

Iconographies for Children and Development of Imaginary: Emblematic Examples

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The illustration for children is set up as an artistic-narrative language acting with extreme power and incisiveness on the creation of the visual imaginary, whether it be 'simple' set to the verbal or complementary text, or totally 'unhooked' from that in the story function, as it happens, for example, in the *silent books* or in certain vignettes devoid of ekphrasis and yet so eloquent. Although playing different roles, in all these cases, the illustration gets a certain autonomy, namely it creates a textuality that runs parallel and produces stories: it rewrites, suggests rereading, offers different perspectives, opens to new interpretations, leads to new representations, making chromatic elements, shapes and meanings concrete.

There is considerable evidence of the extraordinary meeting experience with the books illustrations during childhood: from Walter Benjamin to Italo Calvino, illustration remains impressed in one's mind, becomes school of "narration" and "image composition"¹, feeds the visual alphabet that represents – among other things – a first key of access to the art and aesthetic enjoyment that strongly persists in the adults' imaginary. It is enough to observe the fascination exerted by the images on the little reader of a quality picture book: the look lingers, goes along the entire surface of the plate, probes every visual element with the expertise and attention of those who register information and integrate knowledge, through increasingly complex and refined inferential processes. It is the enchanted and fruitful phase of the "supremacy of the images", as alleged by the reading teaching scholars, in which the iconography facilitates text comprehension and feeds the broad cultural and personal deposit of the imaginary.

Therefore, there is an active participation of the reader (the little reader *as well*) before the picture book, which becomes – to use a famous category by Umberto Eco – "open work", namely "'field' of interpretation possibilities, [...] configuration of stimuli equipped with a substantial vagueness, so that the user is induced to a series of always changeable 'readings'"².

¹ I. Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*, Turin, Einaudi, 1993, p. 105.

² U. Eco, *Opera aperta. Forma e indeterminazione delle poetiche contemporanee*, Milan, Bompiani, 1962, p. 146.

Of course, while considering the circular (*not linear*) and virtuous relationship between author, work and reader, you should not neglect the author's point of view, who communicates his/her ideology, namely his/her character, style and poetics that inevitably reaches the reader. Recently interviewed by the French semiologist, Frédéric Lambert, on the concept of "open work", which opposed the fundamentalist structuralism and anticipated the question of aesthetic reception in 1962, Eco asserts that it is true that the work never stops being modified by its reader or spectator, but you must not fall in the reverse excess, forgetting that there is always something stimulating the interpretation³.

Then, those involved in educational sciences and those who approach children's literature, considering the original duality that defines and pervades it (pedagogy and literature), should probe the illustrator's point of view, particularly when the latter is shrewd and conscious and, at the same time, freely expresses a remarkable artistic sensitivity in the performance of his/her job.

Visual Metaphors

I recently had the opportunity to interview Chiara Carrer. Chiara Carrer is a complex artist and illustrator. Artist, above all. She is an artist who experiments a meeting point between the art languages and the narrative language of illustrations.

Her illustrations are not easy to read: sometimes, they are assembled from fragments of recycled papers or just traced with a pencil; they prove to be bearer of an almost palpable emotional wealth. These illustrations express an inner depth in their posture and look, which is the clear result of a long work of introspection and human observation. Maybe, thanks to her ability to "show inside" through images, Carrer is not afraid to confront difficult stories and she can give shape to the inexpressible with rare delicacy and courage. The thought goes to some painful stories, such as *Il treno, Il dono di Alma, È non è*. The first story tells of a little girl who has lost her mother⁴; the second one tells about Alma, a little girl in foster care⁵; *È non è* tells about Sara, autistic girl, through the eyes of her brother⁶.

I asked her how she approaches the illustrated stories. I asked if her illustrations are faithful to the verbal text or if they reinterpret it. I asked if they represent *another* story for her. I asked her how she works starting from a story that belongs to other people and how much she feels free in managing this story. I had read that Chiara Carrer grasps the suspension time, the pauses and the fragments of a story. This is a very interesting aspect. It is as if the illustration filled the gaps or integrated narration elements according to a

³ See U. Eco, M. Augé, G. Didi-Huberman, *La forza delle immagini*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2015, pp. 21-22.

⁴ See S. Santirosi, C. Carrer, *Il treno*, Modena, Logos, 2012.

⁵ See F. Iacobelli, C. Carrer, *Il dono di Alma*, Pian di Scò (AR), Principi & Principi, 2011.

⁶ See M. Berrettoni Carrara, C. Carrer, *È non è*, Florence, Kalandraka, 2010.

very personal trajectory and this seems to leave a lot of freedom of expression to the illustrator. Finally, I asked her how text and image interact and what is the result for the reader.

Carrer admitted to approach stories with a disposition to listening, trying to identify herself in the reading, as a good actor looking for a space for himself/herself in the script: it is necessary to study the personality of the character to interpret. Regarding the role of illustrations, she believes that her illustrations have the task of shaking, “whispering” *another way* of seeing, expanding the text and suggesting solutions whereas words *do not say or cannot say*⁷, with the suitable tools of the visual language. “In my opinion, a text has some intrinsic needs that I must be able to listen to and express according to my language and way of listening. It is as when you listen to music, or you look to a work of art or you watch a dance or theatre show; it is something that I need to feel at deeper levels than a logical thinking. When approaching a text, I feel totally free, even when it is a text by another people: there are some occasions for which the solitary freedom I take does not exist because I like the dialogue with the author. Then, the reasons for which the text was written become interesting and useful tools for me to make a deeper research in the visual language; on the contrary, if they are classic texts, I trust only my feeling and my experience”⁸.

Having said that and coming back to the above-mentioned illustrated books, with the proper tools of illustration, the questions we wonder are: how do we describe the concept of pain to children? How do we illustrate fragility, loneliness, isolation?

An image, in particular, helps us to answer. It is the very powerful image of Sara, drawn by Carrer in two occasions using the metaphor of transparency. The girl is completely *crossed* by a floral pattern that is the same as the wallpaper and the upholstery of the sofa: flowers and ochre and brown leaves on a pale dusty pink background continue their vertical motion in her and fill her body. The words accompanying the images are as follows:

She is like that, stands still,
She does not speak, does not listen, does not look,
She often does not participate in any games.⁹

She is quiet as a cat
noisy as the traffic
unpredictable as the weather
invisible as a breath
sensitive as a leaf

she is as a puzzle, an enigma, a maze.¹⁰

⁷ See C. Lepri, *Interview to Chiara Carrer*, 11 February 2015.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ M. Berrettoni Carrara, C. Carrer, *È non è*, Firenze, Kalandraka, 2010.

¹⁰ Ivi.

This is how you should tell children about autism, with the lightness allowed by metaphors only. In Carrer's poetic solution, Sara reminds us of the oxymoronic empty fortress of Bettelheim (whose childish psychosis narration keeps - to date, and despite the many shadows - an extraordinary charm), which encompasses isolation and solitude, vagueness and fear, as well as wealth, emotional depth and sweetness, returned by the flowers and the pastel colours.

As for this foray into the soul of a special little girl, the illustrator admits: "that book costed a lot to me, because it was not simple to tell about such a painful thing, and yet Marco [Berrettoni Carrara] had written a text that was more intellectual at the beginning and then, discussing about that, it became increasingly visceral; you could get to grasp the subject without declaring it, but I would find useless to make what was light in the text explicit. In short, the text did not state that we were talking about autism, so it was necessary that I remained in a comfortable, soft and sweet dimension; there is only a brutal image, the image in which the shadow of oneself declares it is hurting itself, but it is not the real image, I delegated the shadow"¹¹.

How can a little reader interpret such a symbolic and refined language that is related to the artwork? The art image communicates, suggests, stimulates in a connotative way. Carrer claims that it must not be explained, but it must be known immediately and perceived; moreover, she adds that "children have already these tools and they are even more trained than ours"¹². We are talking about the creation of a metaphorical skill that is developed through the early exposure to the illustrated book and that is functional to the enrichment of the imaginary and the acquisition of new interpretation tools of the reality. In fact, according to Fonzi and Negro Sancipriano, "For us, metaphor is much more than a simple transfer of meaning: it is a way of approach and knowledge of the reality" and "if from one hand, it expresses what cannot be expressed by the language [just like the case of *È non è*], its function is not confined to that but it consists mainly in the evocation of a new reality and the reification of its meanings"¹³.

The reading of *È non è*, a story about diversity, should give birth to a renewed, more sensitive and careful look: "metaphor makes you participate"¹⁴; in this regard, we are before a book that shakes, attracts, raises issues and leads to inevitably face the enigma represented by Sara - to use the words of the author of the book. Many other illustrated books require delving into things. They invite to look beyond. They impose a path of renewal and enrichment of one's imaginary. They are impressed in one's mind and then undergo the natural and fruitful processes of inner reworking that go beyond the reality and the evidence of the illustrated page.

¹¹ C. Lepri, Interview to Chiara Carrer, 11 February 2015.

¹² See *Ibidem*.

¹³ A. Fonzi, E. Negro Sancipriano, *La magia delle parole: alla riscoperta della metafora*, Turin, Einaudi, 1975, p. 3.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 39.

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