

**ART BOOKS FOR CHILDREN:  
LEVER OR BARRIER TO IMAGINATION?**

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Children, in their diverse interactions, have access to multiple cultural environments and also to various forms of cultural production such as books, which are containers of text and image memories. Art books, especially those written for children, carry historical imprints, ranging from printing quality and imagery to an implicit concept of childhood – after all, the discourse is always directed to a specific audience and not an abstract and a-historical being.

As a researcher on the possibilities of appropriation and cultural production of different subjects, I would like to bring, in this text, an analysis of Brazilian art books for children, trying to show in which ways their images and text contribute - or not – to the widening of children’s “seeing” and to their imagination<sup>1</sup>. I have selected some books from the main collections available in the market - “Brazilian Art History for Children” (ed. Pinakothek), “Meetings with the Brazilian Art” (ed. Mindem), “Famous Children” and “Leaf-bug” (ed. Callis), “Art Masters in Brazil” (ed. Moderna) – and have examined them with lens embedded in theories about childhood, education, art and image.

***Children and culture***

The concept of childhood and the social role of children have changed with the political, economic, social and cultural transformations in humankind’s different historical stages. Today, the children’s presence in the world is different but as intense as that of adults. However, little or nothing of what children actually say or do is a motive for attention or reflection on the part of those adults around them. Instead, we talk and write a lot about children.

When the child speaks, draws, dramatizes, laughs, gesticulates, she is weaving her history and the form how she sees it and sees herself in the history of the community in which she is

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<sup>1</sup> A análise de livros de arte para crianças fez parte de minha tese de doutorado e, posteriormente, ganhou corpo e substância nas pesquisas que continuo desenvolvendo acerca dos processos de produção de apropriação cultural de professores e alunos.

inserted. In this dialogue with society the child positions herself, both being a subject and a creator of culture.

Children produce culture as they assign meaning. Each community, with its own ways of life, expresses itself in singular and multiple manners. Bakhtin (1992) says that culture is at the same time loaded with unity (its identification attribute) and polissemity (its exchange, its opening); its meaning is, therefore, extremely dynamic – always under stress! Culture is a product and a process. In this plural conception, it sees a polyphonic intercultural relation – dialogue between different approaches, experiences, viewpoints; a path of multiple directions and meanings. Therefore, there is no monologue and aloneness in a culture; there is no original, authentic culture; there are no absolute values which, by them, go beyond any society, any time. Any pretence to universality is, in a way, authoritarian.

Each epoch produces its expressions with the available material, starting from its needs, in a more, or less, explicit and conscious way: culture, society and history are not independent of each other. We humans always want to assign meanings to everything that surrounds us. The endless search for the understanding and the appropriation of reality drives us to the ambitious endeavor of capturing images – first with drawings, afterwards with photography, cinema, etc.). However, the image is not static: it is as plastic and provisional as the reality it makes present; it congregates, somehow, the social, religious or political aspects of its times.

Benjamin emphasizes the role of man in the understanding of objects. Man names them and, by this act, a social identity is created, loaded with its own meanings – it is true that words have had a greater integrity in their relation with what they represent... The word makes present that which was absent – it is, always, evocative. Thinking critically the modernity, the Author points out that the new work environment leads to a decline of experiencing and to the loss of the capacity of listening to others, of narrating, because the fragmentation of the means of production unglues the work from its context. That is, in the modern world, ruled by fast and absolute information, where is no leeway for other senses and different understandings, people do not establish ties; the dynamics of the world drives them continuously, leaving behind the exercise of contemplation.

In other words, the different technological resources growingly amplify the possibilities of portraying images; this technical reproducibility amplifies their dissemination and makes the process of circulation of ideas cheaper and simpler. This cheapening affects even the creation process, removing the sacred aura of an artwork. The paradox is that, on the one hand, the loss of this aura and the democratization of the circulation of images makes art, in its various manifestations, accessible to different social spheres, allowing the viewer to become familiar with the image, with the narration, with the object's theme. On the other hand, this same massification displaces the attention from the artwork itself, does not emphasize looking at the author's project or the techniques used, the mass, texture etc.

The cultural appropriation process is complex e multifaceted. The circulation of culture is a fundamental aspect in a policy of forming adults and children which requires reflection because of its complexity.

This is the problem framework where this text is inserted: taking into account that the different processes of image representation have always been linked, in a more or less direct way, to the resources, techniques or instruments available in each time – through photography, cinema, TV, video, CD Rom, internet etc., in which way can art books open channels for the (re)-education of children's seeing; allow the possibility of an aesthetic education which preserves and amplifies its stored images, contributing for the increment of the apparatus which makes seeing more attentive in the midst of much dispersion of focus that contemporary life offers and favors their imagination?

### **The construction of seeing and art books for children**

Art books cannot relinquish technical quality, aesthetics and the awakening of the viewer's curiosity and the desire to go beyond, to feed the imagination.

There are some cases in which a pedagogical purpose to seeing is required. This pedagogical dimension intends, more explicitly, to make available to its audience – children and young students, in this case – a significant cultural experience. These are the proposals offered by the "(didactic) art books for children".

Santos (1997) understands that pedagogical practices should be sustained on a "teaching centered on the cultural object, on the material evidence of culture. Or yet, as the educacional process which considers the object as a primary source of teaching" (p.32). This methodology congregates observation, analysis and extrapolation. It should favor reflections about the "temporality, subjectivity, identity and otherness", at the same time that it should take into account "the desire of the viewer and the inscriptions of the subject, the public's response and the interest of groups (...)" (p.14).

I use his speech to think about art books for children – I understand that they should induce the relation between the picture that is being seen and the day-to-day universe; between that picture being examined and some other which is similar in technique, theme, color or any other category of analysis – instigating the look that concentrates and which expands – without allowing that games and texts obscure the works and all its creative process. To see the work from what it makes me think. Where does the work take me? Those are aspects which act on affection, desires, a greater discharge of subjectivity, imponderability – interesting challenges for the construction of a critical and curious look; fundamental elements for the imagination.

Galard (1999) argues that the words that accompany the artworks cannot be pretentious, cannot go beyond the work. Auxiliary texts must take into account that there are beginning readers, amateurs. The words must be available to those that desire more information; and not be the main actors. The written text cannot invade visual arts. Otherwise, "the connoisseur becomes so attached to the technical quality of the work, that he dreams about the art and the artist, not with the artwork itself. He is always offstage, never reaches it (idem:1). There are other resources that allow words to be accessible without being invasive.

Santa Rosa (2002) heads a collection of four titles which I take in my hands: "Cities and Forests – the traveling artists between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries", "Lights and shadows – 20<sup>th</sup> Century", "Dreams and Reality – the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century" and "Colors and Forms – the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century". With a well-cared printing and quality paper, he chooses a historical line and his texts are based on the perspective of a linear narration, illuminating the different artistic movements and their main representatives. The text is noteworthy – simple, but not simplistic; for children, without being childish; elaborating questions that surround the artistic universe and trying to answer them in a clear, consistent and truthful way – without making the

speech childish, without endearing terms or “dumbing down”. He chooses a didactical text that prioritizes knowledge over experience – thinks about the understanding of the work under different angles: elements, the painter’s context, technique, social, political and cultural environment at the time. He shows aspects; signals questions to be perceived; interprets... In my view, the drawback is the reduced image size, which makes them less inviting and provoking, placing the artworks themselves on a second plane. For an active contemplation, what matters is the construction of meanings by the subject-viewer, either child or adult. What questions does she ask herself?

Many times, in the so-called re-reading of the artwork, instead of concentrating on the artistic problem that motivated the painter, we only get his work and "reduce" it to his procedures. We also know about the author’s life and his historical context – in this case, it is no longer an Art Book; it is an Art History book: more informative, without the aesthetic experience, the construction of the sensitive look and the stimulus to the imagination, as primary objectives... In this way, we learn about the characteristics of an artist’s work. However, those works left out are, perhaps, those that more strongly tell us about the questions that the painter asked himself. What about the viewer? When facing this formatted information, what questions does he ask himself? In this case, this last collection analyzed contains good Art History books for children.

Rego & Braga (1999) have also written an Art History book, with focus on baroque art, and concentration on one of this representatives: the “Aleijadinho” (Cripple, in Portuguese), an sculptor from the State of Minas Gerais who is very well known for the singular expression of his figures. The linear and clear text makes the images become an illustration. The text is fluid as a historical narration but, in my view, it slides when trying to translate images into words<sup>2</sup> – if we are seeing, why does the narrator have to tell us what is there? “The façade is simple, with straight lines and curves” (p.17); “(...) through the blue and red tones, the murals and flowers, the mulatto angels with blonde hair (...)” (p.19), among other statements. The excessive use of adjectives is not justified – I find, considering only the universe of two pages: harmonious ensemble; light and gracious baroque; agreeable atmosphere; lightness and elegance of rococo; happy climate; playful smile; and so on. A third uncomfortable aspect in the reading was the attempt to interpret feelings which supposedly are apparent in the works, for example: “creating a

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<sup>2</sup> Sobre isso ver LEITE 1998.

magic feeling” (p.19); “succeeds in transmitting well-being, pain, austerity and evil” (p.20) – each aspect illustrated by a different work. Where is the possibility for the reader-viewer to feel something by himself and singular before these same images? Books intended for children often wrap themselves in the “school” perspective. Making explicit its didactic and “schooling” character, the book analyzed above has a companion folio with two works from the author and a “working supplement” which checks the knowledge of the student-reader. Of the eleven exercise proposals, only one allows for an authorship: “Be an architect. Observe the project for the façade of the S. Francisco de Assis church, at S. João Del Rey. In the side space, modify it according to your imagination”. It worries me that art becomes so encapsulated by pedagogical proposals as to lose its aesthetic and poetic character, being reduced to a programmatic content.

Aesthetic appreciation is something that is lived, learned, educated... Conversely, we can penetrate it as a coroner: slice it, autopsy it, dilacerate it, examine its entrails. We can possess it as a detective collecting clues and indications, in search of the enigma’s decipherment. All possible “science” can be applied to the analysis of the work, as a physical object. Study object: knowledge object.

The Acedo & Aranha (1995) books seem to fit this pattern. They choose a directive and informative approach, asking questions in each page, calling the reader’s attention to details in the works. In this way, they are bound to the voluntary, detailed attention, losing the overall image, annulling the tension between the whole and the part, between attention and inattention, dismissing the viewer’s repertoire and his creative imagination for seeing the picture. The questions try, basically, to verify if the reader has learned the previously presented contents. The text is not detailed or is the fruit of a careful research that confers the status of an Art History book. It only talks about Portinari – a well-known 20<sup>th</sup> century Brazilian painter – and of some of his works, in a fragmented manner, with printing on simple paper.

The book by Trzmielina & Bonito (1997), dedicated to the same author, can be placed in a very similar perspective. In this case, exploring the painter’s childhood and his trajectory until he becomes a professional, the book in the Famous Children Collection also does not present an aesthetic refinement or an editorial care which justifies being called an Art Book. It makes clear its children’s audience by choosing a linear narration, with simple illustrations. It is a pity that so many productions for children are less challenging and have less technical and aesthetic

refinement... For the artwork to be perceived as part of an aesthetic experience it is necessary some kind of active contemplation, the subject has to “let go”, divest his pre-conceived categories and endeavor to educate his look to SEE, instigating the imagination that requires slowness and temporal decompression. It is a game of attention / inattention; approximation / departure, letting us possess / be taken by the object’s resonance – that which makes this experience reverberate, flow. For the interaction between the subject that sees and the work seen to occur, it is necessary to produce seeing associated to knowledge – images and text in harmony and with quality, without underestimating the child’s ability to understand.

Thus, the challenge is to search for the resonance and to establish, with the image, an aesthetic experience. What one thinks, speaks or writes is, necessarily, about the image – a post-pictorial speech. What one looks for, with the aesthetic experience, is to establish a dialogue with it. This is not about sharing the same codes – key for the interpretation of conventional signs –, but about familiarity, of a common baggage. It is a dynamic and continuous process of approximation / departure from reality. Even with the unknown, we try to approximate it by something we know. We interpret, we try to adequate the lenses, to make parameters flexible, to widen the horizons.

Education is an dynamic and uninterrupted process which no longer fits into a verticalized paradigm of transmission of consecrated knowledge. The revision of the role of art books for children follows the re-dimensioning of the concept of knowledge, which can no longer be reduced to its scientific dimension, leaving out the artistic and cultural dimensions (Kramer, 1998:208). I borrow Kramer’s words about museums and I re-signify them in the questions presented here about art books:

To be educational, arte needs to be art and not educational art; in the same way, to be educational, the museum needs to be a cultural space and not an educational museum. It is the cultural action itself that has the possibility of being educational. The museum is not a place to teach about culture, it is a place of culture (idem:210).

Therefore, books are not a material for teaching culture, they are cultural materials. To promote the "didactical" art books is a risk; the challenge is to use adequate communication strategies which ensure an authorial and creative relationship by the children which dive into them. The idea of surrounding art books with a "school aura" (or pedagogic, or didactic – it does not matter how subtle is the name employed) is complicated for a conceptual reason: art is, essentially, transgressor and free; school, on the other hand, is regulated.

This brings another reflection: the adjective "infantile" or "for children" – we could be talking about quality art books which are of interest to all viewers, but it is undeniable that, currently, the child has become a market segment, therefore, the tension is permanent: books have to be economically feasible, and find ways of expression that attract their target audience, bring them closer, meet their expectations, respect their points of view, their prior knowledge; reaching out to them not as an homogeneous block, but as unique persons from different social, ethnics, religious, age groups. Far from trying to dictate solutions, I recognize that the achievement of this balance is an instigating and permanent challenge. However, it seems to me that only by taking up this challenge we will be favoring the construction of a sensitive look and imagination – and, consequently, the creation. After all, the originality of the creative process is in the possibility of multiple combinations; of unexpected connections and approximations; of a tension between new and old, making its production always a "grand opening". In this way, it is possible to say that one does not create out of nothing, only out of an existing parameter. All the creation process is, necessarily, a re-creation process which is directly linked to the imagination.

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