness in the representation that saves giving a total definition of the setting and shows it only with some of its parts. However, more frequently it tries to emphasize a relevant aspect of the story within the general frame. This is the case of close-ups that concentrate on facial expression and do not show the complete figure. When something disappears momentarily from the shot or is only announced with one part, it is possible to push towards a new illustration that will satisfy the expectation created. However the mere absence of something is not enough to makes us aspire to it. If the *objective off-screen* is to be efficient, its absence must be foreseeable and evident for which it will have to be announced beforehand with signs and establishing shots with a portion which is sufficient to completing the whole, such as the seven tails of the *Seven Blind Mice* (1992) by Ed Young.

External Subjective Off-Screen

What is not seen of the observer? Invariably, the viewer is shown by the very selection of a scene as soon as it is observed (Metz 1979). The person watching, due to the physical limitation of the scopic semi-sphere (Gaudreault 1995), cannot be included in his own visual field, however presents itself when opting for a line of sight and also by showing traces of him such as the edge of spectacles or a drawing hand. As we see in *La petite marionette* (1994) by Gabrielle Vincent, the reader can identify himself directly with the observer-narrator or move to the surprising visual location of a doll that comes to life. In all cases his gaze is directed to assign him with a subjective and diegetic value (Nodelman 1988). This subtle presence of the gaze is one of the main instruments of the cliffhanger because it turns the viewer into one of the actors. Since the viewer's world is not visible by definition, it is normally shown with successive changes of point of view which make perceptive movement evident and suggest different positions with regard to the story which go from asepsis of an establishing shot up to the implication of seeing through the eyes of the subjective shot.

External Omniscient Off-Screen (Mise en Abyme)

It is what is not seen of the productive system that the observer has around him. Strictly speaking, it is the shift backwards from the *subjective off-screen*, raising the position of the observer and even of the scene, until contemplating the actual apparatus of expression. In this way information is conveyed regarding *representation* and the *mechanism* at the same time. This ensures that the representation includes the devices used to achieve it. The *scene* appears alongside the *obscene* (what is around the *scene*). The points of view are multiplied and the reality is conveyed at the same time, of its formal expression and of the fiction process used to form it and analyse it. The *mise en abyme* usually appears at the end of the visual experience like a trick which returns the viewer to his segregated condition and makes him heave a sigh of relief bringing to mind that it has all only been fiction. It has the character of metalanguage or reflection on the medium itself, typical of the current moment of certain maturity, in which the new authors see themselves obliged to quote increasingly more established classics.

In the *late modern* picturebooks the back pages and flyleaves are privileged areas for discussing the book itself, for remembering some of its best moments or for showing the *other side* of a particular drawing. This is what happens in Lauren Child's *The Princess and the Pea* (2005), a picturebook that always shows its elaboration by using micro-scenes and which in the end shows its authors working in small premises. The framing changes are a

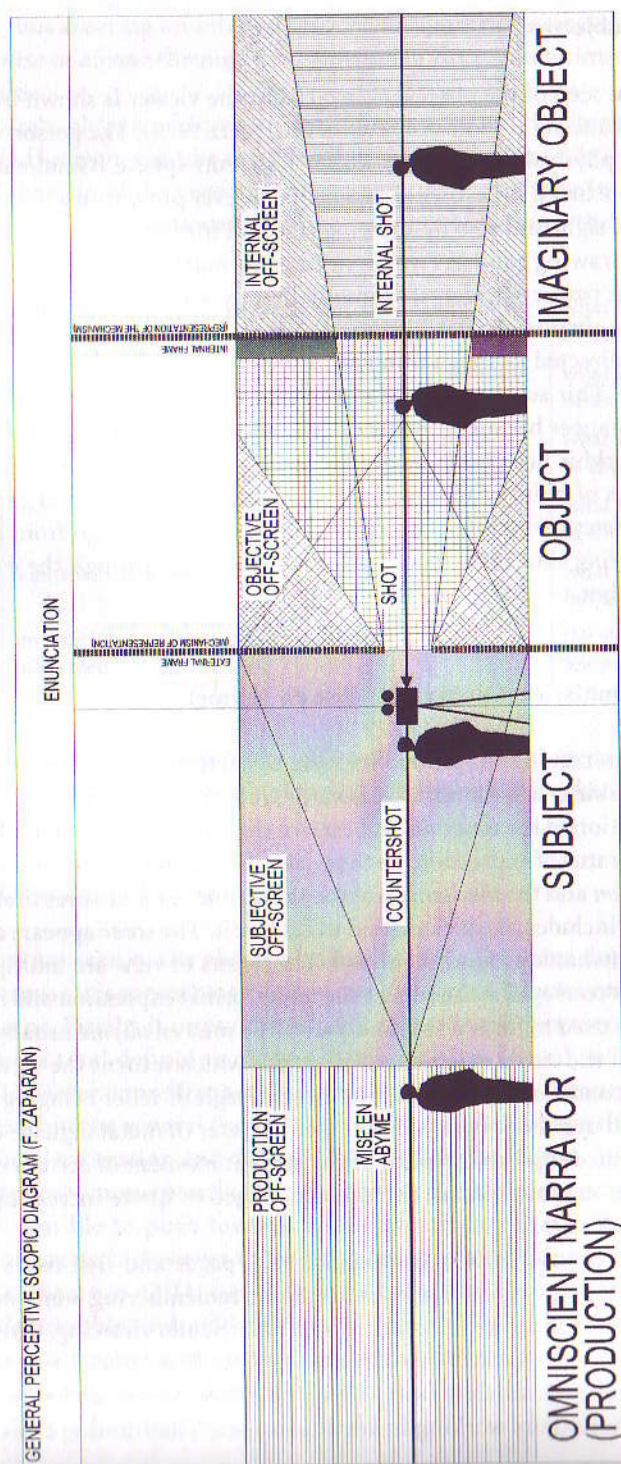


Figure 12.1 Table "General Perceptive Diagram" by Fernando Zaparaín

privileged system for expressing the *mise en abyme* since they reveal new *shots* that were previously hidden. Within these movements the *zoom* backwards is very expressive because it holds the axis of the gaze however increasing its amplitude until covering the scene and the observer, something which can be seen in the picturebooks by Banyai, *Zoom* (1995), *Re-Zoom* (1995) and more recently *The Other Side* (2005). All of these have this mechanism as a theme and each page is converted into the *mise en abyme* of the previous one. A final example of a successive *mise en abyme* would be the masterly vignette by Hergé in *L'Affaire Tournesol* (1956), in which we are aware of the hired assassin who controls how another spy watches his victims.

Internal Off-Screen

This is what is not seen of the shot, a surprising absence because the privileged eye of the observer accepts not seeing beyond the scene however does not expect things to be hidden from him in the scene. This modality introduces the tension of a gap in the space itself in addition to what already exists with regard to the outside world. In this way, it is possible to multiply a scene into various scenes without having to turn the page. A way of producing it is the use of *depth* (Wölfflin 1952) with which the elements from the scene are superimposed hierarchically within the focal pyramid. Some hide others and adjust their presence like the rabbit in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902) by Beatrix Potter which is suggested inside a watering can while Mr McGregor is seen in the background. The *picture inside the picture* (Gorlin 1982, 51) is a rhetoric modality which, through the representation of windows, doors or mirrors, reinforces the general frame with another internal one (Perec 1989). Peter Sis in *Madlenka* (2001) uses a hole in the page to introduce the next one. There are also elements that normally, by appearing within the scene, evoke non-visible worlds. This occurs with steps, boxes or chimneys, however above all with books, letters, maps and drawings which announce another possible story within the one we are experiencing. In this sense, the way in which Hergé⁴ incorporates the story of Sir Francis Haddock by having the head of the current Captain Haddock poking through the painting is unique.⁵

Sonorous Off-Screen (Sound in Off)

In a picturebook, even although no sound is reproduced, its place of origin can be expressed and spaces beyond the page can be defined. This is what happens in the second part of *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* in the version illustrated at the end of the nineteenth century by Kate Greenaway. During such an early period, the illustrator chose a sonorous off-screen to graphically add tension to the revenge of the piper who attracts the village children from faraway with

his music. The children start to move from the left to the right and in the last scenes form a procession which rises above the margins and crosses various pages until joining the piper. The figures are propped up towards the right; they dance and make gestures to capture the notes that are coming from outside the page thus making the reader continue to find the source of the sound. There is no drawn spatial frame. Not even the ground has been represented, it is only guessed at due to the shadows that are projected by the protagonists over the blank paper. In this purified context, and beyond the frame, it is the sound that governs the movements and is made real in our imagination, without the need to have been represented. This example is very rich in content because what is not drawn is capable of moving the narration and providing it with a context. It is perfect for expressing what we can define as *phenomenologic space* (Merleau-Ponty 1975) made of sensations and not of geometric or graphic lines.

Interstitial Off-Screen (Between Shot and Shot)

The off-screens analysed up until now are common to all scenic representations, including painting, as a singular image. However the new kinetic media of expression are formed over various sequenced images although not continuous, separated by a *caesura*, or *interstitial off-screen* which has different physical characteristics in each case. Cinema appears to be continuous, however in reality supports itself on the phenomenon of retinal persistence to link two fixed images with slight variations and, to a greater extent, uses the *phi effect* (Aumont 1992) through which each viewer fills the existing gap between two different attitudes of a character which are fixed in two successive images (Arnheim 1952). Comics use, above all, *the blank space* between vignettes and picturebooks take advantage of the *page-turner* which implies a cut between spaces and situations. Given the choice, this would be the most specific *off-screen* of those considered up until now for our study since it originates as a compulsory consequence of the narrative character.

This can be understood by observing the transition between two pages of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963). Both represent the same room of Max dressed as a wolf at the start of the story.⁶ It could be thought that there is continuity given that the spatial frame remains however, subtly, with the change of page; the room starts to change into a forest. The white edge disappears as we enter further into the world of fantasy until completely disappearing. The physical jump between two images is used to transmit the advance of an interior state of the protagonist, who without moving from his room moves further into an imaginary world. The technique is highly purified given that traditional systems are avoided in order to tell the transition from reality to imagination with changes of color or edges in the shape of a cloud. It is here that the scenic frame is transmuted and the character is kept

inside it however advancing with the book. When turning the page, not only are two different moments described but also two different mental states.

Montage. Functional Conditions of Off-Screen

For the purposes of picturebooks, *off-screen*, although it also economizes resources, is truly rich when it propels the story forward. If something is concealed too much the story disappears, and if it is shown very obviously it is not attractive enough. As such, in the language of visual sequencing the change from one scene to another will be strengthened with the momentary concealment of portions of reality and the promise of accessing them further ahead. It also has to be gauged very well at what moment information is extracted and when it is revealed.

First of all, this narrative dynamism is guaranteed when respecting specific functional conditions originating from our psychology of perception (Montes 1989) that can be summarized in the *general law of perception by expectations*. The human gaze is not automatic but intelligent and selective (Marina 1992). It searches for that which it is interested in according to a preliminary frame of expectations (Gombrich 1961). It meets the sensitive world, loaded with its own programme: it anticipates, prevents, recognizes, interprets, and uses well-known information. In short, we can venture to say that *off-screen* does not function alone and requires a *shot expectation* in order to be efficient.

In addition to respecting the general laws of perception, the *cut* performed with the frame or the sequence must be resolved with a subsequent *montage*. This recomposition is based on the actual laws of visual exploded view, shared by the creator who cuts and the viewer who stitches. The following are some examples:

Law of etc. (Gombrich 1961): In all representation, it is sufficient to mention an initial number of elements so that the viewer is able to complete the whole. This occurs in the book *Jeanne d'Arc* (Boutet de Monvel 1896), whose battles are suggested with partial views of some weapons and combatants in the background.

Laws of continuity (Balló 2000): through which it is easier to associate an image with subsequent images. For example: keeping the coherence of the elements of *atrezzo*, changing the visual axis according to the direction of movement, closing all the initiated argumental arches, gaining support in the sense of reading and page turning. This is something which we can verify by comparing the first drawing of Jane Yolen's and John Schoenherr's *Owl Moon* (1987) with which the book comes to a close. The first drawing, following Ford in *The Searchers*, shows someone framed by the open door and prepared to go out into the snow-covered landscape where the night-time adventure will take place. The last page shows the reverse camera of the initial situation. From outside, this same protagonist returns in her father's arms towards the door

from which she left, which is now a rectangle of light in the night. The important fact is that the scene keeps its initial coherence in spite of many things having occurred. The snow is the same, the bluish night tone remains; the hat, scarf and the boots are the same. The protagonist is now among the bare trees which before could be seen in the distance. The house from which she left reappears in the distance. Even the change in perspective is justified because if on the first page we were leaving the house, it would seem very logical that at the end we return in the opposite direction. Even the point of view is kept.

Laws of symbolic association. The relationship between the things we see and those which are hidden from us can be more subtle and substitute a reality with a symbol (metaphor) already established or specifically created for this work as occurs in *Gewitternacht* (2000) by Michèle Lemieux, where the empty bed creates an internal off-screen to hide the protagonist and to evoke the attempt to lead him to his death when he arrives.

Laws of partial substitution. These are agreements through which a reality is recognized from the moment a part of it is seen (*metonymy*). As such, there is suspense because the appearance of the terrible or mysterious events is delayed. The *print* is emphasized in the visual language among those graphic instruments. It is understood as the sign of the presence of something hidden that is recognized by its shadow, its reflection, its sound or its remains. In Mark Weatherby's *My Dinosaur* (1997) the nighttime arrival of the enormous pet is announced by the projection of a silhouette against the wall. A masterly vignette in *Tintin au Tibet*⁷ reflects the stormy relationship of Haddock with the Yeti however without the latter appearing. An even more difficult feat is that various hours in the life of the Yeti remain frozen against the white support. By following his footprints, we can participate in finding the bottle lost by the captain. Some footprints further ahead we can see the effect of alcohol in the shape of drunkenness and a fall, followed by fleeing unsteadily towards the distant mountain. On the left-hand side of the vignette Haddock is shouting; on the right-hand side his enemy, who has left, is present without having to be represented. From one corner to the other of the drawing, several kilometres of Himalaya are transferred for us to a small frame by the brilliance of an expert. In between, the white immensity of the non-drawing of the snow, which like all blank space invites reading between the lines, guarantees narrative tension and ensures that a picturebook has as many interpretations as the absences which we are able to detect in it.

Notes

1. See Bonitzer (1972) for a thorough analysis of this topic.
2. "Filmique ou non, l'image est toujours incomplète puisqu'elle n'est jamais que la représentation particulière d'un fragment particulier du monde" (Mitry 1990: 93).

3. These ideas also occur in Barthes (2001).
4. See Asouline (1997).
5. Hergé. *Le Secret de la Licorne*. p. 25
6. For a thorough analysis of this picturebook, see Nikolajeva and Scott (2001).
7. Hergé. *Tintin au Tibet*. p. 26.

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