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# 4 Picturebooks and aesthetic literacy in early childhood education

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## Introduction

In their everyday lives, children are immersed in a world of images. They grow up interacting with images and visual screens long before they learn to read. In toddlers, visual precedes verbal alphabetization. They learn to look at and recognize people, animals, and objects long before they learn to name them. What is more, their assiduous use of digital devices forges their way of looking at the world – a way in which the main route via which they receive information relies on images, certainly not words. If this awareness is combined with a literary, iconographic, aesthetic, and sociocultural expertise, this way of gaining knowledge in childhood can generate effective educational outcomes. Children's literature can contribute to the training of this expertise, particularly as regards iconic narration and aesthetic sensitivity. Aesthetic sensitivity is "present when people begin to engage in sustained questioning about art, particularly in terms of different sorts of awareness regarding qualities of the objects being considered" (Rostankowski 1994: 117). A promising field in children's literature research concerns the study of the nature and elements of aesthetic experiences in picturebooks. Which reading experiences are aesthetic and why? When do children have them? There is ample evidence that children have aesthetic experiences (Muelder Eaton 1994). Reading different kinds of picturebooks enables young readers to develop a sophisticated visual competence and aesthetic literacy, as shown by several recent studies (Arizpe and Style 2003; Beckett 2018; Campagnaro and Dallari 2013; Druker and Kümmerling-Meibauer 2015; Evans 2015; Kümmerling-Meibauer 2014). Seen from this point of view, picturebooks can be a relevant resource in the design of aesthetic education schemes, they can help to reflect upon aesthetic experiences, and they can be "instrumental in drawing students into more rewarding productive activity" (Muelder Eaton 1994: 20).

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how a more articulate and critical relationship with aesthetics through picturebooks may foster a highly formative educational experience and to present a working model that attempts to develop aesthetic literacy in early childhood. This chapter is divided into five parts. The first part deals with the topic of visual prejudice in education and some of the reasons why visual narratives are penalized at school. The second part describes

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a study, “Come and Meet Bruno Munari,” conducted at a nursery school with children from twenty-seven to thirty-nine months old. It focuses on the importance of promoting projects of aesthetic literacy right from early infancy, drawing on the materiality of books, and book-objects in particular. The third part presents an educational and methodological proposal that could prove useful for constructing pathways of aesthetic sensitivity with young readers. This involves using picturebooks that emphasize both the aesthetic and pleasurable experience of reading and the status of the picturebook as an aesthetic object. The fourth part discusses a case study on the picturebook *Emilia Mirabilia* (2016), intended for children of ages 7 and 8, in which this approach is undertaken with more mature readers. Finally, the last part of the chapter underscores how important it is for teachers and educators to develop the expertise they need for fostering the aesthetic literacy of young children. Consequently, this chapter places an emphasis on the semantic complexity and the educational potential which can emerge from a reading of picturebooks and which is crucial in the literary, visual, and aesthetically oriented sense. It can be compared to a unique constellation of textual and visual features “which can be described as a coherent pattern or gestalt, contributing, in the particular work of art, toward the overall artistic design or vision. This uniqueness is, so to speak, part of the logical makeup of the concept of an aesthetic feature” (Haugom Olsen 1981: 525).

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## Visual prejudice in education

Western civilization has given a great deal of space to words, which have always been seen as the ideal, most advanced way to promote the development of thought and human rationality. Within the field of education, too, the word has always occupied an unquestioned pole position, although there were exemplary cases of the declension of words and concepts through visual images already in the seventeenth century, a time when the question of which method to use to construct knowledge was at the heart of the philosophical and scientific debate. Suffice it to mention the work of the Moravian pedagogue Jan Amos Komenský, latinized as Comenius, and the central role he attributed to the image in the theoretical framework of his educational project.

There are various reasons for the primacy of the word over the image. For a start, the written text is perceived as the proper place for the production and preservation of knowledge. Second, images may be an extraordinary way to give shape to a body, real or imaginary objects, scenes of life (for instance, a lovely face), the colors of the sunset, the impetus of a wave, or to capture a historical moment or concept, such as the grandeur of a sovereign or the inscrutability of death, but only words can incarnate and tell the story of a peasant woman or a queen, the occurrence of a phenomenon or an event, bringing out meanings and interpretations. Finally, images have a dangerous invasiveness. They require that one exercise one’s understanding in quite a different way than with words and sentences. An image is “intrusive and evocative; it has an immediate capacity to communicate (needing no mediation, up to a certain level, at least . . .), so it has a potentially

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dangerous power of penetration, especially in children, who are so curious and, at the same time, so defenseless when presented with an image" (Farnè 2006: XIII; my translation). The visual pleasure, nimbleness, and the pervasive way in which images seem to make everything so clear and simple does not usually marry well with the traits of industry, sacrifice, and rigor demanded of study and learning. Images deny "childhood that fundamental relationship with the word and the text, which constitutes the real 'pedagogy of reading'" (XIII; my translation).

According to some thinkers of the past (it suffices to recall Plato's epistemological theory), there is also a close link between an enjoyment of the visually and aesthetically beautiful and a relaxation of morals. Pleasure in beautiful images and aesthetic sensitivity distract us from intellectual goals of a much higher order, breeding hazardous attitudes, and bad habits. Such prejudice has been rooted for hundreds of years in the cultural history of the Western world (Freedberg 2009: 99). There has been a gradual tendency to form the idea that beautiful and seductive images distract us and degrade our thoughts, especially in children, who are led away from the real, edifying educational influence of the word. This historical subjection of the *ikon* to the *logos* permeated the twentieth century, too, and has weighed heavily on the world of education as well, with a fallout on the consequent teaching investments. It was important to invest in words as the expression of a culture of a higher order, and therefore more worthy of a central role. Images were seen instead as belonging to a lower order and cast in a subordinate role, not vital to the processes of knowledge building. It is not by chance that, even today, in a world invaded by a deluge of images, there is still a preference for cultivating the myth of aniconism in numerous school settings in an effort to protect and safeguard the word and children's imagination. Clearly, this approach is out of date. It prevents children from learning how to create order amid the visual chaos in which they live. Instead of developing appropriate paths for their visual literacy, and nurturing in young readers a renewed vital aesthetic sensitivity to help them understand and interpret the world in which they are growing up, there is still a tendency to silence the visual code.

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One scholar who has contributed to placing the role of the image and of visual culture at the center of the epistemic debate is W. J. T. Mitchell. He introduced the concept of the *pictorial turn* in an effort to repair the ancient rift between word and image. In *Picture Theory* (1994), Mitchell demonstrates how, despite the advent of photography, cinema, television, and digital technologies today, the medium intended in its solitary visual dimension has never existed. The *pictorial turn* is not a conquest of modernity and contemporary visual culture. It is a phenomenon that, in different forms and with a variable intensity, has appeared several times in the course of Western history – when linear perspective was developed in the fifteenth century, for instance, or with the invention of photography in the nineteenth century. This shows that images are historically and culturally well established as a product that has always emerged from a mixture of sensory and semiotic elements. The same view is never one-dimensional, and it is the result of optical and sensory combinations in which the social dimension of looking plays a fundamental part.

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The *pictorial turn* is "a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies and figurality" (Mitchell 1994: 16). It is correlated with the awareness that individuals presented with an image and its variegated experiential modalities, such as glancing, looking, observing, examining, and taking visual pleasure, experience a knowledge-gaining modality that is just as complex as the experience of the various reading modalities, e.g., deciphering, decoding, interpreting, and so on. For Mitchell, the visual experience "might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality" (16), because images are nourished by our gaze and by fragments of our thoughts, our imagination and our memories, which never unravel according to a linear, nor even a stellar or reticular logic. In taking shape, images become charged with reminiscences of other images or other aesthetic experiences.

The proliferation of images and visual practices makes it necessary to design appropriate methods of study and analysis, capable of capturing and relaunching a disciplinary territory – that of aesthetic literacy – that has a great deal to offer to education. Aesthetic literacy offers children "new ways of symbolizing, new ways of structuring their experience, so they can see more, hear more, make more connections, embark on unfamiliar adventures into meaning" (Greene 2001: 50). This activity allows them to see nuances out of complexity, to analyze and discuss details, to consider the whole instead of considering only the parts, to find out interpretations and meanings out of it. In their apprehension of what they see, children will "in some sense be free to find their own voices, as they find their eyes and ears" (11). It is a form of learning that combines knowledge, imagination, feeling, and skills. It refers not only to the capacity of recognizing and analyzing aesthetic elements but also to the skills of using and adequately communicating even personal aesthetic experiences.

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## Building aesthetic sensitivity through the materiality of books

Expertise in the sphere of visual and aesthetic literacy is closely connected to the capacity to read, understand, interpret, and use images (even artistic ones) to create knowledge, and to conceive harmonious forms and innovative modalities of visual representation. Adequately cultivated, these skills make it easier to get children reading, training them to observe things critically, and subsequently to engage in a dialogue about the characters, objects, landscapes, and all the numerous symbolic and intertextual references contained in a picturebook (Boulaire 2018). Graphics, shapes, sizes, and materials, combined with the aesthetic dimension, join forces to convert a book into a narrative object. In the case of numerous publications, a specific typographical project (Ramos 2016) or the materiality of a book can encourage processes of independent interaction between the child and the narrative plot: "Materiality, often a vehicle used to deliver a narrative, becomes a narrative by means of added or omitted parts, or through the use of different materials that stimulate the senses, challenging reading experiences" (Veryeri Alaca 2018: 59).

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In early childhood, aesthetic literacy can also transit through the materiality of the book-object and its characteristic features, such as the thickness and texture of the paper or other materials used (paper, cardboard, tissue paper, cellophane, fabric, plastic, etc.), the binding (with glue, staples, thread, string, wire spirals, etc.), the graphic design, which may be obtained in various ways (silkscreen printing, engraving, collage, etc.), and any additional elements (flaps, holes, cuts, etc.). Already from twenty-four months old, children can be invited to explore and play with all these and other elements (e.g., stones, pieces of wood) to create their own multi-material landscape, which can prompt their first narrative efforts and serve as a bridge to more sophisticated storytelling. This is the case, for instance, with a reading experience entitled "Come and Meet Bruno Munari: An Educational Pathway with Nursery School Children," developed with pre-readers from twenty-seven to thirty-nine months old at a municipal nursery school in the province of Treviso (Italy) during the academic year 2016–2017 as part of a more extensive historical-educational study on the figure of Bruno Munari (Campagnaro 2017).

The aim of this reading experience was to cultivate these young children's sensory and aesthetic literacy by focusing on materiality and material objects as a pathway leading them to understand more complex and articulated plots. Precisely such a plot can be found in Munari's *Prelibri* (Prebooks, 2018), an ingenious series of tactile-sensory micro-narratives intended for children up to three years old. The set of *Prebooks* consists of twelve innovative and intriguing 10-cm$^2$ book-objects created by Bruno Munari in 1980. Leaving aside for a moment, the undeniable importance of Munari's *Prebooks* in this research (Campagnaro 2019), it seems useful for the purposes of the present contribution to focus on the first step along this research pathway (preparatory to the reading of the *Prebooks* with the young children involved) in order to emphasize the significance of a direct relationship with an object, be it a page, a stone, or a piece of string unwound along the way toward the aesthetic literacy of children, however small.

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This first step in my research activity was divided into three parts. In the first, the children were left free to explore various materials (wood, plastic, stone, paper, and thread) and note their most obvious features: color, consistency, strength, and so on. (Figure 4.1).

In the second part, the researcher prompted them to become aware of more refined visual and aesthetic stimuli, such as the sensation produced by their texture, the harmonious colors, the sense of warmth, and the sonorities of the different materials – the children produced various sounds by rubbing them, crumpling them, hitting them against each other, and so on. This second part was particularly important because it enabled the children to realize how lots of little stories can revolve around a little object with no immediately apparent narrative function, like for instance a stone or a thread. The third and last part of the first step marked the start of the work on the children's aesthetic literacy. Each child was given a sheet of cardboard and told that they could place on it whichever materials they liked best to create their own personal artistic composition. In other words, the children were invited to create *tactile tables* (Figure 4.2) along the lines of those conceived

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*Figure 4.1* Exploring materials to create new aesthetic experiences

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by Bruno Munari in 1930s and then later tested with children starting from the 1970s (Munari 1985). *Tactile tables* are a Futurist concept and technique invented by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1920, which aims to foster the art of touch and a tactile education by developing sensitivity in the fingertips.

Inviting children to test this kind of aesthetic experience allows them to become actively involved and engaged with curiosity, interest, and feeling (Greene 2001: 73). This experience became for them more complex and richer and fuller with meaning. Training them to look at things from different perspectives (including the aesthetic perspective), prompting them to organize and revise the sensations deriving from exploring the sensory nature of materials, helping them to verbalize their perceptions, using materials to compose a new form of aesthetic communication – all these actions were important to the subsequent reading of the *Prebooks* and other picturebooks by Munari. This activity of materially interacting with objects had a positive effect on the children not only from the cognitive standpoint, such as improving their attention span, refining their gestures, and fine-tuning their verbalization and interaction with books, but also in terms of their social interaction. Creating their compositions on their tactile tables facilitated cooperation: the children could help each other to create the sensory and

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*Figure 4.2* Developing aesthetic literacy through materials and tactile-sensory micro-narratives with young children

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material effects that best reflected their aesthetic tastes and suggest alternative uses of the materials and objects available (note, e.g., the little girl in Figure 4.2 passing a sheet of cellophane to the other child). Just like taste, aesthetic sensibility can be cultivated and trained and "unlike other sorts of knowledge a person may come to have in his or her lifetime, to be able to engage in aesthetic awareness requires very little beyond what a toddler learns in beginning to talk" (Rostankowski 1994: 118). During my research, children were able to approach problem-solving artistically, e.g., building an aesthetic composition based on chromatic and material rhythms, and imaginatively, such as communicating a feeling, a memory, and so on. This awareness of aesthetic elements, e.g., colors, shapes, and dimensions, and of the sense of aesthetic properties, such as gracefulness, harmony, and unity, are the rudiments of aesthetic literacy.

## Aesthetic literacy through picturebooks: a methodological approach

The experiment conducted with the nursery school children highlighted the value of designing harmonious and well-balanced educational pathways that can

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also promote children's aesthetic literacy. By aesthetic literacy, I mean the ability to "know how to look" at the products of human culture and to know how to infer meanings from them in a dimension related to the concept of "beauty." In its broadest definition, aesthetic literacy is an awareness and appreciation of pleasant sensory experiences. Children learn how to let "their energies go out to the works in an enlarging perception and a focusing of attention, the fields over which their imaginations can play deepen, diversify, and expand" (Greene 1986: 57). More narrowly, it means the ability to critically examine works of art based on criteria defined by our culture (Feeney and Moravcik 1987: 7). It is the ability "to respond to the uniqueness, the singular quality of things – to value individual integrity and to reject the cliché and the stereotype" (Ross 1981: 158). Aesthetic literacy may cover various domains in the scholarly investigation of children's literature in general and in picturebooks in particular. Both realms can serve as extraordinary researching and teaching tools which can help us to cultivate this expertise:

> While most students will not become artists, they can be taught to respond to aesthetic levels of meaning in literature, music, painting, film, sculpture, architecture, and other manifestations of art. Once gained, aesthetic responsiveness does more than open up a lifetime of experiences in the arts. As the ability to read provides a foundation for learning, aesthetic literacy allows individuals to grasp more fully the significance of their lives, opening up possibilities of selfhood and self-renewal that would otherwise not be available.
> (Sykes 1982: 597–598)

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Aesthetic literacy through picturebooks entails making a determined effort to satisfy our innate attraction to beauty; gradually nurturing our awareness of the part played by art in incrementing our humanity; striving to respond to a growing demand for refinement and elegance; and rediscovering reality in aesthetic terms. Another way to develop aesthetic literacy through picturebooks is by comparing and contrasting pictures with art production, art history, and art criticism.

Picturebooks come in many forms and can be used in many ways in fostering aesthetic literacy from early childhood on, at school and elsewhere (Arizpe, Colomer, and Roldàn 2014; Campagnaro 2018). In the field of education, however, there is no valid and effective single method or standard approach for making the best use of picturebooks for the purposes of children's aesthetic literacy. According to the contemporary pedagogical view on reading, it is impossible to separate a methodological proposal from the community of readers for which it is intended, or from the social, cultural, geographical setting in which it is implemented. There are always countless variables to consider, and very often what acts as a litmus paper is the role of teachers or educators who interpret, set the tone, and adapt or rearrange their educational pathways to suit the narrative needs and preferences of the children they teach.

It nonetheless seems useful for the purposes of our discussion to reflect on the need to develop a working model, or rather a methodological proposal, that

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attempts to take into account all the possible stages of a well-organized approach to the development of aesthetic literacy. To look is not the same as to see. In the cacophony of school and daily life, teachers and educators tend to forget that. That is why is so important to maintain a certain continuity in teaching of aesthetic literacy in the classrooms from preschool to primary school. It increases aesthetic maturity, it prevents becoming sunk into habitual routines, and it leads children away from reductive thinking into the rich complexity of the world:

> There is always more to be found, horizons to be breached, limits to be broken through always untapped possibilities . . . In a world so focused on objectives and results, efficiency, effectiveness, and the rest, I would lay particular stress on what lies beyond the moment's grasp, on the uses of defamiliarizing the overly familiar (and thus invisible, inaudible) world.
>
> (Greene 2001: 206)

The goal of this methodological approach is to convey the importance of knowing how to construct and promote a culture of the visual, a more conscious and critical attention to the aesthetic dimension already in nursery school (in three- to five-year-olds) and to continue it also in primary school (in six- to ten-year-olds).

The methodological approach that we propose here is an itinerary completed in five stages, as outlined below (Figure 4.3).

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The first stage consists in helping young readers, especially those with a limited visual culture, to understand and use their perceptive sensitivity by means of a more conscious and interactive reading of images in their picturebooks. Any cognitive numbness can be countered (in the second stage) by presenting children with less descriptive and referential picturebooks (Campagnaro 2015), and opting to read picturebooks in which the images are more challenging, further removed from the more commonplace visual themes. Take the case of *I cinque malfatti* (The Five Misfits, 2014), by Beatrice Alemagna, where the theme of a topsy-turvy world along with the topics of diversity and self-acceptance that permeate the whole story also emerges metaphorically in the visual narrative (see the upside-down character in Figure 4.4, bottom left).

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By presenting a rich variety of iconic narrations, discussing them, and stitching them around the young readers' emotional and experiential world, teachers and educators can embark together with the children (even of preschool age, from

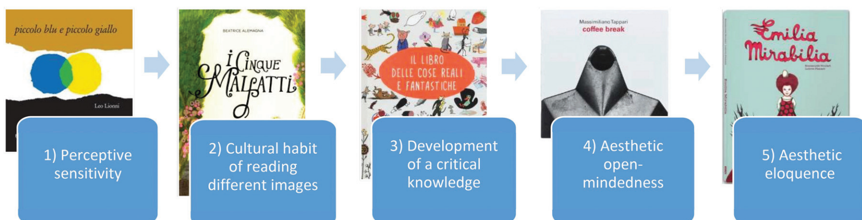


*Figure 4.3* The five stages of an itinerary of aesthetic literacy

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*Figure 4.4* Illustration from Beatrice Alemagna's *I cinque malfatti*. Milano: Topipittori, 2014

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three to five years old) on a path of visual analysis and comparison, as in the picturebook *Il libro delle cose reali e fantastiche* (original German title *Das Beste von Allem*; in English *The Best of All*), edited by Jutta Bauer and Katja Spitzer and published in 2016. This picturebook is a curious catalog of many things, such as flowers, trees, animals, monsters, robots, angels, siblings, different kinds of death, hats, panties, and so on, portrayed by sixty illustrators, with almost 900 pictures (Figure 4.5). It is a relevant picturebook for discussing visual analysis with children. Teachers and educators can do so by proposing a multitude of other different illustrated works: ABC books, concept books, wordless picturebooks, pop-up and movable books, wimmelbooks, illustrated poems, photography books, informational books, artists' books, and so on (Kümmerling-Meibauer 2018).

Children can be helped to develop an aesthetic-literary approach and openness to criticism even from an early age. For this purpose, discussions within small groups and the application of comparative analysis of picturebooks at school are relevant methodological tools. For instance, teachers and educators can discuss the dynamic relationship between image, text, and graphics, or point out shapes, composition, and artistic style. They can speak about the narrative processes, the iconographic symbolism, and the emotional relationship established by means of the written text and the images. By doing so, they can help young readers to

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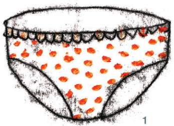
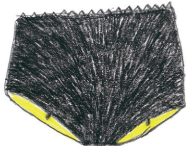

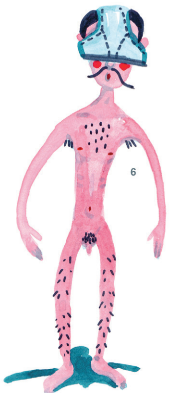
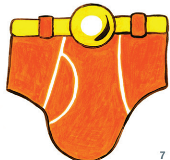

*Figure 4.5* Illustration by Jutta Bauer from Katja Spitzer's *Il libro delle cose reali e fantastiche*. Rome: Edizione Lapis, 2016

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see (third stage) what is not so evident, i.e., the hidden features, and to realize that – between the lines of a visual text – there is also a great deal that is "not said."

It is then up to the curiosity and ability of the young readers – with some "whispered" input from the adult working with them – to discover and identify references and other possible formulas for interpreting a text. The assimilation of a grammar of the visual and the development of a greater familiarity with comparative analysis predisposes the children to take less obvious visual horizons into consideration (fourth stage). This is essential in the case of more complex, demanding, surreal, symbolic, or abstract illustrations, which occupy a place outside the realism and visual context of daily routine. They can open up horizons that often lead the children to express, in their own aesthetic choices, a preference for a more articulated, less trite language that sometimes goes against the flow, becoming freer and more personal than the flattened and standardized figurative tastes proposed at school and elsewhere.

This working on the visual level helps children to acquire an aesthetic eloquence (the fifth stage), that will subsequently give them a chance to use their imagination, and the power to "evoke images in absence" (Calvino 2002: 103), and draw visual inferences on various levels (Drucker 2018; Kümmerling-Meibauer et al. 2015; Sipe and Pantaleo 2008). This is an aspect that makes children (especially those visually better developed and aesthetically more mature) show a particular interest in picturebooks that have made a creative and original use of artistic solutions refined in the world of the arts and drawn not only from the twentieth century. We can find artistic and iconographic re-actualizations of art movements such as Cubism, Dadaism, pop art, and conceptual art in the original screen-printed reinterpretations of the picturebooks illustrated by Blexbolex: *Ballata* (Ballads, 2013), *Immaginario* (People, 2008), and *Stagioni* (Seasons, 2010). Moreover, there are picturebooks that use fragmentation and decomposition, as in *Coffee Break* (2006) by Massimiliano Tappari, or the compositive rearrangements of certain environments, using collage but also other alternatives to paper like string and rope, wire, and small domestic items, as in *La carezza della farfalle* (The Caress of the Butterfly, 2005) by Christian Voltz.

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It often happens that illustrators explicitly or implicitly include genuine icons and symbols of our cultural and artistic history in their visual landscapes. Take for example the illustration in Figure 4.4, drawn from the picturebook *I cinque malfatti* (The Five Misfits, 2014). This picturebook tells the story of a somewhat provocative encounter between a "perfect type" and five delightful friends that are "*malfatti*" (i.e., badly made: one has a hole in it; one is bent in two; one is too soft; one is upside down; and the fifth is . . . a disaster). We can see them all in the bottom left-hand corner of the illustration. The five live happily together in a great big ramshackle house which is situated in the middle of the picture. In her story, Alemagna has characters, objects, and scenarios with regular geometrical shapes engaging with others that are distinctly out of proportion and misshapen in a game of deconstruction and reconstruction of the characters' identities that is highly effective and empathic for adults and young readers alike. The whole story takes place inside a house that seems to have been shaped around the attitudes

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and peculiarities of its characters. As the story overturns the points of view, it does not escape the careful reader that, whether deliberately or otherwise, the house of the five *malfatti* bears a strong visual resemblance to the house in Santa Monica designed by Frank Gehry, one of the most prominent exponents of the deconstructivist architectural movement – a very strange house indeed, all askew but genuine, made of recycled materials and crooked window panes. This is a good example of how, from the sense of a story and from looking at an illustration, we can activate educational pathways that lead us to reflect together with the children more broadly on the meaning and value of the aesthetic dimension of deconstructivism. The visual "deconstruction" of Alemagna's five characters and of their crooked house invites us to draw critical comparisons on the value of different geometries, shapes, architectural spaces, and art forms in an educational process that is absolutely feasible, as already demonstrated by a primary school teacher, Antonella Capetti, in her book *A scuola con gli albi* (Picturebooks at School, 2018). This is an illustrated diary charting three years of a teacher's experience (from September 2013 to June 2016) with challenging picturebooks used in two classes of twenty-nine and twenty-six children at a school in the province of Como in northern Italy. The children were observed in first grade (at six years old), second grade (at seventh years old), and third grade (at eight years old). Complete with illustrations from the picturebooks and the children's graphical output, the diary provides a detailed account of the teaching activities conducted by the author with these children for three hours a week, in an educational process designed to develop their literacy, including their aesthetic literacy. The diary demonstrates how the children's variegated exploration of the imaginary visual world of several challenging picturebooks, like the one by Beatrice Alemagna, proved a powerful antidote to visual and aesthetic stereotypes.

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## The visionary power of objects: a case study on *Emilia Mirabilia*

Reading and discussing with children picturebooks that foster an inclination to openness and a way of defamiliarizing the well-known world have a fundamental role in developing a child's aesthetic literacy. As we are reminded by John Berger:

> It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sunset. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight.
> (1972/2009: 9)

From this point of view, objects in picturebooks can play a fundamental role. The construction of an individual's first significant relationship with objects occurs specifically in early childhood, when children acquire the capacity to manipulate objects materially, use them functionally, and attribute to them a role as privileged interlocutors in their cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and symbolic

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experience. The way in which objects are represented in picturebooks thus takes on a considerable value – a value that lies both in what they are materially made of, and in what they represent. The work *Emilia Mirabilia* (2016) by Emmanuelle Houdart and Ludovic Flamant is an example of this exclusive relationship that children have with the educational world of things.

Pebbles, shells, branches, chicken bones, books abandoned on a bench, little pieces of string, sheets of pink and blue paper, bus and train tickets, cinema tickets, cigarette butts, sand from the beach, ribbons and cocoons, and birds alive and dead: these are just some of the objects that fill the room of Emilia Mirabilia, a girl who right from an early age has loved to collect objects of all kinds. Emilia enjoys staying alone in her room, in a sort of *Wunderkammer* where she accumulates *naturalia* and *artificialia*, passing her time filling and emptying containers, contemplating and rearranging her things. To escape from her parents (who worry that the girl spends too much time on her own), Emilia digs herself a hiding place in the midst of the profusion of objects populating her room. But one day, as she goes deeper and deeper, she meets an ogre (Figure 4.6). She manages to escape from the terrible creature by attacking him with an ogre's tooth that she retrieves as she enters his stomach.

This picturebook is challenging for various reasons. For a start, is fair to say that children opening these pages find illustrations that are demanding, controversial, and for adults even disturbing (Evans 2015: 5). *Emilia Mirabilia*'s story

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*Figure 4.6* Illustration from Emmanuelle Houdart and Ludovic Flamant's *Emilia Mirabilia*. Modena: #logosedizioni, 2016

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conveys a dense network of narrative mechanisms, symbolisms, and intertextual references that hone children's capacity to think critically and their aesthetic sense. The protagonist in the story has a very troubling and personal problem, and it is only after digging carefully to interpret the images (e.g., the metaphorical use of the egg on Emilia's head) that readers realize this has to do with the arrival of a little brother or sister. The picturebook can also evoke the children's personal worries and concerns and help them "to come to terms with them by finding solutions" (6). Third, the way word and image are brought together in this picturebook challenges adults' expectation about what is acceptable and what is controversial for children, "questioning widely held notions of childhood and suitability" (Arizpe 2015: XVIII). Finally, this picturebook is also a challenge because, with its images, it reminds adults (teachers, educators, etc.) that in the world of children there is a primordial density in which everything is necessarily present and also totally mixed up: words, figures, people, animals, and objects. A universe where it is difficult, if not impossible, to isolate one element from another (Starace 2013: 46).

The children's engagement and critical thinking emerge more clearly from a case study conducted on this picturebook, as part of an educational project to improve children's reading and aesthetic literacy entitled "The Secret Life of Objects: A Fantastic Journey Inside Your Own Home." As a part of the so-called Kids University held at the University of Padua in October 2018, I conducted this project with a class of 24 seven- and eight-year-old children who attend a primary school in the province of Padua. The project built on a pedagogical study conducted by the phenomenologist Vanna Iori in 1996 on the influence that living spaces, their material substance, and the choice and arrangement of furnishings and objects have in shaping our habits, behavior, and aesthetic inclinations. Such studies also add to our understanding of the actuality and utility of offering young readers a rich repertoire of familiar and obsolete objects, based on Gianni Rodari's suggestions in 1973 concerning the importance of the "household imagination" (Rodari 1997: 103). The picturebook *Emilia Mirabilia* pays particular attention to depicting interiors, and objects especially, that are modeled on the shape and mood of the protagonist. Some of these objects refer explicitly to the artistic experiences of Dadaism and Surrealism, such as the frequent presence in the illustrations of a large human eye with the iris in the foreground, which recalls Magritte's painting *The False Mirror* (1928).

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This picturebook was the object of multiple semantic interpretations advanced by the children. Among the most recurrent was the idea that *Emilia Mirabilia* is the story of a very special little girl breaking free. This narration, which the teachers found rather difficult and controversial, seemed extraordinarily effective to the children, who particularly appreciated it. They showed a surprising degree of interest and pleasure, and attachment to this book. They asked to read it several times and snatched it out of each other's hands. They paused on several double-page spreads at length, observing, seeking, and interpreting the objects which the pages contained, such as the tooth, the egg, the shells, and the birds.

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One child kept returning to an image of battle, in which Emilia stands trembling on a palpitating red heart that is split in two.

In addition to the story, which is exciting, the reasons for so much interest also relate to the intertextual and interpictorial dialogue (Hoster Cabo, Lobato Suero, and Ruiz Campos 2018) that the authors weave between the events of the story, with several objects and certain ancestral narrative sediments. We refer particularly to two rather disturbing symbolic elements – blood and teeth – which proved a remarkable stimulus for talking with the children about the concept of beauty in a picturebook, the relative nature of this concept, and the value of the aesthetic dimension. The young readers showed a lively interest in the illustrator's insistence on the apotropaic power of the color red and on "the vivifying power of blood" (Giallongo 2016: 32) that flows like an underground river in many of the illustrations, disrupting the order and the barricades of objects erected by Emilia, solidifying around her in multiple salvific branches, like veins or hair, branches of trees, and ramifications of leaves.

For the adequately stimulated reader, these ramifications cannot fail to recall to mind the blood that spurts from the severed head of Medusa the Gorgon and coagulates to form splendid branches of coral. The other literary and metaphorical image that aroused the children's imagination was the tooth that Emilia stole from the ogre: after the battle, the girl kept it jealously tied around her neck like a lucky charm. The tooth is an inanimate bodily object, but it is wrapped in an inscrutable halo of mystery. Its presence in Emilia's story takes us back through the centuries of children's stories. The scholar Angela Giallongo (1990) reminds us, e.g., that – already in the Middle Ages – it was customary to hang necklaces of wolves' teeth (evidently attributed a beneficial power) around the necks of children who were acquiring their permanent teeth (179). In Christian symbolism as well, one finds representations of the teeth of wolves, sharks, and dragons being worn for luck. In her historical reconstruction of the material and symbolic culture of the Middle Ages, the historian Chiara Frugoni mentions as a proof of the diffusion of this practice two images from the Cassone Adimari by Lo Scheggia (1450), one depicting "the infant Jesus with around his neck a cross, a wolf's or dragon's tooth, and a branch of coral" and the other "the infant Jesus with charms: a wolf's or dragon's tooth, and a branch of coral" (2017: 55; my translation).

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Sharing these considerations with the children in class proved a powerful way to channel their interests, words and critical reflections. These actions can be seen as belonging to stages four (aesthetic open-mindedness) and five (aesthetic eloquence) of our methodological proposal. They demonstrate the real relevance in educational pathways of knowing how to weave into the construction of children's aesthetic literacy multiple domains, including the literary, iconographic, symbolic, cultural, social, and historical.

The case study on *Emilia Mirabilia* highlights numerous types of visual and semantic references that an illustration in a children's book can bring out, even in books intended for young readers. In my theoretical orientation, reading should

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always be intended as an authentic encounter with the young reader, who must always be free to accept or reject the offer of a story. But picturebook reading also helps us to reveal the significant educational potential that illustrations for children can convey, contributing to the construction of aesthetic literacy. Thanks to their high degree of narrativity and the numerous symbolisms they contain, these figures, e.g., the illustrations in *Emilia Mirabilia*, can stimulate children's intellectual capacity for comprehension and interpretation, particularly promoting the development of hermeneutic capabilities in the aesthetic sphere.

## Designing educational paths for children's aesthetic literacy

Pictures and aesthetic literacy do not enjoy much attention and visibility in the world of education. The assumed capacity of individuals to place themselves initially in a direct, independent dialogue with images, without needing to learn an alphabet, has undermined the concern for developing children's visual and aesthetic literacy. This is because, at first glance, the image seems to impose nothing on readers, neither a grammar nor a visual syntax, leaving them free to find or invent their own meanings, although specific studies have demonstrated the complexity of the expertise required to read and interpret images (Bang 2000; Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; Mendelsund 2014). Although they are immersed in a culture of images, children often lack appropriate tools for reading, understanding, and freely choosing from the variegated iconic universe of children's books.

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The design of educational itineraries for children's aesthetic literacy with the aid of challenging picturebooks should envisage pathways that are multiform and subject to marked topical and experiential variations: from the types of image (single or sequential, and referential or polysemantic) to the aesthetic valence of the narrations, from the reading conditions (as in a dialogue, reading aloud, in groups, or unassisted and alone), to the role and competence of the adult acting as a mediator, capable of identifying symbolic references and artistic intertextualities.

The methodological proposal advanced in this chapter – as illustrated by the visual analysis of some challenging picturebooks – shows that decoding an image is an insidious process that cannot by any means be taken for granted. The apparent ease with which an illustration can be read can actually conceal a semantic complexity of an entirely different nature. From this point of view, the training provided for teachers and educators is crucial. They are often ill-prepared and ill-equipped to deal with the rich and sometimes disorienting editorial panorama of contemporary children's picturebooks. The problem is further complicated by the hybrid nature of the picturebook, falling midway between literature and art. Being trained and equipped to recognize, expand on, and add value to the multiple opportunities for aesthetic enrichment offered by a picturebook can become a winning strategy for teachers and educators in their efforts to build effective, enriching educational projects and to nurture children's capacity for critical thinking right from an early age.

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