

## Reviews

Andrea Casale

**Forme della percezione  
dal pensiero all'immagine**

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"To perceive a visual image implies the beholder's participation in a process of organization. The experience of an image is thus a creative act of integration" (Kepes 1971, p. 17). Thus wrote Gyorgy Kepes in the introduction to his fundamental *Language of Vision*, to which the fine essay by Andrea Casale, that we present here, certainly owes the clarity of the approach used to examine the theme of the image, not in itself, but as a process, as an act of a discipline of organization of which vision, perception and memory are the protagonists. The urgency to reflect on the way of understanding visual language as an aid to "thinking in terms of form" permeates the pages of Casale's book. In glancing through its chapters, one perceives a certain anxiety in dealing with the need to reclaim vision as a primary tool for orientation, and thus for measuring and organizing spatial events, and the approach to this theme is novel. Those of the *Language of Vision* were years in which enthusiasm for the revisiting of the Bauhaus model proposed by the School of Ulm still animated the Schools of Architecture throughout the world, in a lively dialectic that had also intensely involved the theoretical foundations of geometry and representation. What happened shortly afterwards is a well-known story. Investigation into the concept of perception and visual thought ended up by being relegated to architectural training courses; its preparatory function for the project of an education

of vision, which instead underlies the exercise of control over form and the idea of space, was underestimated and in some way abdicated. And thus a large and fascinating area of investigation into visual thought long escaped consideration in the field of representation, while a flood of images, both pervasive and invisible, began to invade the experience of everyday life. The first merit of Andrea Casale's essay is, therefore, that of recognizing, above all, the need to restore importance and centrality to the theme of education of vision, that would be capable of redefining emotional horizons and categorical tools useful, today more than ever, for acting with awareness in the varied scenario of the new media. In a memorable page of *Lezioni americane* (Calvino 1993, p. 103), Calvino had warned of the risk of losing the faculty of *thinking* in images and had invoked the need for a "pedagogy of vision." It is not an exaggeration to say that with his essay Andrea Casale basically attempts to give an answer to that concern by posing a few fundamental questions: what really happens when we look at something? what is an image? what are we doing when we use images? how do we learn when we learn through images? And Andrea Casale does so with particular attention to setting his reflections in a wide context in which the psychology of perception, traditionally used to explain visual-perceptive phenomena, allows itself to be con-

taminated and enriched by different areas, from the physiology of the eye to the neurosciences, from philosophy to art, in a series of references that reveal the author's belonging to the category of researcher and, at the same time, to the category of artist.

But let us proceed in order. The essay opens with a chapter, *Occhio e mente*, devoted to the fundamental relationship between eye and mind, a key element of that process which from sensory information leads to awareness, that is, to the definition of forms endowed with a meaning. The critical horizon introduces the inevitable reference to the Gestalt paradigm into a broader range of reflections that define its limits and comparisons with contemporary and subsequent theories –from behaviorists to cognitivists– that, without denying its role in the evolution of visual thought, contextualize its meaning within the area of contemporary thought. Thus the argumentations of the following chapter, *Dalla matita alla matita*, are based on a well-defined critical reference and clearly develop the broad disciplinary and methodological issue of perception seen as a “complex and sophisticated [cognitive process] of interpretation of environmental stimuli, dynamically and actively modified by the mind in the continuous exploration of the environment” (p. 33). The notions of sensation and perception return, each one inserted, for its own specificity, in the process of recognition in which the role of memory –be it declarative or procedural– is clarified in a progressive awareness of the phenomena that appear to us under the visual aspect to which the entire chapter is devoted. The clear definition of the idea of perception of the “visual fact” as the result of the dynamic interaction between signals

coming from the external world and information stored in memory introduces the role of imagination in the construction of the process of recognition of objects and of the space around us. A process in which the contents of the following chapters (*Lo spazio e il tempo* and *Rappresentazione mentale, rappresentazione iconografica*) provide further specifications and qualifications of meaning. The way of “what” and that of “how” we perceive are set into the spatio-temporal dimension understood, in a contemporary sense, as a “mental construction that, starting from specific information received by the senses, leads to deduce the reciprocal position of objects and the environment and of ourselves in relation to them” (p. 87), at the same time activating mental structures, “schemes” that categorize and group objects in abstract representations in which the general knowledge of phenomena takes shape. “Our brain, rather than processing images, constructs, through the active management of neuronal impulses, especially internal ones, together with the little information coming from the external world, complex conceptual and symbolic conditions that we could define as spatial mental models” (p. 100). The language with which these mental models communicate toward the external, but especially toward the internal world during our actions occupies the author's reflections on the thread of the relationship between mental image and iconographic image and in the subtle relationship that binds one to the other. The reference to Nelson Goodman's writings helps to define, in this context, the concept of similarity, and perhaps it would have been useful to refer to those “degrees of iconicity” in which Abraham Moles summarizes the entire linguistic space

of the possible representations of an object in placing at its extremities the real object and its abstract counterpart, the word.

The tone of the argumentations in this first part of the book, in which complex themes are often touched upon, is on the whole pleasantly discursive, but never banal. The intention is clearly to build a clear and agile document on the themes of perception, seen as a “mental solution” to a problem posed by the senses, and on the relationship between thought and image. The examples and visual experiments proposed are useful in explaining the concepts. The bibliographical references, ranging over a significant period of time that reaches the contemporary period, are sufficient, and render the theoretical framework solid by enriching it with transversal contributions.

For now, “drawing” remains in the background, ready to come into play in the following chapters in which it is, instead, the great protagonist. In *Il bambino e il disegno* the author outlines the need that each of us has to communicate with the graphic sign, from scribbles to graphic expression, proposing as the key to interpreting this process the subtle line of development that goes from random realism to lost realism, up to intellectual realism and *Verismo* realism, underlining the cultural aspects and contexts. But it is above all in the next chapter, *Lo strano fenomeno della prospettiva*, that the author, an expert in geometry, finds his sincerest tone as a ‘representer’, proposing an interesting and not at all commonplace approach to that ‘diabolical’, more than ‘symbolic’, instrument, as Vittorio Ugo puts it, which is perspective. Casale enters into the *querelle* that has always seen the juxtaposition of those who accuse perspective of betraying reality with its

'symbolic form' and those who emphasize its value as a geometric-mathematical model' of space, radically changing, indeed, the point of view! The clear distinction between the author and the observer of the perspective image, "since the former constructs the image through what he knows and therefore from the mental model of the object, [while the latter] constructs his own mental model recognizing, in the representation, the characters deduced from his perceptive experience" (p. 159), defines the contours of this approach favoring the observer's gaze, and allows Andrea Casale to link the hypotheses for understanding perspective space to the whole context of previous reflections. The geometric relationship that is generated between object, observer and picture is at the same time the origin and the outcome

of a process aimed at generating, on the one hand, the illusion of reality, and on the other hand, the representation of a truth, and both concepts of truth and illusion are interpreted by Casale as distinct tracks on which the observer's experience moves in his investigation of perspective space and its meaning, at the same time perceptual and cognitive. Once again the description of the cultural and methodological contexts is clear and captivating and allows the author to underline, through exemplary cases, the conversational tone of the image both in its relationship with the artist and then in its relationship with the observer until it becomes "a system of transmission between mind and mind" (p. 19) and therefore a system of communication. *Arte da vedere* and *Il bello del disegno* are the two final chapters in which this attempt to shift

the reflection on the image for its fundamental role of communication, into the context of artistic production or architectural design, finds its clearest form of expression. Perhaps slightly less convincing in terms of approach and solidity of the theoretical framework, these two chapters are, instead, the clear and courageous attempt to bring the whole path of reflection back into the context of the production of images in which the artist and the architect (and Andrea Casale interprets both roles) are engaged in their daily work, thus completing the itinerary of reflection on the process that from thought leads to the image with a strong reference to the role that visual thought has in the dimension of the project and, more generally, of the creative process.

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