

Reviews

Valeria Menchetelli

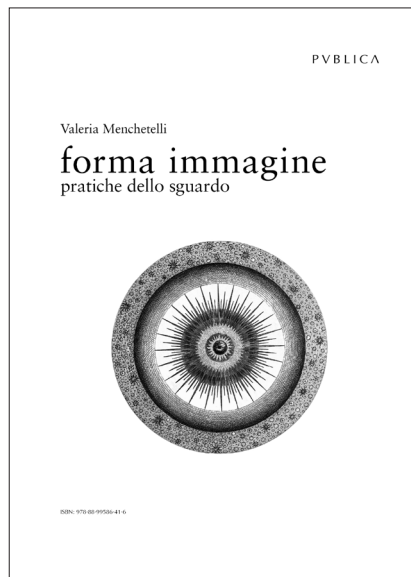
Forma immagine. Pratiche dello sguardo

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To present Valeria Menchetelli's volume, it is worth starting from here and from what the author herself suggests in her interpretation of the semantic ambiguity of this binomial, evoking the idea of "a snapshot, of an overall view taken from a particular framing, the one given by observing from a specific point of view" (p. 14). And it is a particular point of view from which the author observes the vast sphere of the contemporary 'society of images'. It is the point of view of those who understand the practices of the gaze as the protagonists of an argumentative itinerary with which the author moves with agility within the vast horizon of the culture of images, without claiming to deal with it in its overall dimension, but rather aiming from the outset to identify in the logic of categorisation and the exemplificative approach the key to interpret a large number of practices through which it is precisely the gaze that gives form to the image or at least gives it 'one of the possible forms' in a given interpretative context.

If in the title the author seems to want to emphasise the conceptual distinction, now widely shared, between the planes of visual perception and those of graphic production – on the one hand 'form' refers to the creative act of configuration through design, on the other hand 'image' carries with it the idea of the perceptive act brought about by vision – in the development of the subsequent arguments the distinction between the planes blurs in favour of an interpretation that, in several passages, emphasises how the process of shaping images necessitates a continuous transition between these two planes and condenses into that complex operation of 'attribution of meaning' that remains the ultimate reason for both the production and reception practices of images in the context of visual culture.

The articulation of the volume therefore revolves around certain categories of images,

interpreting them precisely as vectors of as many ways in which through the gaze we not only relate to reality, but act in it, in it we experience behaviour, in it we produce effects.

It is no coincidence that the volume opens with a reflection on the relationship between images and society and closes with a concerned observation on the phenomenon of image overload. Images, as the author explains in the opening of the volume, not without reference to a broad scenario of critical reflection on the subject, are born with the aim of connecting man with reality and the eminently visual substance – with all that can be included in this term – that permeates contemporary society, inescapably defines the nature of the relationship between man and his world, and structures his dimension as *homo videns*. And yet, images today experience a paradox, clearly expressed by the crisis of their communicative content and the emptying of their original function, that of, as the author herself tells us, "expressing and conveying an informative message through a process of putting it into graphic form and using specific languages" (p. 24). The rampant 'pan-visual' dimension of the image runs the risk of rendering "its manifestation sterile and inessential, which reduces it to the embarrassing absence of communicative content" (p. 24).

Starting from this consideration, the urgency that animates the text and that in some way makes it not pleonastic, but necessary, to argue once again around the horizon of visual culture, seems to be that of helping the reader to orient himself and move around in the redundancy of images that characterises media behaviour today, by trying to subtract them from a randomness of interpretation and inserting them in a certain number of 'thematic containers', certainly not exhaustive, but useful in opening as many windows of reflection on more general themes around the practices of the gaze, visual culture and contemporary media behaviour.

The 'speaking images' are the first to take the stage, opening up a reflection on the relationship between verbal language and graphic-visual language in which the balances between word and image show themselves with all their power in the processes of thought development. Starting with Calvino's enlightening words regarding the two imaginative processes –that which starts from images and that which starts from words– the author develops a thought rich in references and examples to the point of bringing the dichotomy back into the realm of a "necessary collaboration" (P. 46). It is then the turn of the 'synoptic images' through which the author emphasises and investigates the extraordinary taxonomic and synthesis power with which images have, over time, constructed complex forms of knowledge organisation and promoted the development of critical thought through systemic and overall visions. Catalogues, lists, replicas, series, follow one another in demonstrating the power of "simultaneous vision" (p. 56) and its ability to dominate space and time in a single conceptual synthesis. 'Wrong images' are an opportunity for the author to investigate a critical theme of great interest inaugurated by the new 'aesthetics of error'. From crime to aesthetic ideal, the

error clearly manifests the experimental attitude in digital visual production and not only, intriguingly introducing the category of the unexpected as a value and as an unforeseen activator in the creative process. An aesthetic change whose semantic scope is investigated by the author, starting from the experiments of the 1950s up to an interesting insight into glitch art and its dimension as a collective phenomenon in which error is emancipated to the point of becoming an independent art form. Reflection on the social responsibility of communication is addressed starting with an analysis of the main posters of the 1960s, first and foremost the famous *First things first* by Ken Garland. Attention is then turned specifically to 'life-saving images' with a focus on their ethical and social values, but with particular attention on their ability to convey messages that are fundamental for human health and safety and therefore on the ability of images to modify behaviour. The analysis of the vast and fascinating subject of infographics and their sign-symbolic power is opened by the definition of 'interactive images' with which the author inaugurates the reflection on those systems of signs and symbols that make intelligible the infinite series of visual devices with which we

now interact with the real world. The term 'icon', its hybrid meaning, its clear distinction, from Pierce onwards, with respect to the meanings of index and symbol, its classification in degrees of abstraction, are analysed, through the thought of Moles, Anceschi, Massironi, in order to investigate its coding and decoding mechanisms in the context of informational representations.

It is clear, therefore, that the overview of declinations through which the author classifies the phenomenological dimension of images and the imagery connected to them should not lead us to think that the structure of the volume is exclusively exemplary. The categories identified are only the starting point from which reflections are developed, never trivial, that aim to frame the phenomena from a historical-critical point of view with a large recourse to bibliographic sources and with a rich iconographic apparatus that accompanies and facilitates the comprehension of the themes that cross a broad spectrum of the images' production and of those practices of the glance that, as the author suggests, never as in our times must be "guided by a real awareness and by the opportune cultural instruments to interpret the images that surround us" (p. 25).

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