



**Geographical education and visual: lessons from the past.
A brief comment to Cristiano Giorda's
L'immagine del mondo nella geografia dei bambini
(FrancoAngeli 2021)**

Erica Neri, Stefano Malatesta^a

^a Dipartimento di Scienze Umane per la Formazione "Riccardo Massa", University of Milano-Bicocca, Milan, Italy

Received: March 2022 – Accepted: April 2022

Abstract

Geography and "the visual" are an inseparable duo: a powerful relationship that elicits research and papers in both geographic research and academic geography. Starting from the commentary on Giorda's book, this short essay proposes a general reflection on the function that visual teaching aids (maps, images) have in producing and reproducing geographical stereotypes and imagery. The commentary specifically focuses on the value that work such as Giorda's has for those involved in research in the field of geography in education today.

Keywords: Academic Geography, Historical Cartography, Scholastic Geography, Visual Geography

1. Introduction

Cristiano Giorda's volume, *L'immagine del mondo nella geografia dei bambini. Una ricerca sui materiali scolastici e parascolastici italiani fra Otto e Novecento* [The image of the world through children's geography. A survey of Italian scholastic and extracurricular materials in the 19th and 20th centuries] is the first outcome of a research project called "Atlanti e manuali di geografia, dal passato di carta al futuro digitale" [Atlases and geography textbooks, from the past on paper to the digital future]. By adopting an historical perspective, Giorda's book brilliantly highlights the various and

multi-layered connections among geographical education, national buildings, and geographical narratives along the first decades of the Kingdom of Italy. Our comment focuses on a few implications directly linked to the visual ramifications of these connections.

2. Geographical education and the visual

The relationship between geography and the "visual" has always been characterised by a significant level of complexity. Within the framework of the so-called "New Cultural Geography" representation has become a key

topic in geographical thought. Cosgrove (1989) defined landscapes as “flickering texts”, with much emphasis placed on the structure of iconic signs aesthetically representing social conflict, patterns, and constructs. In this perspective, images and languages are not innocent windows on reality but incorporate opaque, distorted, and arbitrary mechanisms of representation (Mitchell, 1986, p. 8). “Oculocentrism” has dominated the path of geography over its history as an academic subject, whilst our discipline describes reality through visual representations, so much so that visual analysis has been interpreted as a perspective inherent in geographical knowledge, which for a long time required no in-depth methodological investigation (Ryan, 2003). Recently, visual methods have gained a new status as a framework in geographical research. As Bignante reminds us, geography currently assumes that each gaze produces its own description of a place or phenomenon, which does not necessarily match previous, subsequent, or contemporary descriptions given of the same location (2011).

The “visual” is characterised by profound complexity, and this has challenged the exclusivity of the forms of visual description traditionally privileged by geography, calling on geographers to take visual representations more “seriously” in the context of disciplinary reflection, and to understand what they “can do” with them and why they should be interested in doing so (Rose, 2007). Though visual perception is not just crucial to geographical research, it is especially so for instruction in geography. As Caputo (1997) points out, working with images aims to encourage researchers and/or study participants to explore and use their ability to reflect, imagine and look at reality from different angles. The image, more than objective reality, represents an object to be decoded.

For this reason, studying its characteristics, therefore observing it, examining it, and questioning it, means giving life to an interpretation of reality that was not present at the beginning of the course: the image does not speak, it is made to speak by its audience and in this sense, it represents a tool that generates, not dispenses, knowledge (Bignante, 2010). Therefore, it is necessary to use a critical approach to visuals: images must be taken

seriously, and we must approach them in a reflexive/self-reflective manner, both when we are dealing with existing visual material and when we or, even more, when students participating in our teaching activities or the subjects involved in our research, produce them.

Teachers should always contextualise images, taking their performative power into account whilst thinking about the relationship we have with those images and the way we look at them. Images, photographs, maps, etc., do not merely convey information and representations. They can be eloquent interpretations of the meaning of a place or people’s feelings about certain environments and landscapes. They can show or bring out sensory relationships with the world, and they also can create strong reactions in people who look at them. For all these reasons, they can play a relevant role in many visual research methodologies, particularly in projects interested in exploring people’s sense of place and feelings (Rose, 2011).

The use of visuals to support teaching, to enhance lessons, motivate pupils and make subject content more accessible is common practice. Visual representations strike a chord with all and sundry, and certain visual imprints can remain engraved in our minds for a lifetime. Children’s discovery and appropriation of environments take place mainly through the affective-emotional channel (Giorda, 2014) and visual representations are undoubtedly suitable tools to stimulate this channel. Therefore, as tools they are very influential, because they are able to introduce children to environments they have never experienced with their bodies, developing a strong sense of stewardship and care for those places.

Teaching the use of visuals in geography is a valid support, since they offer a language that is easy to understand, which encourages the observer’s attention, allowing pupils to relate to the spaces represented through cognitive and effective intelligence. Visual representations are powerful tools both in the field of non-verbal communication and in geographic research and have made it possible, even before the advent of more sophisticated technologies, to compare places and landscapes that are very distant from each other in time and space, grasping their similarities, differences, and transformations (Pasquinelli d’Allegra, 2020, pp. 216-217).

Finally, among the geographic tools for indirect observation, a fundamental role is played by the language of cartography, universally recognised as geography's peculiar code, it is one of the privileged means used to illustrate the world and, as Raffaele Mantegazza reminds us, one of the ways of "indelibly imprinting the signs of power on the territory" (Mantegazza, 2009, p. 56). Although it is a medium that represents a remarkable support to teaching activities, it brings with it many didactic, ideological, and cultural problems that have been underlined by several Italian geographers (Bettinelli, 2005; Squarcina, 2006; Giorda, 2006; Malatesta, 2010). Therefore its use, from the first grades, should never be separated from careful analysis and critical reflection. Cristiano Giorda reminds us that "teaching *with* maps means giving order to geographical space, and therefore interpreting it, explaining what its most important elements are and why. Teaching *a* map, on the other hand, means transmitting to the student the knowledge needed to distinguish maps from reality, to understand that maps are tools created for a specific purpose, tools that can be built in schools by following rules and reflecting on what they are meant to represent" (Giorda, 2006, p. 79).

3. Academic geography and school geography: an historical "dynamic duo"

The complex relations, in most cases bi-univocal and unequal, between geography as an academic discipline and geography as a subject taught at school have been the object of reflection for many decades, especially, though not exclusively, thanks to the initial vision given by Marxist and radical scholars (Lacoste, 1976; Capel, 1977), and, more recently, to the inspiration provided by "critical geopolitics" (Dalby, 1991; dell'Agnese, 2005). Italian geography has contributed to the articulation of this debate in an even more specific direction, by directly addressing the didactics of our discipline (Squarcina, 2009; Giorda and Puttilli, 2011), also, as Giorda proposes in this volume, by analysing geographical works from the 19th

century (Schmidt di Friedberg, 2010). The question that unites these perspectives is essentially epistemological: to try to understand, and at least critically read, mechanisms, practices, and objects through which geographical categories have been developed in academia, together with other public institutions (in Italy, for example, the *Istituto Geografico Militare*) and private ones, such as the Touring Club or publishing houses, are transferred into the transmission of geographical knowledge in schools. Giorda's volume provides a further contribution to the discussion of this subject. As made clear in the first paragraph, his book presents a reflection on cartography, one of the most relevant systems of representation in the transfer of geographical categories in academic teaching. Huckle (1997), reminds us that in addition to forming the image of the world, based precisely on constructs and categories elaborated in the academic sphere, school geography contributes to the formation of ethics for "future" citizens: ethics that are in line with the dominant political context and ideology.

Consequently, reading works such as Giorda's can contribute to understanding whether the materials, in this case, maps, used in school, reinforce the ideological character of academic knowledge and whether teaching, far from being neutral, reinforces the power that geography has in influencing the production of imaginary spaces or not. In this perspective, a work of historical reconstruction such as the one presented by Giorda has, therefore, a twofold objective. The first is contextual to the period under consideration: that is, the decades between the formation of the Kingdom of Italy and the establishment of a national school system. The second is, however, unrelated to that context and is, perhaps, more relevant to the study of geographic education in the present context. On the one hand, in fact, we have a careful work of documentation and critical reading of the production and use of cartography for the transmission of geographical knowledge in a specific historical period pervaded by a clear philosophical direction (first neo-positivist and then idealist), motivated by a political intent, which, over the distance of time, returns to us in all its clarity: to use the image of a "unified" country to reinforce the association between

State and Nation. It is not by chance that Giorda, in his analysis of the cartographic image, uses the expression *La nascita di una nazione* [*Birth of a nation*] (Chapter 9). On the other hand, as shown by several contributions of European geographers (Winter, 1997; Szakács, 2007; Budke, 2009), we can understand how the ideological function of school geography, through maps and images, is independent of the historical moment and runs through the whole process of its institutionalization, in academia, in publishing and in schools (Capel, 1977).

4. Categories, Narratives and Discourses

In the last part of his book, *Letture geografiche, filastrocche, viaggi: una lunga tradizione didattica* [*Geographical readings, nursery rhymes, travel: a long teaching tradition*], Giorda includes travel narratives and other textual forms such as “*filastrocche*” in his analysis, highlighting the weight that these products of popular culture (but also of literature) have had in the construction of the nation. The construction of the nation is one of the nodes, as explained in the previous paragraph, that makes work such as that documented by Giorda fascinating from the point of view of the study of the history of geographical thought. Among these, some are significant not only because of their intellectual value but also for those involved in teaching geography today: they are almost an admonition.

The first concerns the power that maps of the world (planispheres, but not only) have in creating spatial hierarchies and in visually showing a centre, where however, for geometric reasons, a centre also does not exist (Chapter 5 *L'immagine del mondo* [*The image of the world*]). These maps are often accompanied by other iconic elements (drawings, later photographs, details of objects, human figures or monuments) that make up the iconographic corpus of atlases, textbooks, picture books and posters and that contribute to reinforcing the stereotypes of gender, race and simple associations between place and culture that still resonate in many contemporary narratives. Among these (Chapter 6. *L'immagine dell'altro* [*The image of the other*]) the “other”, the exotic and the oriental catalysed the production of

discourse aimed at justifying colonial endeavours at the turn of the century.

Finally, perhaps from a geographical point of view, the most interesting and topical reflection of the book concerns the significant role that school cartography, posters and atlases have played in the process of the regionalisation of our country, or rather of its representation as a unitary state organised into regions. In this sense, representation and naming are fully in line with the processes of territorialisation enunciated by Angelo Turco (2010). Giorda includes, in a chapter called *la nascita di una nazione e delle sue regioni* [*the birth of a nation and its regions*], a map from the child's atlas *Atlantico Popolare* [*The people's little atlas*] by Roggero G. in Giorda, 2021, in which already in the early 1920s, Italy was being defined based on geomorphological boundaries, the sea and the Alps, which in many school materials are still called natural boundaries, contributing to their reification and legitimation as political limits, but which have been organised internally into administrative units. A single nation with specific cultural traits, often easily represented in images, enclosed in a state defined by natural boundaries, and organised into administrative units make up the key triad for teaching the geography of Italy that still permeates many popular and educational materials from that era.

5. Historical Atlas today: Neglected products?

“Every text is an atlas and every atlas is a text”, Franco Farinelli tried using this evocative statement to define what an atlas is. The only difference, although extremely relevant, lies in the two symbolic systems they refer to: the alphabetical system and the linear-geometric system (Farinelli, 2009). As Enrico Squarcina reminds us, school textbooks have been, and in part still are, considered marginal among the productions of culture and knowledge. In particular, primary school textbooks are perceived, by scholars, as minor compared to papers and “scientific products”. Furthermore, textbook and didactic publications have been subject to limited conservation. Initially, only national libraries included schoolbooks in their

collections (Squarcina, 2006). Nevertheless, as Fulvio de Giorgi reminds us, the importance of schoolbooks as a historical source with multiple implications – on the level of cultural history, social history, political history, geographical history, and history of education – is now a deeply discussed research issue. As experts we should consider schoolbooks as the unneglectable and pivotal meeting point between the didactic, geographical knowledge, politics, and school curricula (de Giorgi, 2001).

References

- Bettinelli E., “Il mondo a fette”, in Schmidt di Friedberg M. (Ed.), *Geografia a scuola: monti, fiumi, capitali o altro?*, Milan, Guerini, 2005.
- Bignante E., “Osservare, interpretare, apprendere: alcuni stimoli per utilizzare le immagini nell’insegnamento della geografia”, *Ambiente Società Territorio*, 1, 2010, pp. 7-11.
- Bignante E., *Geografia e ricerca visuale. Strumenti e metodi*, Bari, Laterza, 2011.
- Boehm G., *La svolta iconica*, Rome, Meltemi Editore, 2009.
- Budke A., “La géopolitique des cours de géographie en RDA. Résultats d’une analyse des manuels scolaires”, in Squarcina E. (Ed.), *Didattica critica della geografia. Libri di testo, mappe, discorso geopolitico*, Milan, Unicopli, 2009, pp. 129-150.
- Capel H., “Institucionalización de la geografía y estrategias de la comunidad científica de los geógrafos, I”, *Geo Crítica: cuadernos críticos de geografía humana*, 1977, <https://raco.cat/index.php/GeoCritica/article/view/59250>.
- Caputo J.D., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, New York, Fordham University Press, 1997.
- Carter S. and McCormack D.P., “Affectivity and geopolitical images”, in Macdonald F., Hughes R. and Dodds K. (Eds.), *Observant states. geopolitics and visual culture*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2010, pp. 103-122.
- Cosgrove D., “Geography is everywhere: culture and symbolism in human landscapes”, in Gregory D. and Walford R. (Eds.), *Horizons in Human Geography*, London, Macmillan, 1989, pp. 118-135.
- Dalby S., “Critical geopolitics. Discourse, Difference and Dissent”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 9, 3, 1991, pp. 261-283.
- de Giorgi F., “Dalla scuola all’impero. Libri scolastici e modelli formativi fascisti”, in Coarelli R. (Ed.), *Dalla scuola all’Impero. I libri scolastici del fondo della Braidense 1924-1944*, Milan, viennepierre edizioni, 2001.
- dell’Agnese E., *Geografia politica critica*, Milan, Guerini e Associati, 2005.
- dell’Agnese E., *Paesaggi ed eroi: cinema, nazione, geopolitica*, Turin, UTET università, 2009.
- dell’Agnese E., *Ecocritical geopolitics: popular culture and environmental discourse* (1a ed.), London and New York, Routledge, 2021.
- Farinelli F., “Ogni testo è un atlante e ogni atlante è un testo” in Squarcina E. (Ed.), *Didattica critica della geografia. Libri di testo, mappe, discorso geopolitico*, Milan, Unicopli, 2009.
- Ghisleri A., *Piccolo manuale di geografia storica generale e d’Italia in particolare*, Bergamo, Istituto Italiano d’Arti Grafiche, 1888.
- Giorda C., *La geografia nella scuola primaria. Contenuti, strumenti, didattica*, Rome, Carocci, 2006.
- Giorda C., *Il mio spazio nel mondo. Geografia per la scuola dell’infanzia e primaria*, Rome, Carocci, 2014.
- Giorda C. and Puttilli M. (Eds.), *Educare al territorio, educare il territorio. Geografia per la formazione*, Rome, Carocci, 2011.
- Huckle J., Towards, *A critical School Geography*, in Tilbury D. and Williams M. (Eds.), *Teaching and Learning Geography*, London, Routledge, 1997, pp. 241-253.
- Lacoste Y., *La Géographie ça sert d’abord à faire la guerre*, Paris, Maspero, 1976.
- Maggioli M., “Rappresentazioni fotografiche e narrazioni geografiche”, in Azzari M. (Ed.), *Italia in movimento. Diretrici e paesaggi*

- dall'Unità a oggi, Pisa, Pacini Editore, 2011, pp. 15-19.
23. Malatesta S., *Per fare l'albero ci vuole la carta. Note critiche per un curriculum geografico*, Milan, Guerini, 2010.
 24. Mantegazza R., "Contromappe e contropotere, le mappe come strategia di resistenza", in Squarcina E. (Ed.), *Didattica critica della geografia. Libri di testo, mappe, discorso geopolitico*, Milan, Unicopli, 2009, p. 56.
 25. Mitchell W.J.T., *Iconology. Images, Text, Ideology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986.
 26. Mitchell W.J.T., "Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture", *Journal of Visual Culture*, 1, 2, 2002, pp. 165-181.
 27. Mitchell W.J.T., *Pictorial turn. Saggi di cultura visuale*, Duepunti Edizioni, Palermo, 2008.
 28. Pasquinelli d'Allegra D., "Le immagini fotografiche, da surrogato della realtà a piste di ricerca", in De Vecchis G., Pasquinelli d'Allegra D. and Pesaresi C., *Didattica della geografia*, UTET – De Agostini, Novara, 2020, pp. 216-217.
 29. Rondinone A. (Ed.), *Cinema, ambiente e territorio*, Milan, Unicopli, 2011.
 30. Rose G., *Visual Methodologies: an Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*, London, Sage, 2007.
 31. Rose G., *Visual Methodologies: Interpreting Visual Materials*, London, Sage, 2011.
 32. Ryan J.R., "Who's afraid of visual culture?", *Antipode*, 35, 2, 2003, pp. 232-237.
 33. Schmidt di Friedberg M. (Ed.), *Elisée Reclus. Natura e educazione*, Milan, Bruno Mondadori, 2007.
 34. Schmidt di Friedberg M. (Ed.), *Cos'è il mondo? È un globo di cartone. Insegnare geografia fra Otto e Novecento*, Milan, Unicopli, 2010.
 35. Squarcina E., *Carta Canta. Materiali per una riflessione critica sul ruolo ideologico della cartografia nei libri di testo per la scuola primaria e nella stampa quotidiana*, Milan, Mimesis edizioni, 2006.
 36. Squarcina E. (Ed.), *Didattica critica della geografia. Libri di testo, mappe, discorso geopolitico*, Milan, Unicopli, 2009.
 37. Szakács S., "Now and then: National Identity Construction in Romanian History. A Comparative Study of Communist and Post-Communist School Textbooks", *International Textbook Research*, 29, 1, 2007, pp. 23-47.
 38. Tuan Y.-F., "Sight and pictures", *American Geographical Society*, 69, 4, 1979, pp. 413-422.
 39. Turco A., *Configurazioni della territorialità*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2010.
 40. Winter C., "Ethnocentric bias in geography textbooks: a framework for reconstruction", in Tilbury D. and Williams M. (Eds.), *Teaching and Learning Geography*, London, Routledge, 1997, pp. 180-188.