

The International  
**JOURNAL**  
*of* the **BOOK**

Volume 6, Number 4

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THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE BOOK  
<http://www.Book-Journal.com>

First published in 2009 in Melbourne, Australia by Common Ground Publishing Pty Ltd  
[www.CommonGroundPublishing.com](http://www.CommonGroundPublishing.com).

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ISSN: 1447-9516  
Publisher Site: <http://www.Book-Journal.com>

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Typeset in Common Ground Markup Language using CGCreator multichannel typesetting system  
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# How Are Books Without Text Read?

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*Abstract: In the world of books, in addition to literary texts, there are books of which contents refer to visual imagery. Illustrated books, artist books and all books of which content is based on images, require a particular form of reading whose paradigm is vision. Seeing is an everyday event, it's an unconscious habit for all of us who enjoy the physical ability of perceiving the surroundings through the sense of seeing. Educating sight means elevating to the level of conscience the different perceptual moments; this involves considering the objective and tangible conditions of every instant, being able to name in correct terms the formal conditions of what is being seen, and understanding the possible determinations of our sight, everything from the perceptual ambiguities to the physiological, environmental and cultural processes that go with it. Reading a book with images requires learning to see, resorting to the abilities of the other senses that contribute to the apprehension of the sensuality of this type of publications. The space of these books is the infinite exteriority that surpasses the world of ideas due to its complexity; they are receptacles whose magnitude forces the human being to conceive them within the framework of a particular legibility, and also to fragment them in different ways so as to understand them within material configuration or determined exterior limits that create their inner ambits.*

Keywords: Visual Books, Reading, Visual Education

## Introduction

**I**N THE WORLD of books, in addition to literary texts, there are books whose contents are related to visibility: illustrated books, material books, or artist books, also known as “the other books”<sup>1</sup>, which, although they may contain a certain type of text or isolated typography, these books require a particular manner of reading whose paradigm is visibility.

Visual language uses complex systems of graphic signs that follow fixed organizational patterns on a two-dimensional surface which are called visual texts and to which the receiver - through a peculiar reading process and analogous to the written text - assigns sense, depending on the meanings that he provides.<sup>2</sup>

What we see in an illustrated book or an artist book is a set of sensorial stimuli; a semiotic system is also considered, that is, signs that seek knowledge with a clear line of interpretation and knowledge. For this purpose, knowledge of visual grammar and literacy is required.

One must know how to read, as Noé Jitrik affirms, “one must possess a competence [...] a construction that is erected between an individual and a text [...] that possesses a form or, rather, a multiplicity of forms”<sup>3</sup>

In the same way that letters have forms that are variable through typography, that can mean in a

single word dynamism, solitude, enthusiasm, etc., forms become meaningful through their dimensions, relations, distribution in space, character, complexity, colour, texture and other elements that can be considered ambiguous, what's certain is that there are structure conditions for visual language.

## Visual Perception

Seeing, knowing how to see, involves learning to detain our eyes on the forms and their characteristics, it implicates the development of qualities and aptitudes of analysis and observation. As early as 1862, Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran spoke in his text on the formation of the artist about the importance of seeing, not through the eyes but through the brain.

Seeing things, beholding phenomena that occur around us, is a matter of attention and discernment, which together constitute a tool by which the everyday may be gauged, and a powerful instrument with which to ward off fear [...] seeing means re-assuring ourselves that we control our environment [...] Sight is such a powerful tool of recognition that its ability to discover new things, or simply to describe what is there with precision [...] may often be concealed...<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Raúl Renán. *Los otros libros*, pp. 13-15

<sup>2</sup> Ken Goodman. *Sobre la lectura*, pg. 19

<sup>3</sup> Noé Jitrik. *Lectura y cultura*, pg. 18

<sup>4</sup> Eulàlia Bosch. *El placer de mirar*, pg.53



This definition allows us to understand the reading of images as an action capable of manifesting a communication through indivisible discursive signs or representative articulations of sensations that emerge from information captured by the retina, as Kupka<sup>5</sup> said, as the doorway of light, of knowledge, and of the configuration of things.

This is manifested in visual perceptions that are fundamental for the development of intelligence and conscience, it is the order through which matter becomes *form and form becomes knowledge*... according to a well-known platonic teaching, seeing does not only mean being affected by the impressions of illuminated objects, but directing active visual rays toward things. The eye itself is solar in that it illuminates things with a light *sui generis*. Visual rays leave the eye as projectiles of cognitive artillery, and the visual world is the target ...<sup>6</sup>

And so, within the formative context of the reading of illustrated books, material books and artist books, the image's communicative intention should be characterized as the construction of its own purpose. Thus, visual representation becomes knowledge of the essence and recognition of the educational intention, and this becomes the nucleus in which the representation's objectives and meaning lie. Learning to see implies learning to read the image and turning the action of seeing into part of a permanent discipline in which all the possible meanings are included, such as watching, observing, scrutinizing, penetrating with sight all that surrounds us, implicating different factors, from formal ones to semantic ones.

### Visual Representation of Books

A visual representation can represent an idea, an image, or an object, and be a tangible manifestation in supports of which format comprises a visual text considered within the book's conceptual margins, applying the name text "to the object of which the reading is made, written or not, understanding that the reading maintains with it a homogeneous relationship"<sup>7</sup> of continuous knowledge.

That which is represented is the foundation of intentional expressions that, in the techniques of specific genres of books, includes a diversity of possibilities for making perceptible the presence of reality. From this perspective, we are dealing with an attitude that is expressed in different levels of knowledge.

...in Goethe there is a consideration [that] has a strong aesthetic component, of aesthesis, of a glance, of visuality, of the preponderance of

the eye as an instrument of knowledge [...] the visual phenomena were not reducible to concepts. These could only be arranged according to an internal familiarity in constant series in such a way that the most complex are derived from the simplest ones...<sup>8</sup>

Graphic *representation* implicates, within an educational context, the visual translation that invokes the understanding of a particular *intention*. A visualization exercise creates a visual reproduction, makes present what has been seen before, can pretend similitude, give an idea of the thing, be similar to it with its distinctive features, or rather, attempt equality, be correspondent, acknowledge and identify itself by presenting a nature identical to something previously manifested.

Visual representation within the context of the other books generates paths that travel from the schematized representation of isolated objects – called conceptual because it is based on images from memory –, to representation in perspective, with diverse specialities, sets of lights and shadows, impressions of movement and feelings of atmosphere that enrich the possibilities of recognition and interpretation of reality.

### Visual Education

Teaching to see is the same as teaching to represent, thus, teaching to read the image, that is, understanding the two-dimensional representation in a way that this representation is similar to the visual perception that is had of it; visual thought bases its presuppositions among the following perceptive fields: visual image and mental image.

This way the educational action of visuality is conceived as a communication relationship that makes reference to previous knowledge and does not wear out in the physical limits of the visual representation, because it also has a cognitive nature that appeals to memory, to time, and to graphic representation. With this, a repertoire of evocations, memories, or the so-called didactic mnemotechnic series are generated, which continuously refer to some other image and transcend to the spatiotemporal determinations of the representation, exteriorizing their substance in learning actions of different ranges, "it is a process of formal depuration that is conducted through successive images in such a way that the objects end up becoming idealized images, suspended in time, losing all insinuation of specificity, repeating the exercise once and again, capturing the essence,

<sup>5</sup> Pascal Rousseau. "Kupka. El ojo visionario" in *La otra historia del arte. Heterodoxos, raros y olvidados*, pp. 105-113

<sup>6</sup> Peter Sloterdijk. *Esferas I*, pg. 203

<sup>7</sup> Noé Jitrik, *op. cit.*, pg. 19

<sup>8</sup> Goethe, J.W. *Escritos de arte*, pg. 11

[actually we're talking about] interpretations of the observed nature...<sup>9</sup>

Visual education is understood as a permanent project of training in the lecture and interpretation of the world and the surroundings which, being quotidian, becomes part of the unconscious that includes spaces, objects, places and actions.

Visual representations of fragments of the world conducted systematically in illustrated, material and artist books, articulate in the reader a diversity of non-linear visions of himself, of the being and of the cognitive task; thus visual language becomes a materialization, surfaces, contours and volumes, up and down, in and out, yes and no, allowed and prohibited, big and small, relating through basic configurations, enciphering the great dichotomies that integrate the sense of the universe.

Seeing is a daily act, it is an unconscious habit for all of us who enjoy the physical ability to perceive our surroundings through the sense of sight. Educating sight<sup>10</sup> means elevating up to the level of consciousness different perceptual moments, and this implies considering the objective and tangible conditions of each instant, being able to name in correct terms the formal conditions of what is being seen and understanding the possible determinations of our sight, from the perceptual ambiguities to the physiological, environmental, or cultural processes that go with it.

The act of seeing obtains form within the questions generated by the desire to continue looking. Watching is shaped as a process that does not consider time; therefore, it is placed outside its dominion, allowing space to spread beyond the perceptible margins [...] looking, feeling the intensity that is slowly acquired from concentrating on one point is a form of acquiring knowledge, of helping thought...<sup>11</sup>

## Reading the Image

When reading the visual imagery inscribed in books, one reflects on reality through compositions of which essence is the search for form and its manifestation, the expressive configuration related to emotional and gestural contents.

*Learning how to read the image* is the essential experience for *learning to see*, and in both processes the fundamental bases of the links between thinking and doing, between knowledge and image, are defined. Beyond the physiological conditions of the vision phenomenon, what's important is the develop-

ment process itself, of the conditions of understanding physical reality by the individual who reads. The ability to understand, recognize, generalize and reproduce what is seen, all that linked to specific actions of the mind such as fixing in memory and applying concepts. Seeing involves thinking; understanding a form involves noticing the composition of its structure, and this requires for the sense of sight to have resources for analysis.

## Conclusions

Understanding the reading terms of illustrated books, material books and artist books involves understanding the following principles<sup>12</sup>:

1. Structural dimension as a basic element for the graphic description of a book is formed with a viewpoint centred on the spectator, where the represented ideas implicate considerations, by visual literacy, about the form, texture, and colour (basic elements); size, scale and proportion (dimensional elements), and perspective, direction, symmetry, regularity, juxtaposition, sequentiality and grouping (structural elements)
2. The forming of books. Visual literacy elements constitute a grammar based on the principles of spatial layout and determination, space hierarchization, and composition laws or rules that condition existing relationships between the structural elements.
3. The sensorial understanding of reality and the possibilities of recognizing it, corresponding to the concept of iconicity or level of realism of a visual text as compared with the reality that it represents, manifested in degrees of similitude presented by a stable visual organization, oscillating between the possible levels and the variety of forms that involve the recognition of the physical reality. These indications acquire expressive strength through the dynamism of the representation modalities.
4. The presence of the book's communicative dimensions among which the mimetic ones are worth mentioning due to their implications in relations of significance. As a result, we can speak of illustrated books, material books and artist books as dialectic images, in that they represent a critical synthesis of reality in elemental forms, not because they're simple but because they result of the double distance between the senses – the optical and the tactile

<sup>9</sup> María Dolores Jiménez Blanco. "Georgia O'Keefe, una manera de mirar" in *La historia del arte...*, pp. 205-209

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Elliot Eisner. *Educación la visión artística*

<sup>11</sup> Eulàlia Bosch. *Op cit*, pg. 122

<sup>12</sup> Luz del Carmen Vilchis. *Diseño. Universo de conocimiento*, pp. 59-62

– and the multiple meanings that derive from conscious interpretation.

This signification process begins with the unconscious transference of sense, since a graphic manifestation turns into something drawn – which not all sketch does – and therefore involves a meaningful load and a series of possible readings that pour out, in addition to the sensitive experience, the cultural projection of these book genres, like man's interaction with himself and with his community.

Based on the previous, it can be affirmed that visual education is a resource that integrates the concept of reading. The reading of a visual text is a fundamental cognitive and aesthetic requirement whose demands integrate the most authentic manifestation of the paradigms of visuality in a sensorial, perceptual and rational convergence that reveals the individual's critical conscience and brings him closer to the "pleasure of the text"<sup>13</sup>, seeking order and the mastery of reading.

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<sup>13</sup> Roland Barthes. *El placer del texto*, pg 81



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