

# EDITORIAL

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The well-known adage that a picture communicates more than a thousand words is deeply rooted in history. When in the *Treatise on Painting*, Leonardo da Vinci stages a heated dispute between a poet and a painter, the discussion reaches its epilogue with the statement of the absolute supremacy of the latter's art over the former's:

Since we have concluded poetry to be in the highest degree of understanding to the blind and that painting does the same to the deaf, we will say as much more worth painting than poetry, as painting serves a better and nobler sense than poetry, which nobility is proved to be triple to the nobility of three other senses; for it is elected to be instead wanting to lose hearing and smelling and touch, than the sense of seeing; >

for he who loses seeing, loses the sight and beauty of the universe, and remains in the likeness of one who is shut up in life in burial, in which he has motion and life. [our translation from Italian] (Da Vinci, XVI AC/1947)

This epilogue is the definitive seal to a story built in a sequence of stages and progressively layered over time, which it seems significant to retrace in its salient moments. The oculo-centric approach that characterizes Western thought has a very ancient tradition rooted in Greek culture, in which the same word 'idea' draws its semantic derivation from the verb *ὁράω* (to see). Vision becomes a dominant sense, transcending the boundaries of tangibility and taking on a global significance that affects thought and shapes the solid cultural matrix in which humanity is still immersed. According to Italo Calvino (1983/2002), the gradual rooting of the vision prevailing over the other senses can also be traced back to the cultural revolution induced by the printing press, which determines the reassuring habit of 'finding' a world in the two-dimensionality of the book page, inevitably flattening other sensory perceptions. Although this approach has also been questioned on several occasions by philosophical critics, as reconstructed by Juhani Pallasmaa (2005/2007, pp. 28-31) through the listing of theoretical positions ranging from Descartes to Nietzsche, from Scheler to Merleau-Ponty, there is no doubt that the predominantly visual substance that in contemporary society permeates man's relationship with the world determines his nature as *homo videns* (Sartori, 1997).

The image has always accompanied the history of civilization by placing itself as a fundamental support of the ability

to learn and remember. The pairing of the image with the word, if not the radical replacement of the latter, constitutes the basis of learning languages (both visual and verbal). From Comenius to *Pokémon* (Farnè, 2019), images are irreplaceable in educational processes, as witnessed by a long-standing practice and validated by the studies of educational iconology, which are concerned with investigating and interpreting the meanings of figurative works beyond their artistic value, analyzing their role and the languages employed in learning contexts. These range from cave paintings, which take the form of images supporting oral narration as part of collective rituals addressed to entire social groups by taking on the value of “signs produced to convey information” [our translation from Italian] (Barbieri, 2011, p. 15), to the derivation of pictogrammatic writing from real-world objects, which become conventional signs capable of communicating and transferring knowledge (Hohenegger, 2006), all the way to the tales in images that mark artistic-iconographic production throughout the Middle Ages (Giallongo, 1995). The typology of the *Biblia Pauperum* is an illuminating example of this: the designation precisely identifies a volume, numerous variants of which made by xylographic reproduction circulated in Europe from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onward, entirely illustrated with the stories of Christ and accompanied by short texts correlating the events to the Old Testament. This type of narrative in images decisively shapes the artistic production of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries precisely because of its communicative, educational and popularizing power, to the point that, by extension, the cycles of frescoes reproducing biblical stories that decorate the

walls of churches are called the same (think of Giotto's work, among others): a powerful tool for catechizing social strata lacking the cultural means to learn from texts or through educational paths reserved for the wealthy. In this sphere, the boundary between artistic and functional images is fuzzy: illustration becomes a graphic language capable of conveying precise contents and messages (Cicalò & Trizio, 2020). Later on, the advancement of printing techniques facilitates the production and circulation of images. That enables the widespread dissemination of knowledge within a society that gradually becomes more familiar with iconographic messages and the variety of styles and languages adopted in different contexts. The increasing use of illustration as a mode of transmission of scientific knowledge also leads to a broadening of the public interest in images, which draws information and communicates through them. This growing success of pictures functional to the communication of content finds fertile ground in properly educational circles: the *Orbis sensualium pictus*, which can be called the first illustrated subsidiary, dates back to the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century (Comenius, 1658) and is the progenitor of literature intended for schools in the context of which the adoption of illustrated books and dictionaries becomes systematic, making up a rich lexicography whose fortunes have never run out. In the vein of the taxonomic slant inaugurated in the Age of Enlightenment with Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, illustrated vocabularies aimed at children and young people (but also at adults needing to learn a language, as exemplified by Sanabria, 1988) and encyclopedias enriched with pictures such as *Il tesoro del ragazzo italiano* (1939)

by Vincenzo Errante and Fernando Palazzi are next. In these editorial products, if the image still assumes an ancillary role concerning the text, the balance between the two components shifts sharply in favour of the images in the illustrated materials employed for practice in school learning, in which the drawing of the parts of the concrete world is placed side by side with the corresponding word: here the image is the protagonist in conveying the message, the text accompanies it preparing the child for the learning of verbal language, which is always and in any case acquired through the visual recognition of the 'word set'. The model is that of the spelling book, a catalogue of illustrations that, combined with the word that identifies the represented object and its initial letter, enables learning language while identifying, recognizing and naming the 'things' of the tangible world.

The juxtaposition of text and image completely disappears in silent books intended for children (Terrusi, 2017), which configure themselves as an autonomous sphere that has seen significant recent development. In this context, the image-word relationship continually redefines itself, and the desired universality of graphic language seems to be realized. These are silent images that, just like cave paintings, become 'animated' by the narrator's voice, stimulating the ability to construct a verbal narrative leaning on the figured tale. Many play-educational products share this same modality: from traditional illustrated games, such as *Gioco dell'Oca* [Game of the Goose] and its many variants, to figurines, a vehicle for learning knowledge through collecting and constructing visual repertoires (Farnè, 2019); from puzzles, in which the goal is the recomposition of an

image without words, to board games exclusively image-based and in this sense wordless (such as *Dixit*, *Imagine* or many others), that challenge the user by calling to the construction of a narrative based on the selected iconographic repertoire.

In these contexts, wordless images assume the role of a reflective tool, in which the interpretation of meanings is entrusted to the viewer, leaving open a multitude of reading possibilities, as in the case of the ‘unreadable books’ conceived in the 1940s by Bruno Munari, whose work also assumes reference value for the exploration of different modes of verbal-visual interaction such as the *Supplemento al dizionario italiano* [Supplement to the Italian Dictionary] (1963). In these examples, the viewer becomes an active subject in decoding and interpretation, exploring and adding a layer of meaning to the narrative.

In light of the above, the dichotomous ‘artistic image’ versus ‘functional image’ model presents a classificatory nature that often appears legitimate to overcome. Although the autonomous character of art images remains universally agreed upon, it constitutes part of their value and does not exhaust their meaning or role. One need only think of the complex relationship of mutual referentiality between word and image that becomes the hallmark of René Magritte’s work (1929) and how the reading of that work triggers actions of verbal-visual interchange by calling into question ‘things’ as well (Castelli, 2017). The vast field of ‘images that are not art’ (Elkins, 2009) thus opens up a territory of exploration in which the collaborative or conversely exclusive role that different communicative systems can assume needs a proper evaluation.

The seemingly sharp distinction between words and images entails the necessity of taking sides in favour of one or another language (Belardi & Menchetelli, 2006), such that there are areas of expression and communication that remain reserved for one or the other coding system. The roles of images on the theoretical and scientific level have taken shape by the succession of different positions that, during the last decades, have progressively oriented visual studies by delineating an articulated genealogy of them (Luigini, 2020): from the ‘linguistic turn’ (Rorty, 1967) to the ‘pictorial turn’ (Mitchell, 1992) and the ‘iconic turn’ (Boehm, 1994), to the definition of “pan-linguistic intrusiveness” (Anceschi, 1992) and the historical courses and recourses of iconoclastic phenomena (Pinotti & Somaini, 2016, pp. 240-243). At the same time, the roles of images on the operational-functional level and their uses have also taken shape by attempts at taxonomical structuring, among which the most effective remains the river diagram proposed by Manfredo Massironi and emblematically introduced by the definition of “‘drawing’ and ‘graphic communication’ [as] any set of marks produced with any suitable instrument for the purpose of communication without words” (Massironi, 2002, p. 1). A diagram that, even in its actualized version in light of the contemporary scenario (Cicalò, 2020), retains its unquestionable validity. The many contexts in which images dispense with words are relatively heterogeneous; they all share an expressive capacity of the image, manifested through visual representations or interpretations endowed with varying degrees of immediacy or complexity, which allow –and simultaneously require– reflective reading.



Often the reasons for using predominantly or exclusively visual language can be traced back to the need to overcome linguistic and communicative limitations. An emblematic example is the development of the ISOTYPE system by Otto Neurath, Marie Reidemeister and Gerd Arntz in the context of the Gesellschafts-und Wirtschaftsmuseum (GeWiMu) in Vienna (Neurath, 1936): here, the goal of communicating in a nonexpert context is achieved through a visual language based on the interaction between pictograms and accompanied by minimal textual labels; a language to which current pictographic systems are deeply indebted (Menchetelli, 2013; Luigini & Moretti, 2018). A similar purpose can be found once again in those areas of public communication about social and health issues, where visual language lends itself to overcoming incommunicability due to the lack of shared idiom by facilitating the relationship between doctor and patient or acting as an effective mediator between educator and learner in the presence of learning or language expression deficits, as occurs in Augmentative and Alternative Communication (Menchetelli, 2022). In other situations, the deliberate use of wordless images links to an intent of communication immediacy or the performance of an informational task that minimizes verbal-visual interaction or even succeeds in freeing itself completely from verbal language. Many infographics adhere to this criterion, sometimes because of the need for extreme conciseness and economy of signs, sometimes because of a choice of communicative-narrative register, and sometimes because they entrust the reader with interpretation based on the comparison between configurations or graphic elements. Just in the

same way that many puzzles rebuses (historical example of synergy between images and words where the latter play a role of marginal complementarity) take shape in the absence of letters, and the solution relies on the visual comparison between two or more vignettes (Miola, 2020). In this context are examples that almost take on the value of lifestyle manuals, compendia for images that teach how to cook (Ferrara, 2019), how to perform daily tasks (Holmes, 2005), how to read epochal changes (Kolodny, 2015) or how to explore the culture and folk wisdom (Civaschi & Milesi, 2012, 2014; Civaschi, 2015).

At other times, finally, wordless images are necessary because showing is often more effective than verbally describing or because, as in assembly instructions, the operations to carry on depend on a visual relationship rather than a conceptual one.

Issue 7 of *IMG journal* collects case histories, critical studies, and iconographic and semiotic investigations that show the multiple communicative, expressive and reflective possibilities that certain types of images possess in the absence of words. The graphic and visual languages explored by the authors show a jagged landscape capable of weaving relationships between only seemingly distant places of exploration. With the usual plurality of looks, the issue presents some points of view according to which to analyze the alternative relationship between image and word when the latter becomes subordinate or disappears altogether.

The contributions, which present both general analyses and specific case studies, ideally identify three main areas of investigation: architectural language, graphic language and

especially the languages used in an elaboration located in the terrain that is always in the balance between image and word, namely the picture book.

Referring to architectural language, Giulia Bertola shows how the three-dimensional visuality of architecture is representable through specific tools such as *maquette* and photography, demonstrating the privileged relationship these languages establish with plastic art. Fabio Colonnese investigates the conflict between images and captions, that is, between visual and verbal texts, in the elaboration of architects' design process. Maria Pompeiana Iarossi, Giacomo Gramegna and Cecilia Santacroce recount a case study emblematic of a much broader communicative practice, namely the catechizing emphasis of figurative art toward illiterate believers who need the narration of theological themes through a 'universal' and natural language such as the graphic and visual. Alessandra Palma philologically investigates the intimate yet universal relationship between an architect and the places he represents through drawing or photography, in which it is possible to show and deepen elements that words only describe with much difficulty. Manuela Piscitelli shows the importance of graphic and visual heritages digitization, investigating the case of the archives of 19<sup>th</sup>-century historical theatres, both in terms of set designs and in communication through the visual documentation of scenes and in advertising posters. Finally, Francesca Sisci archaeologically traces the values of Robert Venturi's imagery, from the beginnings of his intense essayistic activity to some design masterpieces, investigating the role of the image in the architect's creative process.

Referring to the field of graphic language, Letizia Bollini reflects on the use of icons and the dichotomy of the concepts of mimesis and realism, in visual communication and especially in the digital communication ecosystem. Gianluca Camillini, Marcello Barison and Roberto Gigliotti organize a critical analysis on how images interact with each other to construct their own visual language. Maria Grazia Proli presents an experimental research project in which musical and theatrical video performances foster intercultural dialogue between peoples, aimed at validating community-building processes based on the development of creativity. Michael Renner investigates the avant la lettre languages of inkblots in both psychological and communicative contexts. Michela Rossi and Greta Milino investigate the possibilities of visual communication, starting from the field of advertising, through a taxonomic analysis of visual transpositions of rhetorical figures.

Referring to the specific field of picture books, Enrico Cicalò presents reflections on the relationship between images and words in authorial's picture books, investigating this relationship in a dual register that reads the contemporary from a historical perspective. Daniele Colistra's contribution leads us to the imaginative and pictographic world of Warja Lavater, who told stories using only graphic signs between the 1960s and the early 1980s. Giulia Mirandola reports on an educational experience developed in Berlin in which intercultural studies, publishing projects from the 1970s, educational use of silent books and inclusion for visually impaired individuals are intertwined. Paola Cortiana and Alberto Ostini offer an explication of Sophie Borrow's latest work: a picture book that deals with themes that

play a crucial role for adolescents but not only: loneliness, incommunicability, and the desire to meet others. Finally, Valentina Valecchi proposes a comparative reading between author publishing proposals in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the current catalogue of children's publishing. Through the common thread that unites the contributions that compose it in a choral vision, issue 7 of *IMG journal* returns an insight into the functions of wordless images and the uses to which they are currently put and offers itself as a tool for a more conscious reading of their role in the transmission of content and more generally in contemporary visual culture.

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