A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHILDHOOD - AS SEEN ON VISUALS[1]

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Pictures are autonomous carriers of meaning, but they also function as coded texts; they are capable to conserve the information about anything depicted. The study of image-use helps to break the silence regarding child-rearing practices and other educational contexts such as showing the parents' or instructors' attitude towards children. Visuals help researchers gain a genuine day-to-day experience of childhood and create a possible narrative of childhood in any period and place. The present researcher agrees with Nyíri (2009) that pictures can convey information that cannot be coded in any other way. The present paper is based on the researcher's investigations on focusing paintings, illuminated manuscripts and wood-cut prints, possibilities and limitation of such sources in Visual History of Childhood. The methodology is based on Iconography, Visual Semiotics and Visual Anthropology.

Objectives of the research

1. To introduce possible visual analysis methods for qualitative research methodology.
2. To introduce new sources for Visual History of Childhood and Education—such as paintings, wooden block-prints and illuminated manuscripts.

Theoretical background

Every image contains coded, complex meanings. These meanings may be understood through in-depth analyses, especially when focusing on the ones that may be relevant to childhood studies. Visual communication theorists, Kress and Leuween disclose that social relations are encoded in pictures (Kress–Leuween 2006). To accord with Kress and Leuween, since the last decade of the 20th century some researchers have focused not only on textual but also on visual documents as sources of education and childhood history, Grosvenor (1999), Depaepe − Henkens (2000), Mietzner and Pyllarczyk (2005), Kéri (2009), Dussel and Priem (2017), Polenghi (2018). These works are based on photograph and film analysis as possible sources of education history. To be able to analyse visual documents we need to understand the hermeneutical process.

The hermeneutical process serving the deciphering and interpretation of pictures may be summarised as follows (Endrődy-Nagy, 2017):
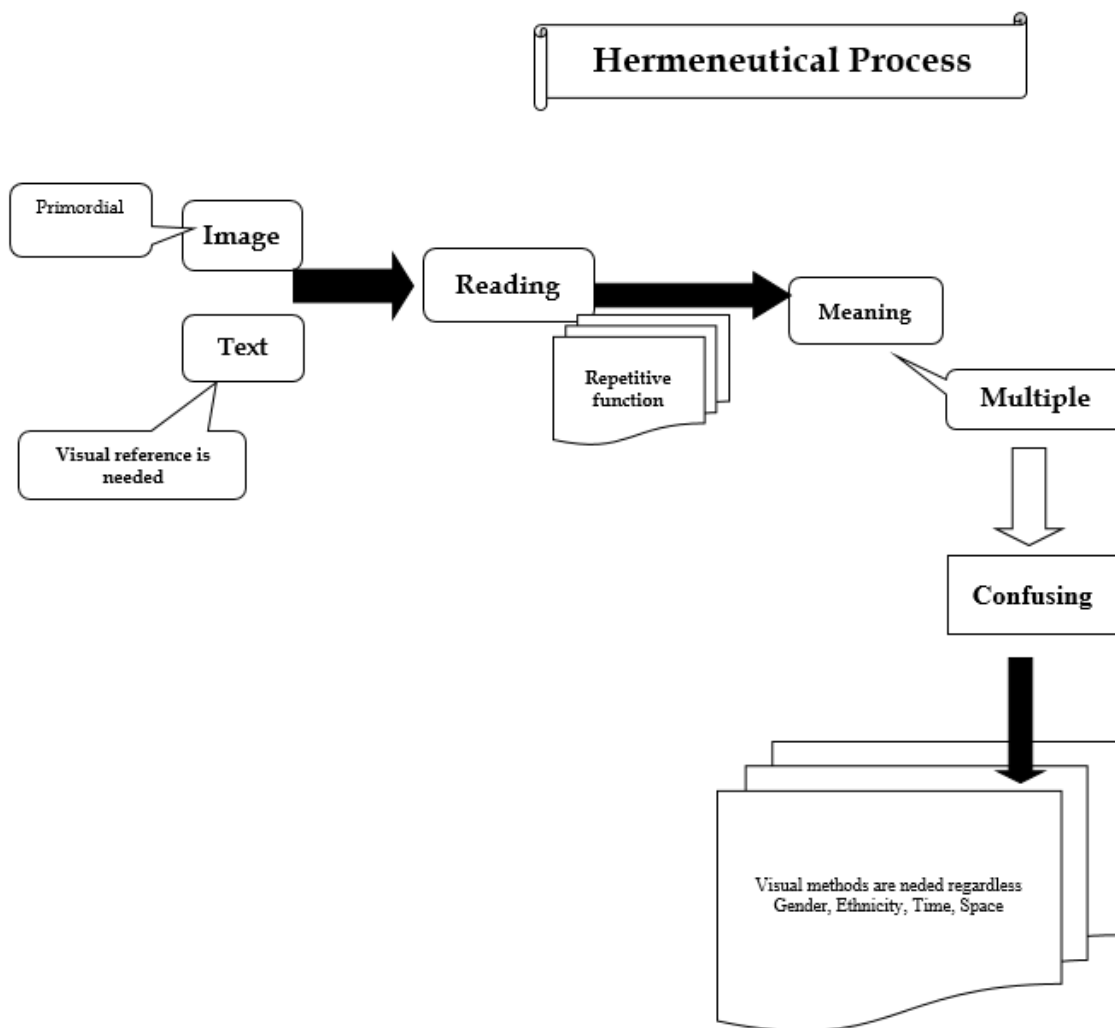

Figure 1. A possible process of reading an image (Endrődy-Nagy, 2017)

Core Themes in the Cultural History of Childhood

According to Colin Heywood (2001) the topics related to History of Childhood are the following, we shall focus on these whenever we discuss a source of the discipline:

Depravity/innocence

The Christian doctrine of original sin based on St. Augustine's theories, we need baptism to wash away our diabolical taint, on the other hand Luther believes that we are innocent in our first 5-6 years. We can say that in the History of Childhood it is one of the most important topics to talk about the polarized opinion whether children are divine or diabolical. Regarding the paintings, Joshua Reynolds' iconic work, The Age of innocence usually is regarded as the turning point of the depicting traditions of children.

On figure 1. we can see a pale girl wearing a beautiful white gown, which both symbolises INNOCENCE in contrast of the dark and windy background. It probably means that in any condition and with any background children are innocent.

Figure 1. Joshua Reynolds: The Age of Innocence c. 1788. Tate Britain

Independence/dependence

Slaves and servants never achieved full independence and even children were expected to grow up fast, they needed to help adults more as our children need today.

Nature/nurture

They thought that human nature is determined by class and gender rather than individual circumstances. Nature seemed more important as a theme before the Renaissance, but nature versus nurture shifted during that Era.

Age/sex

According to Ariés: 'boys were the first specialized children during the 17th century'. They were more certain than we are today about innate differences between males and females. By playing together it was hoped that 'the girls' weakness would be strengthened, and the boys' roughness softened.

Conception of Childhood

According to Heywood, Childhood is an abstraction, referring to a particular stage of life which changes over time and varies between social and ethnic groups within any society. Historians wish to recreate the day-to-day experiences of children in the past. This is social history of children (Heywood, 2001).

Childhood research focuses on a stage of life when we are vulnerable and dependent on adults. Current childhood conceptions should never be compared to previous ones as they are always built on the contemporary social and mentality-related history of the period under review (Endrődy-Nagy 2016). English sociologists started to examine childhood as a sociological concept. They believe that childhood must be regarded as an organic part of society and culture rather than a precursor of them, and children must be considered as players in society rather than viewing them as merely aspiring to be that. The core of the mentioned paradigm, based on James and Prout (1997), may be summarised as follows:

- The definition of childhood is constructed socially/sociologically. The meaning of the terms child – childhood is different in every society. For example, the immaturity of children is a biological fact, but the definition and interpretation of immaturity varies across cultures.
- The definition of childhood may also vary within a given social environment when gender, class and ethnicity are considered.
- Children are active participants and creators of their own lives, and affect the lives of those around them.

According to Hendrick (2000), children are social actors, too. We should never forget that the research shows how adults thought and felt about the young (Heywood, 2001).

For decades, childhood historians have analysed mostly textual documents such as letters and diaries to recreate childhood history. The following discussion aims to support the hypothesis, analysing Visual Sources, however, researchers used only pictorial documents to illustrate their theses, except Ariés and his followers. As a new branch of educational sciences, I shall introduce Iconography in Childhood Studies and Iconography in Education, also called Visual History of Childhood.

Methods

Methodological approaches and considerations of the present research use image analysis strategies primarily based on visual semiotics, visual anthropology and iconography. Through the combination of several methods, the presentation of the decoded information may be more detailed. The present research applies the Panofsky (1984) methodology published in 1984, requiring a thorough knowledge of art history, as well as the Bouteaud method (Bouteaud 1989) explored in the French literature, applicable for researchers with a technical background, and the Collier method (Collier, 2001) from the field of visual anthropology which so far has only been tested in its series analysis application in photo analyses and the only one which enables the viewer to use his/her intuitions. Following the application of the three methods, a conclusion might be reached knowing the social conditions, the historical and cultural background and childhood history of the period, and thus a more detailed conception of childhood may be presented.

Results

As the results of the research here we present some visual examples of the kind of documents we can use for the analysis and what are the core categories of the visual sources. Regarding the topics we can find several visual sources about:

- Giving birth and pregnancy
- Toys and games, playing
- Mortality and sickness
- Child-rearing practices
- Human life cycles

The types of visual sources are not limited to paintings, but also engravings, wood-cut prints, old-prints can be used for the analysis, however, we always have to bear in mind that the creator should be contemporary artist of the depicted era.

We educators and childhood researchers agree that toys are to encourage the intellectual and physical development. Children in the past managed to improvise toys from everyday objects or to make their own, see rag-dolls, hobby-horses, wooden tops on the painting of Pieter Brueghel the Elder. (Figure 2.)

Figure 2. Pieter Brueghel the Elder: Children's Games, 1559-60 Oil on wood, 118 x 161 cm.
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

We can find several examples of the fantasy worlds and fantasy - or role play which seem alternatives to the adult world, we see baptism, wedding, imitated by the children. It is an interesting comparison to analyse the toys on a similar picture from a different region – China from the Song dynasty. See Figure 3.

It seems that in Eastern traditions based on Confucianism and Buddhism, we see children playing in the nature rather than playing with the nature. Regarding the Eastern ideology and world view, people admire the nature and it is told that they should be living in harmony with nature. We see several examples; children chasing butterflies but never picking flowers, just admire them. They never play with pigs' bladders or intestines in contrast with that it was one of the most popular toys in Europe in the Middle Ages. See Figure 4.

We should consider the following: Europeans seem to wish to rule the nature not living in harmony with it.

Our last example is about depiction of stages of life from an illuminated manuscript of Barthelemy d'Anglais (see figure 5).

We can see four stages of the life circle, a toddler, an adolescent, a young adult and an old man. Children became adult between 12-14 regarding the Medieval tradition. This viewpoint is based on the natural maturity, rather biological than philosophical or psychological idea.

Figure 3. Children's Games, Song dynasty, China, cca.1200

Figure 4. Barthélémy l'Anglais, Livre des propriétés des choses, France, second part of the 15th century, BnF, Department of Manuscripts, Fr 9141, fol. 175

Figure 5. Barthélemy l'Anglais, Le Livre des propriétés des choses,
France (Anjou, Maine), 15th century

Concluding remarks

Pictures are coded texts according to the research introduced above. Viewpoints - such as East-West traditions, religious views determine, also space and time is important, but we should never compare with previous ones as they are always built on the contemporary social and mentality-related history of the period under review. Childhood and conception of childhood changes over time and varies between social and ethnic groups within any society. Visuals could be Sources of Cultural History of Childhood if we find contemporary depictions of the chosen Era.