Images in the Contemporary Environment and in Education

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Abstract

The role and the importance of images in the contemporary environment has been studied by many researchers. Their presence at an economic, political, social and cultural level has been deemed to be both vital and essential, due to the influence which they exert on each of these fields. Education has not been an exception to this rule. The development of technology and of new technological media has aided, boosted and established their presence in all the activities of human life, with all the positive and negative aspects that this entails.

Keywords: image, types of image, economic dimension of images, political dimension of images, social dimension of images, cultural dimension of images, educational dimension of images

Introduction

Image. Concept and types

"Image" is a general concept and one with multiple meanings. It can refer to a depiction, an imitation or even a likeness. However, apart from this general, non-specific reference, any attempt to home in on the meaning of the term will run up against the sheer number of various types, features and attributes qualifying it. Therefore, an image may be identified as being the momentary visual correspondence of an object which is obtained with the help of a medium, as happens with the reflection in a mirror or the visual reproduction of an object on a specific medium, such as happens in a printout or on the screen of an electronic device. An image may be static, as in the previous examples, but it can also move. It can depict an object very faithfully and with great accuracy or it can just resemble it. The category of material or non-material images also includes mental images, which are created by a set of information, whether visual or not, which create an idea about the object, and this idea does not necessarily correspond with a real visual representation. The image of a city, for example, is the product of set of information or partial images concerning this city, none of which might, however, coincide with what can be construed as an

image. Thus, it becomes obvious that finding a definition for "image" depends on the standpoint from which it is studied.

One relatively simple definition, which is at the same time useful for the requirements of this paper, defines "image" as a medium for expressing "two-dimensional visual depiction of persons, things or phenomena" (Kanakis, 1999). Within this meaning, the image was initially created with the sole and exclusive aim of presenting and representing an item which was not present. However, it soon became clear that that which had the ability to depict had, ultimately, a greater value than simply being just a representation. Namely, it could mean many other things as well, but, primarily, its duration can be longer than temporary. In this way, it slowly invaded and became established in many fields, also including that of education (Kantartzi, 2002; Taratori-Tsalkatidou 2005; Hatzidimou, 2015).

The choice of the above-mentioned definition helps in the further analysis of images. They can be examined following certain criteria. The most common of these criteria are:

the accuracy of the depicted object,

the degree of closeness in relation to the depicted object,

the contents of the image,

the appearance,

the movement,

the colour,

the degree of clarity and the technical features of the image,

the size, the shape, and the aesthetic aspect,

the medium or the environment in which it is appears.

With the criterion of the *accuracy with which the object is depicted*, the depiction obtained through the image starts with the absolute and faithful depiction of the reality, as happens, for example, in the case of a photograph, and declines until the level of abstraction is in facthigh, although still allowing the information about the object depicted to be recognised and read without any great difficulty (Kanakis, 1999). Symbolic images are a typical example of this. Based on the previously-mentioned level of abstraction, we can identify three categories of images (Kanakis, 1999): real images, which are distinguished by the total accuracy with which they are depicted; schematic images, which are distinguished by a higher or lower level of abstraction; and symbolic images, where the level of abstraction is the highest possible, without, however, making it difficult to read them.

With the criterion of the *relationship of the image with the object which it depicts,* we can encounter two types of image: the primary or identical and the secondary type. A

primary or identical image is one which is a faithful, authentic and unimpaired item by the artist who produced it. Any such image simultaneously mirrors and reflects in its content the cultural background of the person who created it (Kulvicki, 2006; Vrettos, 2009). Conversely, secondary images are images which are reproductions of an original image (Grammatas, 2011). We often encounter various varieties of the above types in private or public spaces, in church environments (Taratori, 1988) or elsewhere.

Depending on their *content*, images refer to narrative, analytical, symbolic or taxonomic procedures. A set of categories based on these procedures is formed (Alachasidis & Demetriadou, 2009), including *narrative* images, where, through a chronological sequence of events one can understand the content of a story; *analytical* images, where, through procedures of identification and correlation, specific characteristics are attributed to the objects; *symbolic* images, where, through identification procedures similar to the previous category, symbolic characteristics are attributed to its objects; and, lastly, *taxonomic* images, where the objects are thereby classified according a certain criterion.

Another classification is the one which is made based on their *complexity.* Thus, we can divide the images into simple and complex ones, depending on the amount of data they contain. With regard to the *degree of definition,* images can be divided into high, medium or low definition. Especially in digital images, which are made up of pixels, the definition corresponds to the term *analysis* of the image.

Depending on their *size*, their *appearance*, their *movement* and their *colour*, images are divided into large or small, transparent or opaque, still or moving (Simatos, 2003) and black-and-white or colour. Finally, concerning the *medium* in which they appear, images can be divided into paper, analogue or digital forms.

Apart from these classifications, the image-text relationship produces additional classifications into categories. According to Alchasidis & Demetriadou (2009), the simple or composite morphic elements of an image involve the viewer in a series of narrative and mental processes. These processes sometimes run autonomously and are sometimes influenced by the written text accompanying the image. Thus, an image can accurately depict the details of the written text, show additional details, supplementing the written text, or not have any connection with it (Simatos, 2003).

But even the way in which the messages coming from the reading of an image are perceived is yet another criterion for classifying them into categories. Each image has a dimension comprising multiple meanings, because the details of it which are shown are perceived in a different way by the recipients – viewers (Lindekens, 1971) and, consequently, the interpretations which they make are, not infrequently, varying and contradictory (Vryzas, 1990).

The economic, political, social and cultural dimension of images

The century in which we are living has been described as a century of visualisation and imaging or, by other people, as a century of visual culture or of the culture of images. Visual representations flood everything which is displayed around us, conveying messages and information with a view to eliciting intense interest and impressions. In the multicultural environment in which we live, images have now become an international language.

Many people maintain that the modern world is currently experiencing a real 'images revolution'. The extent of this revolution can be seen from the following (Bullas, 2012):

With the use of new technological media it is calculated that the owners of a television, a computer and mobile telephones (currently estimated at 2.5 billion people) have easy access to images and, for many of them, to the production of images.

The rate at which images are being produced is rapid. At a rough calculation it has been estimated that 10% of the images in circulation have been produced during the last 12 months.

The social networks which rely on images and photographs, such as Facebook, Tumblr and Instagram, are the ones which are growing at a faster rate than the others.

Nowadays an image is a complex product which is produced in various ways, captures a share of the market and constantly varies in form, type, production method, cost and use. At the same time, it is a factor with a significant influence on the economic, political, social, and cultural environment. Images, sometimes by themselves and sometimes in combination with other technological products, cause rapid and radical transformations in the economy, politics, society and culture (Robins, 1996). Each of us is caught up in the throes of this torrent of images, sometimes more, sometimes less susceptible to perceiving the information and messages provided, which are transmitted through these.

Economic dimension

The role of images in the economic reality of the 21st century is considered to be fundamental, whilst important thematic fields of the applied economy, with a crucial role in the production and consumption, rely on illustration. The invasion of images into marketing, advertising and sales promotion operations is indicative of this tendency. There are many cases where the effectiveness and efficiency of activities and actions in these fields is attributed to, inter alia, the accuracy of the images. According to the findings of studies (Edell & Staelin, 1983· Aydınoğlu & Cian, 2014), graphic stimuli facilitate persuasiveness and increase the degree of responsiveness in consumers. For this reason, moreover, images currently take up an increasingly large area of the space in publications, magazines and the daily press.

The following are some of the elements which demonstrate the invasion of images into the economy:

In the business economy, and especially within the context of marketing and sales promotion, the visits to articles which provide information about a company or a product and which have images are much more numerous than the visits to the other articles (94% more).

A large proportion of consumers visit a company or wish to buy a product because they have been influenced by images relating to the company or that product. This proportion amounts to 60% of consumers visiting the company or wanting the product.

In addition, a large proportion of consumers(approximately 67%)state that the image of a product is more important than a text with information relating to the specific product (Bullas, 2012).

There are many reasons why images are an effective medium in the field of product promotion. Comparative studies referring to the advantages of images in comparison with other media, and in particular in comparison with texts, come to the conclusion that images outstrip the rest because they attract people's interest, they are more easily remembered, they exert an influence through their content and their technical value, and are, by their very nature, more lively and vivid. In addition, they are able to create pictorial and perceptual mental processes and to create a favourable attitude towards advertising and the product being advertised (Sojka & Giese, 2006).

Of course, there is no lack of criticism of the use of images, even from those who recognise the value of marketing and do not reject, at least in principle, the need for its activities within a competitive society and economy (Bolls & Muehling, 2007). A part of this criticism states that images convey the message which they contain and impose it with their power, thereby restricting the freedom of the target individual, with the ultimate aim of pushing him to buy products, whether useless or not, as a high priority. Another disadvantage of images relating to the domain of the market is the clarity which distinguishes the content of the image of a product. Any possible ambiguity might alienate the consumer from the product, when he discovers aspects of the product which do not interest him or have a negative impact on him, whilst other aspects which could possibly be of more interest to him are omitted. In this case the choice of image by the person in charge of advertising turns out to be mistaken, however, no matter how much this choice is the result of knowledge and skills in the field of the economy and marketing; one has to recognise that it is not at all easy to find images which satisfy all the potential consumers.

Political dimension

The effects of contemporary images on politics are equally impressive. The debate around the impact of images on public opinion is wide-ranging, because the political

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choices by citizens are, to a great degree, directed and manipulated through them. Apart from this effect, which was identified at a very early stage, one important impact of images on politics concerns the internationalisation of the political interests of society. Thus, whereas the visual media were traditionally directly linked to politics at a national and local level, in the contemporary environment, through publications, television and the internet, images contribute towards the reproduction of this political culture, which is predominant in the international sphere. This political culture encroaches on the interests of the citizens, side-lining national issues and creating of mixture of national issues with international ones, giving these issues a hybrid nature, with all the positive and negative aspects that this entails (Fernandes, 2000· Dolan, 2014).Globalisation, as a political phenomenon, is also, inter alia, a consequence of access to images.

Social and cultural dimension

Images, in connection with technology, have changed the culture of the family, customs and the way of life, attitudes and values, entertainment, behaviour, and even the space around us, transforming, inter alia, the relationship between the private and the public sphere.

As significantly stated by Thoman (1992), Kalle Lasn, one of the founders of the 'Adbusters' magazine and an important founder of the Canadian media criticism, eloquently describes the impact of television images on the daily life of people, as follows: " In the privacy of our living rooms we have made a devil's bargain with the advertising industry: Give us an endless flow of free programmes and we'll let you spend 12 minutes of every hour promoting consumption. For a long time, it seemed to work. The ads grated on our nerves but it was a small price to pay for "free" television… What we did not realise when we made our pact with the advertisers was that their agenda would eventually become the heart and soul of television. We have allowed the most powerful communications tool ever invented to become the command centre of a consumer society defining our lives and culture the way family, community and spiritual values once did." (Thoman, 1992). In a lot of studies, reference is made to the effect of images on the homogenisation of national identities, patterns of behaviour and gendered social codes. Studies relating to India and Ireland (Fernandes, 2000· Dolan, 2014) are indicative of this tendency.

The effect of images also on the mass media is impressive. Apart from the fact that images have significantly contributed to the creation of new media, such as the internet and the digital social networks, they have also brought important changes to the already-existing media. If one looks back in the archives of a political newspaper, for example, it is easy to see that its current form and appearance in no way resembles the look and the form of an older copy which had been published several decades ago. The small number of pages of the newspapers were literally overwhelmed by titles and the photographs in them were minimal and only in black and white. Nowadays the facts have changed. The daily or Sunday news publications provide a vast amount

of information which is not only conveyed by letters and words, but also through photographs, images, maps and diagrams. The reader, caught up in the daily rush, finds it difficult to spend time reading lengthy texts. For this reason the information is provided in a different way: through illustrations. Tables, organisation charts, graphical representations and other types of images help to inform about the issues, combining the provision of the information with inventiveness and aesthetically (Fytanidis, 2009)

Newspapers were some of the first printed media to accept the new circumstances imposed by visual communication and moved onto the new technology immediately and with haste. Based on the provision of current information, which constantly makes them renewable, they started to think and to operate in new ways. Flawless photographs, well-made cartoons and graphics are new tools with which the information is now displayed (Arvanitis, 2009).

However, in addition to the press, the same also applies for all the printed media and television. Images have charted the same course in these as well and the change in their appearance is just as spectacular and remarkable. The images which accompany the spoken word and the narratives are nothing like the ones in the past. Flawless, aesthetically pleasing and interesting images enrich the spoken word and the textual narratives.

1.3. The educational dimension of images

It is obvious from what has already been said that images have conquered every aspect of human life, and therefore all the activities aimed at influencing in a specific way human capital, knowledge, skills, thought, a person's character and behaviour. In these activities images have an effect on both the learning aspect, intervening in the process of acquiring specific knowledge and the development of skills, and also from the social and psychological aspect, contributing to the shaping of values, attitudes and perceptions and influencing individuals' socialisation processes. To that effect, images intervene in an individual's broader education and in every form of it, either formal, non-formal or informal.

The formal form of education, which is a part of Education Science and in the broader context of Social Studies, concerns the systematic and organised process of education and learning, which is mainly planned by the state, but also by other bodies, either public or private (Hatzidimou, 2008, Hatzidimou, 2015). Education is carried out according to specific methods within the context of a specific and specially designed programme with specific goals, among which clear learning goals predominate, which provide people with a supply of basic skills, the preparation for them to participate in society and the labour market, and the shaping of values relating to moral development. It would be utopian to believe that the invasion of images in all the aspects of an individual's life would not affect education as well.

Besides, it requires no more than a cursory glance at the current reality of education to see the importance of images in the contemporary practice of teaching. In their daily teaching activity, teachers widely use images, sometimes in order to teach and sometimes in order to communicate with their pupils. In other words images intervene in both the pedagogical and the communicational side of the learning process (Simatos, 2003). These interventions are particularly dynamic. An overwhelming majority of all the teaching of lessons in Primary Education and a large part of Secondary Education contains images (Taratori, 1991; Kougiourouki, 2003; Hatzidimou, 2012; Hatzidimou & Hatzidimou, 2014; Hatzidimou, 2015). The illustration of books has acquired a central role in learning in school. Sketches, photographs and drawings are featuring more and more in Greek school textbooks, resulting in the development of an extensive 'pictorialization' of education (Pleios, 2005). At the same time, all the teaching materials facilitate the use of images in the teaching process. Every day, computers, the internet and school television confront the pupils with a wealth of images.

From all that has been stated above it becomes obvious that the presence of images in education is based on two axes. The first axis concerns the two dimensions into which images have entered, the pedagogical dimension and the communicational dimension. The second axis refers to the environments in which images appear. These are the environment of the text and, more specifically, of the school textbook, the environment of audiovisual media and the rapidly developing environment of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in education.

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