

BOOK REVIEWS

**Performing Kamishibai:
An Emerging New Literacy for a Global Audience**
by Tara McGowan
2015 Hardback
214 pages £95.00
ISBN 9781138851511
Published by Routledge, Abingdon.
Review by Kate Katafiasz, Newman University, UK

This book describes a research project in which Kamishibai (paper-theatre) is used as a learning medium in two very different New Jersey primary school classes. It is an interesting read, full of lively illustrative examples of children's learning. Author Tara McGowan documents and analyses the diverse and sometimes surprising ways in which children across the ability range and their teachers responded to her Kamishibai project. The work aims to appeal cross-culturally—as the title suggests—to educationalists everywhere; in particular perhaps, to those who want to put children in active charge of the relationship between word and image, to which they are so often passively subjected by TV and the Internet. As a drama educator with these concerns myself, I can see Kamishibai adding a rich and interesting performative dimension to my existing stock of inquiry-based learning strategies.

Japan has a history of picture story-telling, which has adapted itself to Benshi silent movie narration, Manga and Animé graphic novels and cartoons. Kamishibai, as McGowan explains is part of this tradition, emerging from the 1930s economic depression as a popular form of street entertainment. Like Haiku poetry, Kamishibai's constrained format seems to liberate the imagination; the story-teller carefully synchronises the verbal part of their tale with illustrations on large picture cards; these are loaded into a wooden structure, half picture frame, half proscenium stage, and removed with panache to reveal, or half reveal, the next instalment of the story in a series of coups de théâtre. These make Kamishibai completely compelling to watch. Children were reputedly prepared to rob their parents to get the money to pay for the next episode of the story!

Part serialised graphic novel, part theatre, part slow shutter speed film, Kamishibai exploits the drama of the staged interruption, which is common to all these art forms, whereby stable relationships between words and images are frequently deliberately compromised. Following VS Ramachandran, McGowan claims these disturbances and the gaps they open up trigger synaesthesia in the onlooker, as the mind mediates between iconic and symbolic modes, making creative, metaphorical associations. This line of thought has the potential to

situate Kamishibai in poststructuralist discourse, and could lead to future studies relating it to a rich seam of intermedial theory; but these ideas are beyond the scope of this book.

McGowan tells us how Kamishibai was appropriated in the post-war period by communist educators, religious missionaries, and military propagandists, many of whom were presumably interested in closing down interpretative gaps to assert their own ideological position. Indeed the dextrous manipulation of word and image does give the story-teller the authority of a very low-tech film editor, which is precisely why Kamishibai is so empowering in the hands of school children.

As the children in McGowan's trials repeatedly testify, performing Kamishibai puts you in charge of signifying processes, which is far more interesting than mimetically reproducing them to pass a test. Part of the pleasure seems to come from learning to tell your own stories really effectively; and McGowan, unlike some of the teachers she works with, is always very respectful of the children's imaginative input, helping them to bring their ideas to life. This is where kinekonic narrative strategies, which take account of image and text in relational flux, can enhance the "fixed" and "boring" aspects of a mono-modal instructional approach to drawing and writing.

Performative drawing and writing, like the gestural brush strokes in Japanese calligraphy, is in Ramachandran's terms "cross modal"; that is to say it considers words, images, and bodies in relation to each other. In doing this it foregrounds knowledge transfer between modes, where learning is consolidated most effectively. These aspects of Kamishibai make it both personal and labour intensive; children are motivated to spend time working hard on their drawing, writing, and speaking skills. McGowan calls this the "Three 'R's of Kamishibai Writing": revision, recursivity, and repertoire. Redrafting is no longer a chore, but becomes as playfully considered as rehearsal. In the right hands the process has an impact on the power relations of the classroom; children collaborate with each other, teachers facilitate rather than instruct, and "less able" children sometimes outshine their conventionally "more able" peers. Interestingly, the Kamishibai process seems to particularly suit children with Asperger's and Autistic Spectrum problems.

This brings me to my own reflections on Kamishibai as a drama educator. Like classroom drama, it highlights what could be seen as the hidden agenda of state-assessed schooling, where teachers feel pressurized to teach to tests, and the learning process becomes inherently passive or receptive. One special needs class teacher McGowan worked with used a microphone, which had the effect of making her children's voices etiolated—they had to be taught to make themselves heard. But a more sophisticated grasp of the dynamics of theatrical signing as it relates to the classroom would not go amiss here. I was surprised McGowan did not make use of Jerome Bruner's Iconic, Symbolic, and Enactive modes of learning, which are clearly very relevant to her practice. It was Bruner's work that led drama educator Dorothy Heathcote to create her extraordinary educational drama hybrid. Heathcote (1991, pp. 160-169) pointed out that looking and speaking use iconic and symbolic modes actively. These activities are often more or less exclusively appropriated by teachers and ideologues; while being monitored and lectured—their less autonomous flip side—are frequently the lot of the school child.

The theatre traditionally shares these activities democratically as does Kamishibai: audiences look and actors speak. But as Heathcote notes, unlike actors, children do not sign up to be stared-at, and this is a problem for Kamishibai. McGowan admits that all the children in her project had to overcome stage fright. Educational drama harnesses the active use of iconic and symbolic modes of learning as Kamishibai does; but unlike Kamishibai, it does so while relieving children of the social pressure of the audience gaze.

Nonetheless, this is a fascinating and well-researched book. McGowan draws our attention to important deficits in traditional “mono modal” education, and presents us with a lively, interesting way of overcoming them.

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