

DIDACTIC ICONOLOGY

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IMAGE

Didactic iconology is the study of images finalised to educating or, strictly speaking, to education. It is connected to the pedagogy of the media, to children's literature, to psychology, to the history of illustration. On the historical level four points of reference define the profile of this field of study. In particular, the communicative force of the images finds outside of school the best terrain in which to

express its didactic potential, through a multi-media network that accompanies the subject starting from childhood. In fact, the didactic iconography aims to study, on the one side, that world of images that activate a direct relationship with children in their free time and in play; on the other the visual repertoires whose didactic dimension is also characterised by the mediations with which they are managed.

By the term “didactic iconology” we mean the study of images finalised to educating or, strictly speaking, to education. The term “iconology” is used in this context, coherently with its meaning, applying it to the study and the interpretation of the figurative works dedicated to the educational sphere, and not scholastic. That character consists in wanting to convey cultural information and contents, or in wanting to facilitate the learning of given knowledge, making interesting a historical argument or a scientific concept or, more simply, showing or recognising something so as to name it or describe it.

Didactic iconology is connected, on the methodological level, apart from to the contents, to the pedagogy of the media, to children’s literature, to psychology, to the history of illustration. On the historical level some points of reference define the profile of this field of study: here are four of them, in brief: The first one sinks its roots in the middle ages, and refers to the progressive legitimation and affirmation of the use of images by the Church, after the Council of Nicaea in 787, as an instrument of catechesis above all addressed to the illiterate population. A testimony to this are the *Bibliae pauperum*, the great spreading of iconography with the paintings and the bas-reliefs in the cathedrals, and then with the painting after the turn-around imposed by Giotto. The story in images takes shape which, albeit essentially oriented to themes of Sacred History, is characterised as a truly authentic didactic device for popular education on the contents of the faith.

The second aspect is that which, on the grounds of the printing techniques at first with engravings on wood and later on metal plates all the way to modern lithography, puts into circulation iconographic repertoires of varying aesthetic and cultural models. They find in scientific and didactic illustration and, in general, in the dissemination of knowledge, a great field of application and an ever vaster and interested “public.”

Within this public, a significant space is occupied by childhood, and this is the third aspect on which to build the modern didactic iconography. The “discovery of childhood,”

in the terms in which the historian Philippe Ariès defined its cultural traits, becomes the presupposition that leads to the development of a new educational conception and of a “market” of products dedicated to children: above all toys and images, spelling books, illustrated books, picture cards, etc.

The fourth point of historical reference regards schools; starting from the 17th century, with Comenius who published the *Didactica Magna* (1657), the treatise from which the modern school takes shape and, the following year, the *Orbis sensualium pictus*, the first illustrated textbook for children, we can speak of didactics as the science of education, a method that guides the process of teaching/learning, where the word-image synergy becomes crucial. With the birth of the modern concept of “public school,” where the right of everyone to education is upheld, didactics defines its efficacy also on the grounds of the use of the appropriate aids. Images would thus become some formidable didactic catalysers, in particular for those disciplinary fields predisposed to be accompanied by visual repertoires. From the invention of printing onwards, every new technology of communication would be pedagogically put to the test, that is to express its educational potential.

The modern school, in the course of its modern history, on the one side discovers the potential of images in support of teaching, while on the other it fears their intrusiveness and the pervasiveness: it realises that in many cases images bear with them ideas, that is they “communicate” more than they should in the strictly didactic sense. The pillar of didactic communication based on the tradition of the “Scholastics,” represented by the lesson-lecture and the centrality of the figure of the teacher, and his “art of the explanation,” struggles to come to terms with the images, to concede to the visual dimension a communicative space that goes beyond the contained and controlled one which is reserved to them in the textbooks and in the so-called ‘aids’ in which the images are often didactically anaesthetised.

From the didactic standpoint, the images pay for a sort of “original sin” that has a dual connotation: the first one refers

to the pleasure principle, that is to the fact that looking at the figures (reading a comic, watching a film or being immersed in a videogame) is first of all constituted as a sensitive experience that triggers the visual pleasure in the subject, springboard for fantasy and imagination, that is the capacity (the need) to see beyond the image that is being looked at. Traditional didactics does not have familiarity with the pleasure principle, as it essentially operates in the realm of duty or in any case in the teaching/learning devices that, without necessarily being coercive, are external to the subject's needs.

The second connotation is due to the fact that the images are placed directly in relation to the subject, without the need for mediations. This (apparent) ease of access to its immediate "reading" makes the image *docentibus soluta* and creates the minimal conditions for its autonomous understanding by the subject. The images at first sight seems to impose nothing upon its reader, neither grammar nor syntax, leaving him or her free to find (seek) his or her own meanings.

The communicative force of the images finds outside of school the best terrain in which to express its didactic potential in the register of cultural dissemination, through a multimedia network that accompanies the subject starting from childhood. The didactic iconography aims to study, on the one side, that world of images that activate a direct relationship with children in their free time and in play, on the grounds of the prerogative to offer a pleasant and attractive experience without requiring any bond; on the other the visual repertoires whose didactic dimension is also characterised by the mediations with which they are managed. It is an immense output, which already has a significant history behind it and a future laden with expectations (pedagogical and technological) even if, being a matter of "didactic" images they have still undergone a devaluation, like everything that concerns culture for childhood (cinema, literature, illustrations...), on the grounds of an "aesthetic bias" incapable of adapting certain critical categories to new objects of study. The words of Roberto Rossellini come to mind, who in 1962,

during an interview with Cahiers du Cinéma said: “And it’s important to have the courage to be didactic. But when one is so in cinema, one is accused of being an imbecile. And yet, the need for didacticism is an absolute need.”

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