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The Pictures of Comenius’ “Orbis Sensualium Pictus” from the Perspective of Visual Communication

My research area is visual communication, and within this field the systematization of the description, analysis and evaluation of visual products and their categorisation (Searle 2003/100-104; Sándor 2003/52-65). I also specialize on the role of visual products in social life and these under differing conditions (Sándor 2012).

This is the reason why I will discuss pictures of “Orbis Pictus” in my presentation.

There are countless types of visual representations in life of man, born on the basis of several individual or social aims. I think visual products can be judged by their objective and subjective content, because all pictures contain to some extent these two characteristics (Rosengren 2004/15-16.; Bálványos – Sánta 1997/34-43). For example, descriptive geometrical and technological drawings are highly objective, but self-representational drawings of children or artists are highly subjective. Between these two furthest points we can imagine all kinds of visual products in a more or less linear order. In the case of a concrete product either objectivity or subjectivity will be stressed more.

This duality principle helps us to find our way in the pictorial world.

Fig. 1. The principle of duality and double content of a picture.

In the following lines I give a short list of pictures which can be used to demonstrate the duality concept used to systematize visual products:

- constructional drawing of descriptive geometry,
- grand-plan, section and elevation of object or building (architectural and industrial-technological delineation),
- constructional representation of object, machine or living being,
- map drawing,
- explanatory drawing for working or handling of a machine (appliance) and for change of nature, object or living being,
- biological representation for categorization,
- archeological representation for documentation,
- product representation for trading,
- imitative representation from an aesthetic objective,
- visual sign for direction,
- signs created for several social and scientific aims, e.g. in mythology, religion; mathematics, cartography and other disciplines; for traffic, etc.,
- visual representation of emotion, impression, mood (figural - nonfigural),
- visual representation of a story or event,
- visual representation of a world or life view.

Explanatory-interpreting, imitating, scientific representations and signs are basically objective, they inform spectator about facts. In contrast with this, visual expressions of man’s internal world are subjective aroused feels and thoughts in spectator.

The programme of finding dualities can be used to describe the classification of pictures from technical drawings across visual advertisements to non-figurative emotion-expressions. But the sequential order underlying this classification is produced on the basis of a dominating principle which can be put as follows: all visual products are created on the basis of their dualistic character.

The dualities approach of systematizing the analysis of visual products can be applied to the illustrations of “Orbis Pictus”. Pictures of this work show a special type of explanatory-interpretational representation: they emphasize the objective side and contain some subjectivity.

I will now demonstrate my approach with one or two concrete pictures, but I hold my opinion to be correct for any and all pictures including the different “Orbis Pictus” editions.

Fig. 2. Illustration from “Orbis Sensualium Pictus”: The Soldier.¹

There are numbers added to the represented elements of the picture, and under it and on the next page there are explanations with reference to these numbers. Prior to analyzing the representation, we cast a glance at these texts.

Fig. 3. Explanations and names marked by numbers

There are italics showing names in the text. Some names are translated into English: 1 – soldier; 2 – helmet; 3 – iron-collar; 4 – chest mail; 5 – iron on arms; 6 – iron-sandals; 7 – tin-gloves; and on the next page: 10 – sword; 18 – dagger; 29 – mace; 31 – gun.

I can now identify the objective and subjective relations of “The Soldier”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectivity</th>
<th>Subjectivity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The soldier is in front-view, so that his armour and all arms are visible in best position</td>
<td>Similarly, his face is opposite us and with this pose he evokes a feeling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His body is angular so that the spectator is excluded from the picture.</td>
<td>He is in a landscape, near him are two trees, round arms, and he holds a dagger and shield in his hands which means that after all the pictures is narrative and thus brings the spectator into it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“The Soldier” and all other illustrations in the book have been made in order to help students in their learning programme. The themes are described with very simple definitions and are represented with very simple forms. A subjective element, however, is combined with the basically objective drawing. We feel that the arms are placed in an artificial way and the soldier’s bearing is affected.

The largest group among the visual products of “Orbis pictus” is the group of pictures with archetypes. They came into existence in order to allow the performance of permanent social activities, and they protected and protect their visual attributes in such a way that they did not change over the centuries and not even over thousands of years.

In my research, I established archetypes which I ordered as follows: 1. objects with ornaments or without; 2. buildings; 3. representations of facts for documentation showing the outside world; 4. representations of facts interpreted-understood; 5. signs with condensed information.

Some of these pictures are two-dimensional and we now turn to them. They have been formed thousands or centuries ago. In the following, we look with more details at examples of the third and fourth kind.

I found examples of *imitational object-documentation* in ancient Egyptian art. These representations are very similar to present-day drawings or photos. Their main archetypal marks are:
- a change of characteristic views or points of view (e.g. animals from the side view, man’s body however from the front, etc.),
- representations with an authentic scale,
- naturalistic representations down to the smallest details dependent on aims of the artist and on techniques,
- dependent on previous attributes, the images look like the objects - accurately and exactly.

We now look at two-three examples from distant ages.

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b) Coloured drawing of geese from a biology handbook, 1981.3

c) Up: Summer goose. Photo, 2000.4

The third photo (Fig. 4c) shows one principal mark of this archetype producing the greatest similarity. The mark has been used since antiquity. I also found interpreted-understood (or explained) representations (group 5) from ancient ages. Main marks of this archetype are:
- They are made with simple forms and lines,
- they have characteristic marks of their objects, be it animals or other other objects,
- the pictures have numbers, letters or short words, and the references can be connected with short lines or arrows.

The illustrations of "Orbis Pictus" explain the subjects of the different chapters ("lectiones") and help the reader (the student) think and interpret the texts. They are explanatory drawings and include archetypical marks as follows:

a) The pieces or elements of the pictures are numbered, and the numbers are referenced in the accompanying text; each picture is understood as a demonstration.
b) The elements shown in the pictures (e.g. birds/bird species, different tools of a job) are illustrated from the best typical view.
c) The features of the pieces or elements are simplified.

In order to verify this analysis, I show another picture which has as its title "Field- and wood-birds". We can observe all archetypical marks of what was set out: characteristic bodies of birds, authentic scales, numbers, etc.

Fig. 5. Illustration from "Orbis sensualium pictus": Field- and wood-birds.5

5 „Field- and Wood-birds.” Source as Fig. 2; XXI. 46. p.
Archetypical marks have complementary elements of different ages and civilizations, namely narration and the illusion of a three-dimensional representation. It is possible to identify representations of facts interpreted and understood. Scenes and tales; they both bring sight into the minds as described in a scenograph. (The reader is asked to remember that the Baroque era and the following century glorified the realistic representation with scenography and illusion.) The picture shown above has these marks: the birds chirp in a friendly group and in a perspective land.

Contemporary interpreting representations however have different complementary marks: often they are abstract, they focus their subjects without narration. Thus they document a matter-of-fact approach.

Finally we present marks of visual communication from “Orbis pictus”. These illustrations belong to the archetypical family of interpreting-explanatory representations. They are generally figural drawings (in fact woodcuts) with some narration, and they depict objects that can be identified exactly. Comenius explains several themes by applying a special method: the pictures and the texts function in the same way. One of them completes the other, so that the themes are clarified for the spectator-reader and for the students as well.

I took the base of my paper from my research work made in the Grand Library in Sárospatak⁶ where I could study original editions of the “Orbis Pictus”. I also used reprint editions and different editions from the internet.

References:


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⁶ I thank Sárospatak Great Library for high quality copies. Library’s books marked: [RMK]
Sándor, Zsuzsa: *Pictorial world of visualise*. Miskolc University Press 2003,